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Rail: 11 kilometres of track to be safe in the future on section three

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GASPÉ - A project notice submitted to the provincial Department of Environment by the Transports Québec indicates that work will be required between now and 2030 to secure six segments of the Gaspé rail line on section 3 between Port-Daniel-Gascons and Gaspé.

Currently, the vast $872 million project aims to restore safe rail traffic by 2026 on the entire section between Matapedia and Gaspé.

However, additional sums will have to be invested to ensure the 75-year durability of section three, which is the most sensitive to erosion and coastal submersion.

The document consulted by SPEC notes that coastal protection work will be carried out on 11 linear kilometres, spread over six separate, non-contiguous sites on the railway.

At these six sites, the cumulative intervention distance within the two-year flood limit is greater than 500 metres, i.e. around 3.2 linear kilometres, and, because of the variants studied, it is estimated that a cumulative area equal to or greater than 5,000 m² may also be exceeded.

The sites concerned are Pabos Mills West over a length of 225 metres, Pabos Mills over a length of 1,210 metres, Chandler over a length of 1,190 metres, banc de Pabos over a length of 1,340 metres, Barachois over a distance of 5,700 metres and Douglastown over a length of 1,480 metres.

In the document filed, the Ministry of Transports specifies that “the project includes work to protect against coastal hazards. It is planned that this work will be carried out following the rehabilitation of the Gaspésie railway between Port-Daniel-Gascons and Gaspé (scheduled for the end of 2026). It aims to alleviate coastal erosion and flooding problems at six distinct, ‘non-contiguous’ sites in the marine/coastal environment."

Several solutions are being analyzed to correct the six sites: relocation of the rail track outside the constraint zone associated with coastal hazards; local recession of the rail track; and raising the rail track.

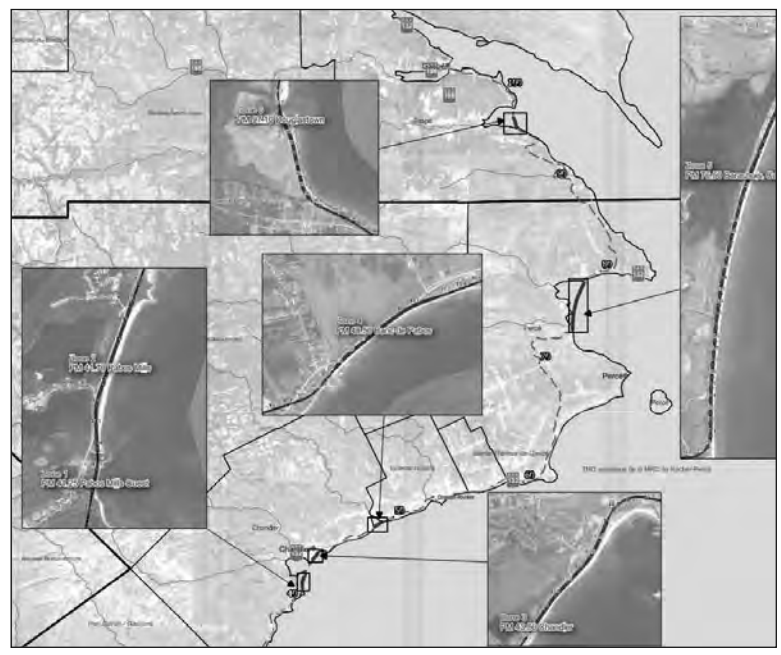

Photo: Ministry of the Environment website

The five areas requiring attention in section three.

The solutions and variants will be analyzed according to four main aspects: technical, transportation and rail safety, environmental and socio-economic.

Considering that work is underway to bring the railroad back into service, and that work to protect the railway infrastructure from the impacts of weather, will be carried out subsequently, work methods will be adapted to avoid compromising, as far as possible, the maintenance of rail service.

Several stages are planned before arriving at a definitive solution.

These include hydraulic studies, ecological characterization, environmental studies, archaeological potential, sediment transport, geomorphology, bathymetry, surveying and geotechnical surveys. This will be followed by preliminary and final designs, plans and specifications, information sessions, impact studies and environmental and government authorizations.

Once these steps have been completed, the Ministry notes that, depending on the results of the preliminary study and impact assessment, ‘site-specific’ measures will be put forward to ensure the rail's long-term viability. These include raising and relocating the tracks, building new stonework, beach recharging, building retaining walls, and other measures that may be applicable.

Other solutions and new combinations of these could be studied as part of the preliminary design.

In the preliminary analyses of the hydraulic studies carried out between 2019 and 2022, the Ministry indicates that maintaining the sites in their current state would be insufficient to ensure the sustainability of the rail line.

According to a 2021 study by the Université du Québec à Rimouski’s (UQAR) Laboratoire de dynamique et de gestion intégrée des zones côtières (LDGIZC), the six sites targeted by this project are located in sectors that are exposed or will be exposed in the next ten years.

For this reason, these sites are exposed to erosion and submersion for ‘two-year’ recurrence events, which can lead to several issues such as damaged track, damaged or destroyed berm, unfavourable longshore drift and insufficient space for vegetation recovery.

The document mentions that when section 3 of the railroad was in operation, the operational approach in the event of a storm was to close the section to traffic.

Once the storm was over, an inspection of the closed section was carried out and maintenance work was done before allowing rail traffic to pass through again, reflecting the importance of the coastal flooding issue along this section and the high risk it represents for rail traffic. It usually took two to three days to restore the railroad after major storms.

The Ministry points out that, although some of the variants under study propose relocating the existing track, the project will nevertheless advocate that work be carried out within the existing right-of-way wherever possible.

This approach will reduce potential impacts on the adjacent human and biophysical environments in the area.

One of the central design principles will be to minimize permanent and temporary encroachments on sensitive environments, with priority given to coastal wetlands and bodies of water.

According to the preliminary timetable submitted by the Transports Québec to the Environment Department, the environmental impact study and preliminary design will be submitted in December.

The notice of admissibility is expected in March 2025 and a recommendation from the Minister in September 2026.

In the meantime, the final pre-project would be submitted in December 2025, with preliminary and final plans and specifications in December 2026, for construction between 2027 and 2030.

No preliminary estimates for the project are mentioned in the document.

"All the infrastructure for which repairs have been made has a lifespan of 75 years for new infrastructure. Section 3 is scheduled for commissioning in 2026. Temporary work has been carried out to bring it back into service. The impact study project aims to ensure the structure's long-term viability for 75 years,” explains Michel Couture, coordinator and team leader of railway projects at the Transports Québec.

Using the banc de Pabos as an example, Mr. Couture points out that riprap has been installed, and the rail still needs to be laid.

"This work is reaching the level of recommissioning. To make the structure sustainable for 75 years, this is part of the study,” explains Mr. Couture.

The Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie (SCFG) was aware of the process. “The ministry wants to have the necessary needs for additional investments assessed in the coming years to deal with climate change,” notes SCFG president Éric Dubé.

"We know where the railroad has been for 100 years. It's a good sign that the ministry is doing this work. What we understand is that after 2026, there will still be investments to be made to ensure its safety and operation to Gaspé,” emphasizes Mr. Dubé.

The total bill could eventually reach $1 billion. "I'd probably say ‘Yes’, but I don't want to make any assumptions until the tenders have been called. I don't know the extent of the technical challenges and financial requirements, and I think that's what the study will be used for,” says the president.