Cleanup continues after West Virginia oil train explosion

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Cleanup operations continue in southern West Virginia, a week after a massive oil train derailment prompted hundreds of evacuations and a state of emergency declaration by Governor Earl Ray Tomblin. Cleanup crews continued pumping oil out of the derailed cars over the weekend.

Last Monday, A CSX train transporting 109 tankers of crude oil from North Dakota to a terminal in Yorktown, Virginia, derailed near the town of Mount Carbon in Fayette County, West Virginia. The train had just passed through Montgomery—a town of nearly 2,000—only two miles before the accident.

According to CSX, 27 tanker cars, each carrying up to 30,000 gallons of crude oil, left the tracks, causing fires and massive explosions. Nineteen of the derailed tankers were either punctured and leaking or still on fire days after the accident.

No one was killed in Monday’s accident, and the train’s engineer and conductor were unharmed. One resident was treated for smoke inhalation, and one house was destroyed. Morris Bounds told the *Charleston Gazette* that he happened to look out his kitchen window at the time of the accident and saw the train cars barreling towards his house. The 68 year-old escaped by immediately running out his door into the snow in his socks.

“The house was blowing up behind me,” Bounds said. “The walls were coming in.”

Bounds’ neighbor Carl Rose saw the scene and told the *Gazette*, “The cars were still shooting off the track as he was running out his front door.”

Bounds said he was thankful his wife was not at home and 15 family members who were visiting him had left the day before.

Contrary to initial reports, none of the tanker cars made it into the Kanawha River or nearby Armstrong Creek, although it remains unclear how much crude oil might have leaked into the two waterways. West Virginia American Water closed its water intake downstream from the accident, eventually cutting off water to about 2,000 customers serviced by its treatment plant in Montgomery. Water was restored later in the week.

About 200 residents living within a half-mile radius of the accident site were evacuated, some of whom went to stay with friends and family, while others went to emergency shelters and hotels. About 800 households lost power until damaged lines could be restored on Tuesday.

The investigation and cleanup operations have been hampered by severe winter weather in the region. The immediate cause of the accident is not yet known, and it is unclear what role, if any, the severe weather might have played.

The use of hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, and the development of horizontal drilling techniques have unleashed an oil boom in the US in recent years. However, inadequate or non-existent pipeline infrastructure has driven oil producers in the newly opened fields to increasingly rely on the nation’s rail network as the most cost-efficient means of delivering their crude oil to refineries and terminals. Since 2009, rail transport of oil has increased from 21,000 barrels a day to 1.1 million, according to federal data.

In particular, the Bakken Shale formation of North Dakota and Montana has benefited from these new drilling techniques. The Bakken oilfields were first tapped with the new methods in 2007, and production has soared since then. By 2011, production had already outstripped existing pipeline capacity, and producers turned to railway transport for the extremely volatile form of crude oil.

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Federal regulations and oversight of the nation’s railroads have not kept pace with these developments and are woefully inadequate to the new reality of ever-longer trains pulling massive shipments of hazardous materials for hundreds of miles through towns and cities.

An editorial in the *Charleston Gazette* noted, “[T]he Federal Railroad Administration has only 76 agents, aided by a few dozen state inspectors, to examine America’s 140,000 miles of track, plus bridges. This means that less than 1 percent of U.S. track can be inspected yearly.”

“Railway fines for safety violations are so small they have little effect,” the editorial continued. “In 2013, the Federal Railroad Administration issued $14 million in fines—to an industry whose top seven corporations reaped $84 billion [in] profits.”

The result has been a string of oil train disasters in recent years in Canada, Virginia, North Dakota, Oklahoma and Alabama. In 2013, a derailment of a 74-car oil train carrying Bakken crude in Lac-Megantic, Quebec, killed 47 people and destroyed some 30 buildings. Last year, a shipment of Bakken crude on the very same CSX route from North Dakota to Yorktown, Virginia, derailed and caught fire in Lynchburg, Virginia.

There have been at least 21 oil train accidents in the US and Canada since 2006, according to federal data reviewed by the Associated Press, and officials expect these disasters to continue. A study conducted last July by the U.S. Department of Transportation anticipates an average of 10 derailments a year over the next two decades, causing billions in damage and possibly killing hundreds of people.

For its part, the multi-billion dollar CSX Transportation company, which operates 21,000 miles of track in 23 states and the Canadian provinces of Ontario and Quebec, has used its money and influence to push for continued deregulation of the industry. According to the Center for Responsive Politics (CRP), CSX is considered a “heavy hitter,” spending more than $15 million on federal elections since 1990.

The campaign contributions have flowed to both Republicans and Democrats alike, with the company favoring whichever political party is in power. Until the Republican sweep of incumbent Democrats in the last mid-term election, every federal office holder in West Virginia since 1990 had received money from CSX.

Former West Virginia Representative Nick Rahall—the ranking Democrat on the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee until this year—received more than $62,000 from CSX since 2000, including $22,000 last year for his failed reelection bid. Republican Senator Shelley Moore Capito has accepted nearly $53,000 from the company since she first entered Congress in 2000. Likewise, Democratic Senator Joe Manchin has received $30,700 since arriving in Congress in 2010.

“The company has lobbied heavily to protect its interests,” CRP explains. “CSX has spent millions of dollars lobbying against bills that would strengthen railroad antitrust laws, as well as bills that would give the federal government more power of oversight and regulation.”

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