

Union Pacific boosts inspections on mountain passes

By Tony Bizjakt, Sacramento Bee

Faced with public concern about the risks of crude oil shipments, the Union Pacific railroad last month boosted its rail inspection program on mountain passes in California and the West, dispatching high-tech vehicles with lasers to check tracks for imperfections.

UP officials say they have leased two rail inspection vehicles, called geometry cars, doubling the number of computer-based safety cars in use on the company's tracks. The move comes amid mounting public concern about hazardous-material shipments, including a growing quantity of highly flammable crude oil from North Dakota being shipped to West Coast refineries.

The inspection cars will supplement similar geometry cars UP owns that it uses to inspect hundreds of miles of tracks daily on the company's main lines west of the Mississippi River. Running at regular train speeds, the inspection vehicles can detect tiny deviations and wear on rail lines that could cause a derailment if allowed to grow, UP officials said.

The new cars will patrol the main mountain routes into the state, UP officials said. Northern California sites will include Donner Pass, the Feather River Canyon and grades outside Dunsmuir. The state has designated all those areas high hazards for derailments.

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