

More questions than answers for residents poisoned by Ohio train derailment

Samuel Davidson
13 February 2023

Do you work at Norfolk Southern or another Class I railway? Do you live in East Palestine or a neighboring community? Tell us what you think about the February 3 accident and release of toxic chemicals by filling out the form at the bottom of this article. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Residents of East Palestine, Ohio, have many questions but few answers regarding the February 3 derailment of a Norfolk Southern freight train and the release of more than 500 tons of toxic chemicals into the ground, water and air.

Over the weekend, residents of the town with a population of 4,700 took to social media and spoke with the press about the death of pets and livestock, the further impact on their health and that of their children, the chlorine-like smell in the air and the lack of accurate information from both Norfolk Southern and state and federal officials.

“I’ve watched every news conference, and I haven’t heard anything that makes me think that this is a data-driven decision,” Maura Todd, 44, told the *Washington Post*. “We don’t feel like we have a whole lot of information.”

The air smells like an “over-chlorinated swimming pool,” causing his eyes to burn, Eric Whitening told the *Post*. He said he had no choice but to return home with his family of five. Many people in this small community on the Ohio-Pennsylvania border are struggling to pay their bills and cannot afford to move away.

Jackie Moore, known as “jakajam11” on TikTok, is a mother of four who lives in Ohio. In her post, “East Palestine Walking Trail along Leslie Run, February 12, 2023,” she pointed out dead fish in the waters of the Leslie Run Creek as heavy machinery filtered the water.

On Friday, residents learned for the first time of three additional toxic chemicals—ethylene glycol monobutyl ether, ethylhexyl acrylate and isobutylene—that were on the train and had been released into the environment.

In a letter sent by the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to Norfolk Southern, the three chemicals were listed along with the others that had been previously identified. To date, Norfolk Southern has not provided the public with a full accounting of all the contents of the 140-car freight train that derailed.

Underscoring the potential for a catastrophe involved in hauling millions of tons of toxic chemicals by rail, a truck driver died in a crash Monday with a train carrying toxic chemicals outside Houston, Texas. The Union Pacific railroad was said to be monitoring air quality at the scene. The same day there was another train derailment in Enoree, South Carolina.

On February 6, Norfolk Southern and government officials conducted what they called a “controlled release” of five tanker cars filled with vinyl chloride, a highly flammable and toxic chemical, known even in low amounts to cause cancer of the liver and other organs. The EPA and Norfolk Southern officials have not released the quantity of vinyl chloride carried on the train, but estimates based on the size of the tankers put the amount at over 1 million pounds.

In preparation of the “controlled release,” residents within one mile of the site were ordered to evacuate their homes.

The so-called “controlled release” amounted to using explosives to puncture the tankers, allowing the vinyl chloride to flow into a ditch that had been dug alongside the cars where the carcinogenic chemical was set on fire.

Flames from the explosion shot up hundreds of feet into the air and could be seen from over 20 miles away.

Smoke from the fire rose into the atmosphere, where it spread toxic waste for hundreds of miles.

Toxins that did not burn or spilled from the original derailment into the nearby stream have been detected more than 30 miles away in the Ohio River.

“Materials released during the incident were observed and detected in samples from Sulphur Run, Leslie Run, Bull Creek, North Fork Little Beaver Creek, Little Beaver Creek, and the Ohio River,” wrote the EPA.

There are 25 million people who live along and depend upon the Ohio River as their water supply.

“We basically nuked a town with chemicals so we could get a railroad open,” Sil Caggiano, a hazardous materials specialist, told CBS-affiliate WKBN.

Last Wednesday, Ohio Governor Mike DeWine, in complete disregard for the people living in East Palestine, announced that it was safe for residents to return to their homes. Reflecting rising social tensions, as the governor started his press briefing, police arrested a *NewsNation* reporter covering the event after a provocation by the head of the Ohio National Guard.

Caggiano, who is also a former battalion chief with the Youngstown Fire Department, felt that more testing should be done before sending residents back.

“I was surprised when they quickly told the people they can go back home, but then said if they feel like they want their homes tested they can have them tested. I would’ve far rather they did all the testing,” Caggiano told WKBN.

“There’s a lot of what-ifs, and we’re going to be looking at this thing 5, 10, 15, 20 years down the line and wondering, ‘Gee, cancer clusters could pop up, you know, well water could go bad,’” Caggiano said.

Dr. Eric Feigl-Ding, an epidemiologist and an outspoken proponent of greater safety measures to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, said on Twitter he would evacuate everyone within a 50-mile radius. The government only evacuated people within a one-mile radius. Feigl-Ding advised that people should be kept away until the area can be fully tested and cleared of toxic chemicals.

Noting the likelihood of long-term health effects, Pennsylvania residents filed a federal lawsuit demanding that the railroad pay for medical screenings and related care for anyone living within a 30-mile radius of the derailment.

The EPA letter to Norfolk Southern also pointed out

that in the race to rebuild the damaged tracks and get trains running again, the ground where the vinyl chloride was poured was not removed but simply covered over.

On Saturday, the East Palestine Police Department notified residents in a tweet that Norfolk Southern would be sending contractors to conduct tests of people’s drinking water.

Many like Nicole Stevenson asked the obvious question of why they should trust the company that poisoned their water to now do the testing. She tweeted, “Can we get testers not affiliated with the responsible party??? It would put us residents at ease with the findings.” Others wanted to know why they were told it was safe to return when their water was not safe.

Another area of concern for experts has been the tools being used by the EPA to monitor the air and the fact that not enough information was collected before sending people back to their homes.

“In any of these situations, EPA is going to monitor with what tools they have available to them, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that’s the best way to monitor,” said Peter DeCarlo, an environmental health professor at Johns Hopkins University, to the *Washington Post*. “The handheld monitors that were being used are convenient to use, but they often do not have the necessary sensitivity or the chemical specificity to really assess whether there’s a risk.”

The danger of catastrophic accidents is increasing as all the major railroads have slashed thousands of jobs and reduced the size of train crews to cut costs.

Each day millions of dollars worth of freight pass through East Palestine. Just as during the pandemic, when politicians pushed to reopen workplaces and schools so companies could make profits, disregarding or covering up the potentially dire health consequences, there was a push to quickly reopen the rail line without any concern for the well-being and safety of the residents of the town.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)