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Gaspésie Railway Society loads last windmill trains for a while

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NEW RICHMOND: – The management of the Gaspésie Railway Society learned on March 14 that LM Wind Power and its customers will soon stop using trains to export their windmill blades to the United States. The train that came in on March 15 at the New Richmond transshipment facility could possibly be the last one, although wasn't yet confirmed as SPEC was reaching its March 18 deadline.

The president of the Gaspésie Railway Society, Éric Dubé, says that his team is trying to find out more information from LM Wind Power. One or a few more trains could still be loaded in New Richmond over the coming weeks but nothing is certain.

"One thing for sure is that we are nearing the end of that contract. We knew that the end would be in 2022 but we thought it would be later in the year. We might be able to haul more windmills over the coming weeks but I don't expect 10 more trains," explains Mr. Dubé.

He admits that the end of that operation will create a significant hole in the budget of the Gaspésie Railway Society, as windmill blade trains bring in close to half of the transporter's annual revenues, which amount to a little under $10 million.

Windmill blade loading in New Richmond will likely stop soon for a few years.

Photo: G. Gagné

"We will reorganize our operations. We went through a blockade in 2020, CN's strike in 2019 and a two-year delay in the delivery of the line between Caplan and Port Daniel. In 2014, we were technically bankrupt, which was a much worse situation," reminds Éric Dubé.

He points out that, overall, the first windmill blade hauling contract of the Gaspésie Railway Society was much better than what the first part of the contract suggested in 2016.

"We don't feel like complaining. The windmill blade hauling contract gave us great opportunities to develop our services. It doesn't change the reality that the line must be repaired to Gaspé because we are working at landing input hauling for LM and other contracts might pan out in the future. The 2016 contract lasted longer than expected, as it was supposed to go for three or four years and we have passed the five-year mark. We also hauled more blades per year than expected," specifies Mr. Dubé.

When the first contract was signed in October 2016, it called for the hauling of 600 blades over the coming year, however, the LM Wind Power Plant in Gaspé started an expansion the following month and the traffic that was initiated in December 2016 finally resulted in about 765 blades transported during the first year, and 1,200 annually since then.

The management of LM Wind Power couldn't be reached by the Gaspé SPEC before the paper's deadline.

The Gaspé plant is expected to gradually phase out the production of the 47-metre wind blades currently exported to Texas and concentrate on the 107-metre model to be installed on offshore wind farms located along the east coast of the United States. They will leave Gaspé by ship. That contract is expected to keep the plant busy for three years. Those blades are the largest in the world.

However, smaller windmill blades could be produced in Gaspé in the meantime and there is a possibility that they could be hauled by train.

"We think that we will see windmill blades back on our freight trains again," points out Éric Dubé for now.

He concedes that the two-year delay in the reopening of the line between Caplan and the Port Daniel cement plant hurts because freight trains were expected to reach the Votorantim Cementos facility in 2022.

"The expected rise in traffic would have partially made up for the revenues lost in windmill blade hauling," says Mr. Dubé, who also remarks that cement would have travelled over a longer distance on rails, therefore generating more money.