

Montana train falls into Yellowstone River, leaking asphalt and molten sulfur

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A train trestle over the Yellowstone River in Montana collapsed on Saturday morning as a Montana Rail Link train was traveling over the bridge. Ten cars were derailed and eight fell into the river. Of those eight, three were carrying hot asphalt and four were carrying molten sulfur, all of which is now leaking into the river.

The other two derailed cars contain the corrosive substance sodium hydro sulfate, but are reportedly not currently leaking, according to Montana Rail Link. There are so far no reported deaths or injuries as a result of the incident.

The derailment occurred upstream of Montana's largest city, Billings, and could potentially contaminate the water supply of the city's nearly 120,000 residents. Local officials have shut down public access to the river, both for recreation and for fishing. The danger was enough to force water treatment facilities and irrigation districts in Billings and the neighboring towns of Laurel and Lockwood to close their head gates to the river for several hours and wait for the chemicals to pass into the Missouri River and ultimately, the Mississippi.

However, tens of millions of people live along the banks of these two rivers, the first and second-longest in North America. Approximately 18 million people get their drinking water from the Mississippi River, and around 10 million from the Missouri.

It is also not clear how much of the chemicals will reach into the surrounding areas. At the time of the crash, the river's level was high as a result of recent storms, meaning that the contaminants were more diluted than they otherwise might have been. But that also means the extent to which they will spread is much farther, crossing over into wildlife habitats as well as potentially seeping into wells used by locals not connected to the region's main water system.

An immediate cause for the collapse of the trestle has yet to be determined, including whether a derailment caused it to collapse or if a collapsed trestle precipitated the derailment. The bridge's point of failure, as well as several of the cars, are still partially or wholly underwater. Investigations are underway by the company, local and state transportation authorities, as well as the Environmental Protection Agency.

However, it is likely that a major contributing factor is decades of poor upkeep. In 2021, a parallel bridge for car traffic had been so eroded after 90 years of water and debris that the Montana Department of Transportation was forced to demolish the bridge. According to a report from the federal government in 2021, the state's infrastructure "from a systemic lack of investment" got a C grade on its Infrastructure Report Card.

The International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM) Rail Division issued a statement on the collapse, declaring it is "committed to highlighting the safety issues and dangers in today's rail industry" by supporting the Railway Safety Act, which will ostensibly make "the rail industry safer for workers and the communities in which they work."

The bill is toothless, introduced in the aftermath of the East Palestine, Ohio derailment to distract from the role of federal and state governments in that disaster, which contaminated the water, air and soil of the town.

The IAM has long worked alongside the rail corporations to hide concerns of workers over safety and working conditions. It played a major role in blocking a strike by more than 120,000 railroaders last year. When IAM members became the first to reject a contract brokered by the Biden administration with the railroads and the unions, they simply forced workers to vote again on a virtually identical deal. Later, when

workers in other unions rejected the deal, Biden went to Congress to secure a strike ban, where it was approved by bipartisan majorities.

The derailment outside of Billings comes two months after another Montana Rail Link train derailed in the state in April. That incident occurred in Sanders County, on the Western edge of the state, and involved a train of 70 cars, of which 31 derailed. On average, about three trains derail every day in the United States.

The Montana disaster is also a continuation of the streak of such incidents since the East Palestine disaster, in which thousands of gallons of highly toxic vinyl chloride were spilled. Rather than properly clean up what leaked, company and public officials initiated a supposed “controlled release and burn” of the chemical. Residents were forced to return to their homes with the chemical and its byproducts still present, which has caused severe and ongoing health issues for the town’s populace.

Questions of safety and staffing were some of the sharpest demands of rail workers last year when they pushed for a national strike. While such a crisis for the unions, companies and Biden administration was ultimately averted, the underlying issues and opposition from workers remain.



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