

Crews burn toxic chemicals from Ohio train crash in “controlled release”

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7 February 2023

Do you work at Norfolk Southern or another Class I railway? Tell us what you think about Friday's accident by filling out the form at the bottom of this article. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Emergency crews working to contain the fire and damage caused by Friday's derailment and explosion of a Norfolk Southern train released the highly toxic chemicals into ditches dug in the ground and set them on fire to avoid the possibility of further rail cars exploding and widely dispersed carcinogenic substances around the village of East Palestine.

Several small charges were set off Monday afternoon to rupture five of the tanker cars. The chemicals were set on fire as they poured from the ruptured cars. Flames could be seen stretching for over 100 yards along the tracks next to the damaged cars. Fire balls went up over 200 feet into the air, and thick black smoke traveled up into the atmosphere.

Meteorologists tracking the path of the toxic clouds of smoke show them moving southeast towards Pittsburgh and its northern suburbs.

On Sunday, safety officials became concerned that the five tanker cars carrying vinyl chloride, a highly unstable chemical, could explode. Safety pressure release valves were not working, and the temperatures of the cars were rising.

Vinyl chloride, used in the making of hard plastics, is very flammable and causes liver and other cancers.

Government and Norfolk Southern officials are describing the release and burning of vinyl chloride as a “controlled release.” In reality, the operation was very dangerous and still poses a major health risk.

Prior to the release, emergency personnel went door to door in a one-mile radius from the derailment to ensure that people had evacuated an area which encompasses 1,500 to 2,000 homes. Road blocks using

bulldozers and tractors were set up to prevent people from reentering the area. The Ohio National Guard was also deployed to assist in this operation.

Ohio Governor Mike DeWine warned that fumes released into the air from the venting operation “can be deadly if inhaled.” Officials designated a “red zone” around the site, where people faced “grave danger of death” from breathing in the fumes. Those who remained in a “yellow zone” just beyond were “at a high risk of severe injury, including skin burns and serious lung damage,” the governor said.

On Friday night, over 50 rail cars went off the tracks, 10 of which were carrying toxic chemicals. The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) sent an investigator on Saturday. Initial reports are that a mechanical failure caused the derailment. Video from a Ring home door camera showed sparks coming off a wheel, which was clearly breaking down.

Moments before the crash, crew members were alerted of a mechanical failure, and they deployed the emergency brakes.

In addition to vinyl chloride, other toxic combustible liquids carried by the train included butyl acrylate and benzene residue. Environmental crews have been going up and down a nearby stream removing dead fish.

Breathing vinyl chloride is very dangerous. In high enough levels it can cause death. At any level it can cause cancer of the liver, brain and blood.

“If a water supply is contaminated, vinyl chloride can enter household air when the water is used for showering, cooking or laundry,” the National Cancer Institute says.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: “Vinyl chloride in water or soil evaporates rapidly if it is near the surface. Vinyl chloride in the air breaks down in a few days, resulting in the formation of

several other chemicals, including hydrochloric acid, formaldehyde and carbon dioxide.”

It is not clear if NTSB officials explored other ways of removing the vinyl chloride other than releasing it into the environment. Norfolk Southern wants to get the wreckage removed and the tracks reopened as soon as possible so it can return to making money on the line.

Norfolk Southern and the other Class 1 railroads are seeking to boost profits by cutting crews. Trains that can stretch nearly a mile or more are often operated with just a two-person crew, who themselves are overworked and exhausted from being constantly on call. And the railroads want to even reduce this to single-person crews.

Maintenance of ways crews are stretched thin and forced to put “bandaids” on problems which should be properly repaired. Much of the rail cars currently in use are decades old and are not regularly inspected.

The fault for this lies not only with the operators but also the heads of the major rail unions, which for decades have collaborated with the rail companies to help them boost profits at the expense of the workers. Most recently the unions worked with Congress to override a strike vote by railroaders and enforced yet another round of concessions.

The only way forward for workers to ensure that preventable disasters like the East Palestine derailment do not happen is to take up the fight for rank-and-file control by creating workplace committees and joining these up with other rank-and-file committees in a common fight. All those interested in this fight should join the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee today.



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