

East Palestine rail disaster

# Federal investigation reveals “controlled release and burn” that poisoned East Palestine was unnecessary

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*Do you work at Norfolk Southern or another Class I railway? Tell us what you think about the East Palestine disaster by filling out the form at the bottom of this article. All submissions will be kept anonymous.*

Investigators from the National Transportation Safety Board were told that Norfolk Southern’s decision to vent and burn five train cars of toxic chemicals had not been necessary, a public hearing last week revealed.

The “controlled release and burn” was carried out three days after the major derailment near the town of East Palestine, Ohio on February 3. This move, which contaminated the soil, ground water and atmosphere of the surrounding region with vinyl chloride and dioxins, and sent a huge black smoke cloud billowing into the sky, was justified at the time as needed to avert an imminent catastrophic explosion. That argument, questioned at the time by independent experts, has now been exposed as a lie. In early May, it was revealed that the company made the decision to blow up the tank cars without consulting federal authorities.

The revelation that the claim used to justify the decision was a lie from the start demonstrates that Norfolk Southern deliberately chose to poison the area in order to get its operations back up as soon as possible. Trains began running on the track shortly after the “release and burn,” once the accident site was cleared. Many members of the community strongly suspected from the start that Norfolk Southern made the decision to burn the five cars as the fastest way to reopen the tracks and get trains moving.

Vinyl chloride is classified as a carcinogen known to cause liver and brain cancer and damage most other organs of the body. Tens of thousands of dead fish and other wildlife have been counted since the disaster. The byproducts of burning vinyl chloride produce dioxins, a class of highly toxic chemicals that can build up in the body over time.

Since the derailment and the “controlled” burn, residents of East Palestine and surrounding communities have suffered from

burning eyes, noses and throats, as well as nausea, headaches and stomach pains.

## Company knew at the time explosion was not likely

The company has always insisted that the decision was made because they feared that one of the tanker cars that contained vinyl chloride was undergoing a chemical reaction, known as polymerization, that would cause the tankers to explode.

But Paul Thomas, vice president of health, environment, safety and security at OxyVinyls, the manufacturer of the vinyl chloride, told the hearing that on three separate occasions they informed Norfolk Southern that it was their opinion that the chemical was not undergoing polymerization and that the tankers did not have to be detonated.

In very careful and thorough testimony, Thomas explained that OxyVinyls informed Norfolk Southern that if the vinyl chloride was going through polymerization, then there would be clear evidence of the tank cars heating up, which there was not.

The one tank car in question was showing a temperature of 135 degrees, which he explained was most likely caused by the fires from the other cars, and not the polymerization of the vinyl chloride. A chart presented by NTSB officials of temperature readings of the rail car shows that the car’s temperature was in fact declining and not rising.

Second, Thomas explained that for polymerization to take place oxygen had to be present. He explained that the vinyl chloride is packed in such a way as to ensure less than two parts per million of oxygen within the tank cars. For the vinyl chloride to be exposed to oxygen would have meant that the cars had ruptured, which they had not.

Lastly, Thomas pointed out that the cars had functioning

pressure release valves, designed to relieve internal pressure, and that these valves had been working. This meant that when the cars heated up in the aftermath of the derailment, and as officials and their contractors repeatedly witnessed, the pressure release valves began flaring vinyl chloride out of the tankers. These valves, he said, are also designed to fully open if the tanker was getting too hot and in danger of exploding.

Thomas said that this information was communicated to Norfolk Southern officials three times, including on the evening of Sunday, February 5, the day before the “controlled release and burn,” by a company expert who had traveled to East Palestine to provide assistance.

East Palestine Fire Chief William Jones testified that he was only given a 13-minute window to approve the recommendations being made by Norfolk Southern, their contractors, Ohio Governor Mike DeWine and the Environmental Protection Agency to burn off the five tanker cars carrying vinyl chloride. This significant fact exposes the involvement of both federal and state agencies in the subsequent cover-up of the disaster. The EPA, for example, delayed testing for dioxins in East Palestine for weeks without explanation.

### **Company ignored rail crew’s warnings**

Investigators were also told that Norfolk Southern never conducted a mechanical inspection on the car whose overheated axle caused the accident, when it was placed on the train at a rail yard or at any point along the train’s nearly 600-mile trip from Decatur, Illinois.

In addition, NTSB investigators were told that the train’s engineer, after having inspected the train 30 hours earlier in Decatur, had told company officials that the train was too long and the cars improperly balanced to make the trip to Pennsylvania, but was ordered to take the train anyway.

In May, a retired railroad engineer who had worked 40 years for several different railroads, including 20 for Norfolk Southern, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that accidents like the one in East Palestine are all too predictable due to the unsafe weight of trains.

He explained that light or empty cars followed by full and heavy cars present a danger as the train accelerates, crosses hilly terrain, or slows down, because the inertia of the heavy cars can actually lift the lighter cars off the tracks.

“It is important that you carefully control the weight of the train, both the total weight of the train and that of each car. If you put empty cars, especially flatbeds which are the lightest of all the cars, in the middle of a train, they will be picked right up off of the tracks when going around bends,” he said.

“The companies don’t care about that anymore, they just

want to make the trains as long as possible so they can make as much money on each train,” he said. “The East Palestine disaster was clearly preventable. For nearly an hour they knew that they had a bad axle, yet they kept the train moving.”

This, he told the WSWS, is one of the reasons for the growing number of derailments throughout the United States.

The Norfolk Southern train that derailed February 3 was 150 cars long and had a weight of over 10,000 tons. The derailment was caused by a defective wheel bearing which began overheating and gave out. Wayside detectors, which are positioned at intervals on the track and are meant to monitor problems on the train, first detected that the wheel bearing was overheating some 45 minutes before the derailment.

However, Norfolk Southern officials did not notify the train crew or advise them to stop the train and inspect the wheel. Security camera video from a company located along the tracks 20 miles outside of East Palestine captured the train passing by and showed the wheel in flames.

Norfolk Southern continues to deny responsibility for the derailment. No doubt the testimony provided at the NTSB hearing will be used in the many lawsuits that have been brought against the company. While the testimony of Paul Thomas from OxyVinyl is very damaging, it is important to note that the company also has its own interests to protect. A recent report found that over 500,000 pounds of vinyl chloride are released each year in the manufacturing process.

It is also important to note that while most of the media coverage of the hearings has centered on Thomas’s remarks, and these are certainly telling, the NTSB largely left untouched the role of various government agencies, the EPA and the NTSB itself, which should have been making these decisions. The hearing also failed to address the longstanding practice of precision scheduling being conducted by all the Class I railroads.

As long as the railroads and the other major sectors of the economy, such as the petrochemical industries, are left in the private hands of the capitalists and run only for the profit of a few, these and other disasters are bound to continue.



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