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Senate Democrats: No excuse for inaction on oil transport safety

OLYMPIA — Senate Democrats on Monday expressed frustration and disappointment in the lack of action on legislation to reduce risks posed by the sharp increase in oil transported by rail and tanker in Washington.

“We spent a lot of time negotiating,” said Sen. John McCoy, D-Tulalip. “But Sen. Tom and his Republican Majority resisted efforts for transparency and the communities’ right-to-know provisions. Our priorities were ignored when the Republican majority released the final version of their bill.”

Two comprehensive measures to protect Washington residents were introduced early this legislative session, SB 6262 in the Senate and HB 2347 in the House. Both bills allowed communities to access information necessary for emergency planning as well as increased safety standards on oil transported along Washington’s inland and water transportation corridors. Neither bill received a hearing in the Senate.

“Communities are calling for information because they recognize the risks posed by oil transportation,” said Sen. Christine Rolfes, D-Kitsap County. “In order to effectively plan for an emergency, first responders need access to basic facts – like what types and how much oil is being moved through their towns.”

Recent catastrophic accidents – including one in Quebec last July that killed 47 people, another in Alabama last November, one in North Dakota in December and one last month Pennsylvania – have prompted lawmakers across the country to take action. More oil was spilled from trains in 2013 than the previous 37 years of oil spills combined. Cities across Washington, including Seattle, Spokane and Bellingham, are not waiting for the Legislature to pass a law and instead have started to address how oil transport affects their communities.

“An oil spill or explosion could devastate the communities and economy of Grays Harbor and Jefferson counties,” said Sen. Jim Hargrove, D-Hoquiam.

“Toothless bills that only include studies will not protect the people of this state,” Sen. Kevin Ranker, D-Orcas Island, said. “We missed an opportunity this session.”

A new bill has been drafted that Senate Democrats hope will provide a good starting point for negotiations next year.

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