

Cincinnati-area water districts shut off intake from Ohio River due to contamination from East Palestine derailment

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Only days after Ohio Governor Mike DeWine publicly declared the water in East Palestine safe to drink, water authorities in Cincinnati, hundreds of miles away, announced they would shut off the intakes from the river “out of an abundance of caution.” The water authority in northern Kentucky that serves Campbell and Kenton counties and portions of Boone, Grant and Pendleton is following Cincinnati’s lead.

Chemicals leaked from the catastrophic derailment and “controlled release and burn” of vinyl chloride from a tanker car would reach the Greater Cincinnati Water Work’s Ohio River intake by late Saturday or early Sunday morning, officials said.

According to public works officials, thus far they have only detected very low levels of the chemical butyl acrylate, a byproduct of the burning of hundreds of thousands of gallons of vinyl chloride, upstream of the city. This is believed to have seeped into the Ohio River from a small creek approximately 300 miles north. The Ohio River passes less than 20 miles south of East Palestine.

The same day DeWine’s office was informed that a large chemical plume of butyl acrylate had reached Gallipolis, Ohio, and was expected to arrive near Huntington, West Virginia.

Richard Harrison, the executive director of the Ohio River Valley Water Sanitation Commission (ORSANCO), told the *Cincinnati Enquirer* the rain that fell across the region on Thursday had made a “significant impact” in speeding the arrival of the contaminants to the city’s water intake.

Harrison told the newspaper that the levels of the compound in the water are still far below what the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) would consider hazardous. Nevertheless, the justified decision to

close the intake has exposed attempts by the government and the Norfolk Southern railroad to convince residents that there is no longer any danger to the public in East Palestine.

The presence of chemicals from the spill in the Ohio River at any level is a worrying development. The Ohio River basin drains an area where approximately 25 million people live, and several cities lie along its course, including Cincinnati, Ohio, and Louisville, Kentucky, with metro populations of 2.3 million and 1.4 million, respectively.

It is also one of the largest tributaries of the Mississippi River. Major cities downriver from where the Ohio River empties into the lower Mississippi include Memphis, Tennessee (metro population of 1.3 million); Baton Rouge (870,000) and New Orleans (1.3 million), Louisiana.

The precise danger to the public is not yet known. The exact substances released in the “controlled release and burn” remain to be confirmed, but they include the highly poisonous and cancer-causing agent, vinyl chloride. The 141-car derailed train was also carrying several other hazardous and flammable substances such as isobutylene, butyl acrylate, ethylhexyl acrylate and ethylene glycol monobutyl ether. Animal deaths have been observed, with the Ohio Department of Natural Resources estimating that 3,500 fish had been killed by the contaminated runoff after the derailment.

A derailment of a Conrail train in November 2012 over a bridge into the Mantua Creek in Paulsboro, New Jersey, led to the spillage of vinyl chloride into the air and surrounding water. Two years later, surveys conducted by the state’s health department found that around 10 percent of the local population suffered from chronic headaches, nose and throat irritation, and respiratory

difficulties.

In a report yesterday on ABC News, Professor of Environmental Health at Johns Hopkins, Dr. Peter DeCarlo, told host Martha Raddatz, “Based on the available data that we’ve seen on the EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] response site, we just don’t have the information we need to understand what chemicals may be present. We know it started as vinyl chloride, but as soon as you burn that, all bets are off. You have a lot of chemical by-products that can happen from a combustion process like that.”

Raddatz followed with a crucial question, “Even though officials are saying you’re safe?” DeCarlo responded, “The monitoring equipment that they’re using to determine things that are safe doesn’t give us chemical specificity. It doesn’t tell us what chemicals are present. It just says they are below some level. There are plenty of chemicals that can be created from that fire that can be toxic at much lower levels.”

Many of the local residents of the small Ohio village are complaining of nausea, vomiting, headaches and skin and eye irritation, indicating toxic exposure to the chemicals. Exposure to vinyl chloride, a colorless flammable gas used in the production of hard plastic resin, can lead to dizziness, skin and eye irritation and burning cough, which many residents of East Palestine experienced. It has also been associated with increased risks of rare forms of liver cancer (hepatic angiosarcoma), primary liver, brain and lung cancer, which are designated as solid organ tumors. However, it can also lead to leukemia and lymphomas.

In spite of the dangers, government indifference continues. Last week, Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg waved off concerns by pointing to the fact that more than 1,000 derailments take place in the United States each year. When this provoked an angry public reaction, Senator Bernie Sanders leapt to his defense. “Was he driving the train?” Sanders quipped when asked if Buttigieg bore any share of responsibility for the disaster, implicitly blaming the rail crew itself for the derailment. Last year Sanders played a key role in the maneuvering which led to the congressional ban on strike action on the railroads, although he himself cast a meaningless ballot against it.

In fact, the cause of the derailment lies in the constant reduction by Norfolk Southern and the other railroads of their workforces, longer trains and a pro-corporate regulatory environment, all of which have also led to record profits for the railroad industry, already the most

profitable in the country. Last year, Norfolk Southern reported \$3.2 billion in revenue.

As one railroader noted, “They cut their workforce to bare bones, and now they’re paying the price for it because the wheels are falling off the train.”

In a further act of damage control, Norfolk Southern CEO Alan Shaw made a brief press appearance Saturday in East Palestine, Ohio. The company had earlier backed out of last week’s community meeting attended by hundreds of residents, claiming an unspecified danger to its representatives.

In his weekend photo-op, Shaw defended his company’s controversial decision to light up the toxic contents of the derailed cars. After acknowledging that “this has been devastating to this community,” he continued to endorse that the “controlled release” remained a correct course of action.

Serious questions have been raised about the decision by numerous experts. Sil Caggiano, a hazardous materials expert from the region, told the WSWs that he had “not seen it in any case studies.” Steven Donziger, a well-recognized human rights and environmental lawyer, recently published an opinion piece in the *Guardian* declaring it “seems like a company with a \$55 billion market cap chose to sacrifice the health of thousands of people to keep its profits flowing.”

JP Morgan has pegged the total cost of cleanup at upwards of \$2.7 billion. However, only an insultingly small fraction of this total has actually been disbursed so far. Norfolk Southern announced last week it was providing a paltry \$1 million to over 700 families affected by the catastrophe.

The fundamental issues that made the disaster possible cannot be solved within the framework of the capitalist system, which is responsible for it. The fight to expose the real scope of the disaster and make those affected whole must be rooted in the working class, which is not beholden to selfish profit interests.



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