

Angry residents confront EPA and railroad officials at East Palestine, Ohio town hall

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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 from East Palestine and surrounding areas angrily confronted officials from the Environmental Protection Agency and Norfolk Southern at a town hall meeting Thursday, demanding to know why their health concerns are being ignored.

The meeting was the first time in the month since the February 3 derailment that an official representative from Norfolk Southern (NS) attended a town hall in East Palestine. NS pulled out of an earlier meeting citing unspecified “dangers” to the safety of its employees. Norfolk Southern CEO Alan Shaw again did not attend the meeting. He makes over \$4 million a year plus bonus and expenses.

NS has announced it will spend a paltry \$6.5 million—barely more than one-and-a-half of Shaw’s annual salary—on assistance to residents in East Palestine, who have been affected by one of the worst US environmental disasters in years. Earlier this year, the railroad said it would spend \$7.5 billion buying back stock to boost share values for its investors.

Only about a dozen East Palestine and area residents were allowed to speak before East Palestine Mayor Trent Conaway closed the town meeting and told residents to continue to ask their questions at the resource fair being held in the high school gymnasium. In all, residents were only given about half an hour to voice their concerns and ask questions of officials.

“People do not feel safe,” said Scott Sayder, who lives near the disaster site and says that residents should be moved out until the area is clean and safe again.

“People who have symptoms, they shouldn’t be dismissed, they should be looked at and we shouldn’t be here. I’d like to know why we were allowed to come home and why we haven’t been moved out,” he said. None of the officials answered his questions.

He continued: “We are losing students from the school district, the kids are coming into this school, they have symptoms, the symptoms sometimes increase when they are in school, teachers have symptoms. I think we should be shutting things down temporarily out of an abundance of caution.”

EPA finally orders dioxin tests

Also on Thursday, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) announced that it would finally begin testing for dioxins in the atmosphere. These highly toxic chemicals were almost certainly released as a by-product of the “controlled” release and burn of a chemical tanker car after the derailment, which produced a massive black cloud and plumes of chemicals that spread out into the surrounding region.

Stephen Lester, science director for the Center for Health and Environmental Justice, has been scathing in his criticism of the EPA for not testing for dioxins for nearly a month. “So why is EPA unwilling to test for dioxins in the soil? My guess is because they know they will find it,” he said in comment Thursday in the *Guardian*. “And if they find it, they’ll have to address the many questions people are asking. It will not be easy to interpret the results of the testing for dioxins in soil, but to avoid testing is irresponsible.”

Incredibly, the EPA is not testing for dioxins itself, but merely ordering NS to test for them. This is the equivalent of asking a murder suspect to secure the evidence at the crime scene. Earlier water testing by NS, later shown to have been marred by serious sampling errors, was the basis for Republican Governor Mike DeWine’s claim last month that the water in the area is safe to drink. The dioxin testing will take place in a three-stage process that will take weeks, if not months, to complete.

The EPA also announced that the railroad would begin removing the contaminated soil from around and beneath the railroad tracks where the derailment occurred. But the removal of the dirt will be done on one set of tracks at a time, allowing trains to continue running on the other side.

While this is more than what NS had originally planned, which was not to remove but merely “remediate” the poisoned soil, vinyl chloride trapped within soil evaporates very easily when disturbed. There are no requirements for preventing the vinyl chloride from being released into the air, and there are no plans to cover the area while the excavation is taking place to ensure that the townspeople are not further sickened with exposure.

What clean-up work has been done has been marked by incompetence and indifference. Dozens of maintenance workers involved in the initial response following the derailment are now reporting symptoms such as headaches and nausea, the

Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees (BMWED) has reported. Photos at the time showed workers at the site without any personal protective equipment, or even masks. A temporary dam built at the juncture of Sulphur and Leslie Runs, designed to hold in contaminated water, has overflowed multiple times, according to investigative outlet Status Coup.

Meanwhile, the government is far more carefully monitoring the growth of social opposition in response to the derailment than it is the release of toxic chemicals. An anti-terror “fusion center” operated by the federal Department of Homeland Security and the Ohio state government warned law enforcement agencies of the potential for “special interest extremism” as a result of last month’s visit to East Palestine by environmental activist Erin Brockovich, Yahoo News reported. “Brockovich is... placing blame solely on Norfolk Southern [for the accident.] The STACC TAU [state law enforcement agency involved in issuing the bulletin] assess this event could potentially increase tensions within the community.”

The bulletin did not name a single alleged extremist group or planned act of violence. Indeed, by the bulletin’s own admission, the activity of these unnamed “extremist” groups would likely be entirely legal, including calling “for changes in governmental policy” and “protests in/around East Palestine and/or at the Statehouse in Columbus.”

“You’re letting people stay here, you’re covering it up”

The government’s involvement in the cover-up was on full display in Thursday’s town hall. When officials tried to brush off residents’ concerns over air safety, one resident yelled “Don’t lie to us,” as an EPA regional administrator reiterated claims that tests show that the air is safe. Darrell Wilson, a top government relations official for Norfolk Southern, flatly rejected residents’ calls for the railroad to re-evacuate residents from the region.

Zsuzsa Gyenes wanted to know why they were not discussing a 2019 report by the Ohio EPA “that talked about the city water infrastructure not being sufficient enough to control any contaminants like this including a chemical spill.” Citing the report authored by Tim Eyerdorn, she explained it “basically said it (the city’s water) wouldn’t withstand this and that’s not what we’re being told by EPA and I’m just kind of curious why we’re not talking about that.”

This is a vital question since it contradicts the official story being told to residents by the EPA. Vinyl chloride travels easily through the ground and is very difficult to remove. Even if the water appears to be “safe” today, it can become poisonous in the near future.

Ashley McCollum asked, “You’re saying it’s OK for me to take my kids into my house, when after 30 minutes I’m there I feel sick? I can’t think properly. My head pounds so hard that it takes three hours when I leave to feel better.”

She said she can’t sell her home but also wouldn’t if she could. “How would I feel if a family moves in and a child gets cancer

from that down the road?” She said families are working just to pay for hotels so their families can be safe.

Linda Murphy said, “This has touched my family, this has touched my friends, this has touched my farm, this has touched my animals, this has touched my finances, and this has touched my home. And it will touch me to the cellular level when I get diagnosed with cancer or ALS or whatever is going to come down the road if I stay in this contaminated, toxic town.”

A mother of two asked how long were they going to be forced to live in the town while their family slowly died.

Spencer Gallagher spoke of the danger caused by the burning of vinyl chloride and clouds of smoke that hung over the area and traveled through Pennsylvania, New York and up into New England.

“When you burn vinyl chloride, any type of chloride whatsoever, you create dioxins. I understand they’re very hard to test for because they’re toxic at such low levels. One part per billion is toxic to a human being.”

Spencer explained that he works with Vietnam veterans who were poisoned with dioxins when exposed to Agent Orange during the war. Sometimes it takes years and decades for the effects to be seen, he said.

He also pointed to the record of the testing companies being contracted and their connections with Norfolk Southern. He pointed out that one of the testing companies is “owned by a company called BlackRock who was the second highest shareholder in Norfolk Southern.” He called for independent testing to be done, but paid for by Norfolk Southern.

Zach Chamberlain said that he has lost his job since the disaster and that he is not able to grow food for his family in his garden. “The smoke was so thick you couldn’t see without a flashlight. I took my kids and we left.”

When he asked what help there was, he was told to call and they would talk with him. “Don’t just tell me, tell everybody. We want to know what is going to be done.”

Resident Joshua Figley said that he has worked hard for his family of five to live in the town and own his own home. But since the disaster he has been forced to live with his family in his brother’s house, sleeping in one room on air mattresses. “I’ve put everything we got into our house. I lived here my entire life. I love this town.”

Speaking directly to the panel of EPA, government and Norfolk Southern officials, he said, “You know, just like we know what happened here was a catastrophe. It is not going to get better overnight.”

He said that the burning of vinyl chloride is bound to produce dioxins and that health officials knew it. “You’re letting people stay here, you’re covering up.”



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