

Norfolk Southern’s “six point plan” for rail safety: More PR damage control after East Palestine, Ohio derailment

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On Monday, Norfolk Southern unveiled a bogus “six point” safety program which will do little to nothing to prevent derailments such as the one which released toxic chemicals in East Palestine, Ohio.

The announcement came as the railroad announced it would offer to pay the housing costs of residents forced to relocate, but only for one and a half months and only for those living within one mile of the accident. The railroad also reportedly considered limiting trains to less than 10,000 feet (3 km), only to backtrack and merely require distributive power on trains over that threshold.

Today, Norfolk Southern CEO Alan Shaw is set to appear before the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, where Ohio senators JD Vance (R) and Sherrod Brown (D) in particular will attempt to grandstand, expressing “shock” and “anger” at the railroads. Brown was one of 80 senators to vote in favor of banning strike action last December; Vance, a right-wing Trump supporter, is a freshman senator who took office this January. The “six point plan” is likely meant in part to give Shaw talking points at the hearing.

The “six point plan” does not actually commit the company to do anything. They are couched in vague, non-specific language such as “evaluating,” and “developing plans.” For example, point six “commits” the railroad to “support a strong safety culture,” without explaining what this even means.

Given the role which the industry’s rampant profiteering and exploitation has played in the creation of unsafe conditions, this pledge is not worth the paper it is written on. Norfolk Southern management’s “safety culture” was on display over the past five days, which saw two accidents in the state of Ohio alone.

One was a fatal collision with a dump truck on the grounds of a steel mill in Cleveland, which killed a conductor.

The other was a derailment of a 212-car train in Springfield, 50 cars longer than the one which derailed in East Palestine. Dumb luck appears to have played a major role in the fact that a similar disaster did not take place in Springfield. Four of the cars which derailed were chemical tankers, but were reportedly empty at the time.

Five of the six points deal with proposals to conduct research, share information and “develop best practices.” Three of these refer to proposed changes to the use of hot bearing detectors (HBDs), which are track-based sensors that measure wheel temperatures and send reading to the locomotive cab. Because of arbitrarily high temperature thresholds set by the railroad to require the train to be stopped and inspected, an audible alarm only sounded on the East Palestine train after the wheel bearing temperature on one car had already shot up to over 200 degrees above the ambient temperature. Eyewitness footage showed the wheel already in flames 20 miles outside of East Palestine.

The first point says that the company will develop a plan to increase the number and reduce the spacing of “hot bearing detectors” that are placed along its tracks. “The company anticipates adding approximately 200 hot bearing detectors to its network, with the first installed on the western approach to East Palestine,” the statement declares.

Norfolk Southern is one of only two Class I railroads operating in the eastern United States, with a network 19,300 miles (31,060 km) long. Adding 200 more HBDs on the network would amount to only one new

detector for every 96 miles of track. According to the statement, the average current spacing spacing for NS's network is one every 13.9 miles (22.4 km). Extrapolating from this, this would increase the number of HBDs from approximately 1,400 to 1,600, a mere 14 percent increase.

Point three pledges to "work with [the] industry on practices for hot bearing detectors," including on temperature thresholds for alarms. But given the fact that these "peers" are management at other railroads where similar conditions exist, there is no reason to expect anything to come out of this.

The fifth point's pledge to "accelerate our Digital Train Inspection program" is particularly ominous. As with other automated technology such as Positive Train Control, The Automated Track Inspection Program (ATIP) is being used by the railroads to try and reduce the size of the workforce, in this case by replacing manual inspections.

Norfolk Southern already attempted to trade support for a pilot ATIP program for four paid sick days for maintenance workers in the weeks after the East Palestine derailment. The Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees (BMWED) backed out of these talks at the last minute. But the reference to it in the "six point plan" suggests that NS is attempting to use the catastrophe as a cover to implement even more job losses.

The so-called safety plan makes no mention of upgrading the braking system on the trains, which still use the system developed over 150 years ago that uses air pressure to activate the brakes one car at a time. A typical freight train will travel two miles before all the brakes on the train are applied, let alone before the train comes to a complete stop.

Norfolk Southern and the other Class I railroads have lobbied Congress not to be required to install electronic braking systems which are able to apply brakes to all the cars simultaneously. Electronic braking is proven to both help prevent derailments and substantially reduce the damage done when a derailment occurs. The railroads also lobbied to have the hazardous classification of vinyl chloride reduced, allowing it to be carried on trains like the one that derailed in East Palestine.

The "six point plan" is the latest in a series of public relations damage control measures from both railroad

management and the government. A similarly toothless plan was unveiled last week by Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg. A bill in the Senate to implement marginal safety improvements and increase fines for safety violations has stalled in the Senate over opposition from a majority of Republicans (though one of the bill's co-sponsors, Vance of Ohio, is a right-wing Republican Trump supporter). In reality, Congress and the White House made more such disasters inevitable by banning a national strike last December by railroaders, in which rail safety and staffing would have been central issues.



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