

**Testimony of Tim McLean, Fire Chief of the Casselton (North Dakota) Volunteer Fire Department
Before the Senate Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee - Subcommittee on
Emergency Management, Intergovernmental Relations, and the District of Columbia (EMDC)
Transparency and Training: Preparing our First Responders for Emerging Threats and Hazards
March 25, 2014**

Good afternoon, Chairman Begich and senators of the committee:

I am Tim McLean, fire chief in Casselton, North Dakota. I was asked to appear before you today by Senator Heitkamp to highlight the importance of federal grant dollars that support local emergency responders.

I have been with the department for 29 years and have been the chief since 2006. We are a small department with 28 volunteer members. On average, we receive 100 calls for service per year and operate on a yearly budget of \$89,000. The Casselton Fire Department covers 378 square miles of Cass County, North Dakota which includes all or part of 12 townships, the City of Casselton and various small towns with a combined population of 3,680. We have approximately 50 miles of railroad tracks in our territory.

On December 30, 2013, a train derailed just west of Casselton, North Dakota. Cars from the derailment came to rest on a parallel track. A tanker train, carrying crude oil, which was traveling on that parallel track collided with those cars and the result was a large explosion and fire, the largest my department has ever encountered.

With exception to the initial derailment, about everything went right that afternoon. Our local response was nearly flawless. From the outset, proper procedures were followed and good judgment was used. We had the foresight to secure the perimeter and not rush in and to realize early we needed our regional response haz-mat team. The team was dispatched within 10 minutes of the start of the incident. From the beginning, the Incident Command System was used and we formed a unified command with the sheriff and we opened an emergency operations center.

All of the steps we took resulted in a high quality and efficient response to what could have been a catastrophic and deadly incident. The relationships that were in place among the responders and the relationship that we have to our state Department of Emergency Services contributed to our success. This efficiency allowed a great deal of planning to be completed which resulted in the early assessment about whether or not evacuations would be needed. As a result of the planning, the evacuations were planned, orderly, and executed perfectly.

You might think we were just lucky. Even the mayor of Casselton said we dodged a bullet, but in reality the success of this entire incident is that everyone did their jobs, stayed in their lanes, relied on their training, and got the job done and we did it well. We had no injuries or fatalities and that is what it is all about.

We would all like to pat ourselves on the back and tell ourselves how great we are; however, the reality is that we couldn't have been successful without federal homeland security grant dollars. Without this financial commitment and support, we would not have had the training or the equipment to properly respond to this fire. The regional haz-mat team's equipment was purchased with federal grant dollars and the advanced training we have in ICS and the National Incident Management System is all made possible by these federal grants.

These grant dollars keep us current in our haz-mat operations training and allows us to hold mock county disaster drills. And, we have been able to update a lot of our equipment. The training that I have received through DHS/FEMA grants has taught me how to react to a disaster and what steps to take in the first minutes on an incident. I know I used my training during the train derailment which in turn helped in our smooth response.

I think this incident should put all of us on notice. Because of the growing oil industry and the likelihood that oil will continue to be shipped via rail, we must continue to train and plan for these types of incidents. Yes...the tanker cars will likely be improved and pipelines may be used more extensively, but that does not erase the fact that crude and other hazardous materials will continue to be shipped through our communities. Our responder community must be ready for that. And federal grant dollars will greatly increase the likelihood that we will be ready.