

VIA Rail Canada's Appearance
Standing Committee on Transportation, Infrastructure and
Communities (TRAN)
Opening Remarks of Martin R Landry, President and CEO
January 26, 2023

Mr. Chair, dear committee members, thank you for having us today.

I would like to address my very first words to our loyal passengers, their families, friends and loved ones. On behalf of VIA Rail Canada, I apologize to all of you that were on the trains that were delayed for an extended period of time or cancelled during the busy holiday season.

I am joined today by my colleagues Rita Toporowski, Chief Customer Officer, and Michael Brankley, Vice President, Railway Operations, and we would like to thank you for this opportunity to review the two events that disrupted our services between December 23 and December 26.

We will not shy away from our responsibilities or from the fact that when passengers choose to travel with VIA Rail, they count on us to get them safely to their destination. We have standard readiness plans as well as winter storm protocols and it is obvious that we need to review these plans to enhance their effectiveness.

Mr. Chair, we believe it is important to highlight that there were two distinct events which led to the disruption of our operations.

First on December 23, the storm brought trees on the tracks, prolonged power outages, frozen rail switches and significant challenges that even led us to bring trains back to their point of departure.

As many of you probably already know, we own and maintain only 3% of the tracks on which we operate. Therefore, the majority of the infrastructure we operate on is owned by other rail companies, mostly by freight companies.

In the case of the events, we are here to discuss, the tracks belong to the CN.

In accordance with our industry standards, it is the owner who's responsible to assist us as quickly as possible in the event of problems related to railway infrastructure.

On the night of December 23, we were in constant communication with CN's control center. And given the extreme weather conditions, CN was facing its own set of challenges.

Then, in addition to this event, in mid-morning of December 24, a CN freight train derailed east of Toronto. Unfortunately, this left us with no other choice than to cancel all our services on our Montreal – Toronto and Ottawa - Toronto routes for 3 days from December 24 to 26.

While this issue – particularly when coupled with truly extreme weather conditions – is largely out of our control, we took immediate actions to address the impact of the disruptions on our passengers, by providing them a refund along with travel credits to those who were on immobilized trains.

Again, I want to be clear: this is not to point the finger at other parties or to absolve VIA Rail of its role in the frustrations experienced by our passengers, their families and friends.

I make this point to help Committee members understand the environment in which we operate.

Also, we have hired external experts to help review our performance and we intend to use the lessons learned to enhance our performance and we already know that there are elements which we could have better addressed, for example;

- Despite the fact that the situation was constantly evolving, we should have been more thorough in our communications to reassure our passengers and their families;
- Despite having increased all our food and water supplies on board our trains and at intermediate stops, as per our winter protocols, we had limited success in getting additional supplies to our immobilized trains due to road closures and the location of some of our trains.

- The challenges faced during the holiday season point to the need to increase the resiliency of our transportation infrastructure in order to deal with severe weather-related issues caused by climate change. Extraordinary weather events are becoming more common, and we need to act quickly in order to preserve the integrity of our transportation system.

We believe we owe it to our passengers to do better as we owe it to ourselves as an organization.

In closing, I want to thank my colleagues across the network who, on a daily basis, worked tirelessly to move our passengers safely from coast to coast to coast.

Their dedication and sense of duty helped us get over 17,000 people to their destinations on December 23 and allowed a safe resumption of services on December 27.

We thank you for your time today. We welcome any questions you may have.