Maine Municipal Association Disappointed in
U.S. ‘Advisory’ on Transporting Crude Oil, Ethanol

AUGUSTA – Maine Municipal Association is supporting counterparts in Illinois in criticizing the U.S. Department of Transportation’s reluctance to ban unsafe, inadequately reinforced DOT-111 railroad cars that carry crude oil and other highly explosive fuels.

MMA’s statement on Friday stems from the U.S. government’s failure to take steps that Canadian regulators have taken regarding rail safety. The Canadian government has ordered that 5,000 DOT-111 rail cars be grounded in that country effective May 23 amid questions about the cars’ safety and crash-worthiness.

Meanwhile, after 20 years of investigations and fact-finding about the rail cars, and after safety hearings held April 22-23, the U.S. National Transportation Safety Board instead issued an “advisory” to the rail industry, recommending that companies voluntarily not use DOT-111 tank cars to transport other explosive petroleum-based commodities.

An Illinois-based group of mayors known as TRAC – “The Regional Answer to Canadian National” – on Thursday blasted the NTSB’s advisory and sent a letter calling on President Barack Obama to order Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx to enact a ban similar to Canada’s. TRAC officials noted that Canada cannot control where DOT-111 cars are diverted after May 23. They may be sent to the United States, where thousands are already in use.

On Friday, Maine Municipal Association President Peter Nielsen said MMA stands squarely with its Illinois colleagues and is similarly disappointed in the NTSB advisory. Nielsen noted that 59 Maine communities see rail service. While not all encountered petroleum transportation as recently as last fall, many that did have railroad tracks traversing their downtown areas.

Nielsen said the 2013 explosion in Lac-Megantic, Quebec, Canada, which killed 47 people as runaway cars filled with crude oil exploded in that city’s downtown, proved how dangerous rail transportation can be if inadequately regulated. Canada also
estimates that rebuilding Lac-Mégantic and doing environmental mitigation will cost more than $2 billion.

“The first task of government is to keep people safe,” Nielsen said. “We ask President Obama and our Maine Congressional delegation to use this occasion to make people safe.

“We can follow our Canadian counterparts in banning unsafe DOT-111 tank cars, and others known for years to be unsafe in crash situations,” Nielsen continued. “That we lag our Canadian counterparts is embarrassing. Previous efforts (U.S. and Canadian) were made to move forward in concert in improving rail safety, but the U.S.’ weak-kneed measures to date will allow unsafe, rolling stock to remain in service.”

Officials from TRAC, the Illinois-based Mayors’ coalition, said accidents involving freight trains carrying explosive Bakken-type crude oil, ethanol and other products are becoming more common throughout North America.

Maine itself is no stranger to rail accidents and emergencies. On Thursday of this week, rail safety was in question as sparks along a rail bed caused brush and propane tank fires that forced the evacuation of dozens of homes in York County and seriously damaged a seasonal camp resort in Old Orchard Beach.

In 1983, the Town of Oakland, where Nielsen also serves as Town Manager, witnessed a major tanker car and freight train derailment.

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**About the Maine Municipal Association:** Founded in 1936, the MMA is a voluntary, non-partisan, member-service organization to which 487 municipalities in Maine belong. It has a core belief that local government is a fundamental component of a democratic system of government. MMA’s services include advocacy, education and information, professional legal and personnel advisory services and self-funded group insurance programs.