

Norfolk Southern conducted toxic chemical burn in East Palestine, Ohio without consulting federal authorities

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

According to a new report, the federal Environmental Protection Agency was not consulted when Norfolk Southern made the decision to burn five tanker cars of vinyl chloride following the catastrophic train derailment in East Palestine, Ohio in February. The revelation, initially released Wednesday by News Nation Now, indicates the degree to which the railroad industry has been given a blank check on safety by the federal government, which also banned a strike by 120,000 railroaders last December.

The completely preventable February 3rd derailment of the Norfolk Southern train sent 38 cars flying off the tracks. Eleven of the derailed cars contained hazardous chemicals—several of which caught fire.

Three days later, on February 6th, Norfolk Southern and government officials made the decision to conduct what they described as a “controlled burn” of five tanker cars that contained 1.1 million pounds of vinyl chloride.

Vinyl chloride is used in the production of various plastic materials, including PVC pipes. It is a known carcinogen responsible for liver and brain damage as well as causing damage to the neurological and immune systems and most other organs in the body.

The controlled burn amounted to rupturing the five tanker cars and allowing the contents to drain onto the ground and into a nearby ditch, which was then set on fire. The flames shot up hundreds of feet into the air

and could be seen for more than 20 miles away. The plume of smoke traveled hundreds of miles. Detectable levels of ash and other burn products have been found in soil samples over 20 miles from the crash site. In addition, an unknown quantity of the vinyl chloride which was not burned seeped into the ground and ran off into the nearby streams.

Two days after the controlled burn, residents were told that it was safe for them to return to their homes while many got sick. Since the derailment and controlled burn, residents of east Palestine and the surrounding communities have suffered headaches, burning eyes, nose and throats, vomiting and a high level of anxiety.

Also this past week, test results from 2 independent laboratories have confirmed what many residents have known for months—that they have been exposed to highly toxic carcinogens, in spite of the railroad’s and government’s claims that residents are safe. However, they also contradict EPA testing which claim a far lower level of exposure.

One set of testing was conducted on samples taken in mid-April by Justin Johnston, who runs Big Pine Consulting in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. They found 11 substances in the water, six of which were created from incomplete burns of vinyl chloride. Five of the six are known carcinogens.

A second set of testing was done by Scott Smith, chief sustainability officer at ECO Integrated Technologies. They conducted tests of ground and water, as well as of air filters in home furnaces to see what chemicals were circulating in the air. Smith found 11 different kinds of dioxins that were not present in a controlled sample taken from an unaffected stream.

Dioxins are a group of highly dangerous chemicals which last in the environment for a very long time and accumulate in a person's body. The World Health Organization classifies dioxins as a carcinogen and says there is no level that is safe for humans or other life.

The testing that was done by Johnson and Smith confirms what residents already knew—that they were being systematically poisoned while being lied to by railroad and government officials.

Johnston paid for the testing himself, which costs thousands of dollars because he wanted to know for sure that the area was safe. “Most of them are carcinogens so we really need to pay attention to them because even in small amounts, they can be dangerous,” Johnston told Pittsburgh-based KDKA-TV a CBS affiliate.

Johnston was surprised by the results. “I thought mine would look exactly the same (as those conducted by the EPA) but they didn't,” he told KDKA. Johnston attributed the fact that different labs test for different levels of toxins. “The reason is simply, detection levels,” he said.

Johnston believes that the laboratories being used by the EPA were not checking at a sensitive enough level to pick up the carcinogens that he found.

KDKA and Johnston later took a second set of samples and those came back undetectable. Johnston says that is good news, but is concerned about what happened to them. “Where did it go? Is it locked in vegetation? Has it sunk into the soil below run-off? Is it going to be in the crops now?”

Another series of testing was done by ECO Integrated Technologies which found dioxins and other carcinogens in the water and soil samples. “You can't find what you don't look for,” Scott Smith told News Nation Now. “So we're looking in furnace filters for the broad spectrum of dioxins and other semi-volatile organic compounds, and in soil and in water.”

For the first month after the derailment, the EPA refused to test for dioxins claiming that because they are created anytime there is a burn, including from backyard barbecues, one could not distinguish which dioxins were produced from the burn-off.

Smith told News Nation Now “There hasn't been anything like the Iraq war until East Palestine,” referring to the burn pits during the Iraq War, which poisoned thousands of soldiers who have become ill

with cancer, bronchitis and other respiratory illnesses.

At the time of the burn, many residents and hazmat material experts questioned the EPA's downplaying of the danger posed by the burn. The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with hazardous material expert Sil Caggiano, who in his 39 years of responding to train accidents and derailments, Caggiano said he had “never heard of a railroad company actually detonating their own containers.”

Caggiano continued, “I question why there is such a rush to get everything open, everyone's saying everything is fine, the water is okay to drink, and everything has been mitigated—and now we're starting to hear, ‘Well, you might want to drink bottled water. We may have found that Norfolk Southern swept some contaminated soil underneath the railroad tracks.’”

East Palestine and surrounding area residents who spoke with the WWSWS at the time also felt that the decision to burn the vinyl chloride was made so that Norfolk Southern could reopen the track and begin running freight.

“I think that [the controlled burn] a mistake,” former EPA administrator Judith Enck told News Nation Now. “I'm looking very closely at who made the decision to set the vinyl chloride on fire. I think that decision will be a major factor in the lives of many communities in Pennsylvania and Ohio.”

“I was on a meeting with the EPA recently and asked them why they signed off on the decision to do the open burn,” Enck continued. “They told me they did not sign off. The EPA told me that they were not asked about whether or not to do the open burn of vinyl chloride, and that they were not part of that decision.”

The EPA has since confirmed with that they were not part of the decision-making process.

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