

“They have upended people’s lives”: East Palestine residents speak out at Erin Brockovich town hall meeting

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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 know about the Norfolk Southern disaster by filling out the form at the bottom of this article. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Residents of East Palestine and surrounding areas packed a town hall meeting hosted by environmental advocate Erin Brockovich Friday evening to hear presentations on the dangers posed by the train derailment and subsequent release and burn of toxic chemicals. Brockovich’s group, East Palestine Justice, is a team of lawyers and health experts preparing a class action suit against Norfolk Southern.

The meeting attracted hundreds of residents both from East Palestine as well as the surrounding communities. Many people also traveled from neighboring regions to learn about this environmental disaster, its causes and what can be done about it.

At the meeting, residents heard stark reports from panelists. “You’re in a situation where you’re going to be dealing with this for the rest of your lives if you stay here,” hydrology expert Bob Bowcock told the meeting. Vinyl chloride, the main contaminant released in the disaster, moves very easily through the ground and is not easy to remove from the soil. Vinyl chloride is highly toxic and a Category 1A carcinogen. It causes liver, brain and lung cancer along with lymphoma and leukemia. It also has the potential to damage the nervous and immune systems and can lead to a decrease in bone strength. To make matters worse, the water supply in East Palestine is uniquely vulnerable to contamination.

Prior to the start of the meeting, the National Transportation Safety Board issued its preliminary report on the derailment which, even in its abbreviated form, made clear that the “accident” which has devastated the town was completely preventable and that through its actions Norfolk Southern ignored warning for nearly an hour that one of the axles was overheating and would fail.

On Friday, the EPA stopped Norfolk Southern from shipping contaminated water and mud for disposal. Previously, the railroad had been shipping waste to three sites, one in suburban Houston, one in southeast Michigan and one in Ohio. This was apparently done without even notifying local officials. In Texas, the local government first learned that waste materials were being shipped to sites in their areas after truckloads had already been brought in.

Outside the event, the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with residents on the impact of the disaster, the role of Norfolk Southern and of both the Trump and Biden administrations in cutting safety regulations governing the railroads that led up to this disaster.

Laurie Mattern and Janice Evans both live outside East Palestine and worry that those in surrounding communities are being forgotten. Laurie’s mother lives in Beavercreek. “If they don’t clean this up, it [the pollution] is going to run right by her,” she worried.

She says that she has seen people testing the water three times and so far nothing has been found. But she also believes the water is not being properly cleaned, noting that “all they are doing are things like pumping the water out, running it through the system and pumping it back in.”

“What are they going to do about the mud and everything?” she asked. “It is already settled down in there and that will leach back into the water. We don’t know the long-term effects. All they care about is their money, their profits, the bottom line.”

Abby and Marty Hostetler said that Leslie Run, a highly contaminated creek which has received significant attention, passes through their backyard. “It is contaminated, all the fish are dead, everything is dead and our well is about 30 feet from the stream.

“When it happened, we had all kinds [of] headaches, sore throats, we evacuated, but when we came home, it must’ve come through our chimney ‘cause the whole house smelled of the chemicals. You couldn’t breathe.”

They worry that the creek will remain polluted and what that will do to people's lives. "There are no signs to stay away from the water. No caution tape. On Sunday, I saw three kids playing in the creek. It is still contaminated."

Janice lives less than three miles away in Negley, Ohio. "Leslie Run runs around our town. Our water table is around 65 feet, and we don't have city water; everybody has well water, and if that stuff gets into our water table, everybody's water down there is going to be ruined.

"I understand it happened in East Palestine, but everyone around here got hit. It is all around here, they try to make it sound like it didn't go very far, but it did."

Janice is angry at Norfolk Southern's response and says she does not trust the EPA. She points to the opening of a dump a few years ago that was only supposed to contain construction materials. But, she says, toxins were dumped there, preventing people from drinking their well water.

Like many others at the meeting, Janice could not understand why they did not stop the train after the wheel caught fire, as far back as Salem. "They could clearly see that that train was on fire when it came through Salem; when it came through Salem it was on fire. I just can't believe that they couldn't get that train stopped."

Janice pointed out that they quickly moved to begin running trains across the track after the release and burn (NS has since shut down the track and excavated the surrounding soil). "They are still pulling dead fish out of that creek. Anything that drinks that water is going to be dead too. They have upended people's lives."

Many people are very concerned about the long-term impact. Lisa Murphy lives and works near the crash site and she has a 14-year-old daughter who goes to school here.

"She has no future. You don't know what the long-term effects are and all the money in the world is not going to fix that. You can't buy her new organs. I don't know if that is going to happen, but that is what I'm scared of."

She, like many residents, is now trapped financially in the town because their houses have become worthless and people are moving away. She notes that several of her neighbors have already moved away and put their houses up for sale.

"All our houses are worthless. I live just a few blocks from here. Nobody is going to want to move into this town."

"It is all about profit," she says. "We all rely upon the railroad, but they have to be safe."

Referring to the appearance of former president Donald Trump, who came to East Palestine two days earlier and gave out bottled water, she quipped, "'Mr. Wonderful,' Trump, is one of the people who helped cut that stuff [safety regulations]."

Lisa Amora Regal is a nurse, and she describes how she

and her daughter have been waking up with severe headaches and sore throats. She points out that Norfolk Southern knew that the train was having a problem even before Salem, Ohio. "I'm fed up with the safety violations. I'm a nurse; I know what this stuff does. We need to do something to get the safety regulations and the infrastructure."

Loretta Kunkle lives within half a mile of the crash site. She says that she was not home at the time but her daughter was and how terrified she was for her. She says she raced home and picked up her daughter. "I got home and we headed out of town. I didn't know what the train was carrying. But I knew it wasn't good.

"I'm still not home," she says. "It is not safe, the water, people breaking out in rashes."

How many times had she heard people saying the water is safe? "It may be safe for the moment, but within time, it is going to hit the water table."

Railroad safety is horrible, she says, and she blames the company for cutting staff.

"How many people's lives are in jeopardy, for what? A couple of bucks?" she asks. "I'm glad that nobody was hurt that evening, It will cost people lives eventually. This town is going to pay the price. The kids will pay the price."

Ron Johnson works in New Castle, Pennsylvania, about 30 miles away, and he says that they could smell the burning off of the vinyl chloride there. He says he and his family went to Tennessee during the evacuation. He says the response of Norfolk Southern was terrible. "They rushed it, they just wanted to get the trains through. They had them backed up there pretty good.

"The controlled burn, that is another thing that shouldn't have been done. It was a rush job to get the trains running; they were losing too much money. It was costing them a lot.

"The railroads are no different than any other lobbies. The politicians are going to suck up to them. The little guy is never going to be seen."



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