

East Palestine, Ohio train disaster: Safety experts told railroad “controlled burn” which released toxic chemicals was unnecessary, NTSB says

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The “controlled release and burn” which released toxic chemicals from derailed tanker cars into the town of East Palestine, Ohio last year was not necessary, the head of the National Transportation Safety Board stated in testimony before Congress last week.

NTSB Chair Jennifer Homendy stated that experts from OxyVinyls, the maker of the toxic chemicals onboard the Norfolk Southern train, had traveled to East Palestine and told Norfolk Southern officials that the chemicals were not in danger of exploding.

The “controlled release and burn” of five tanker cars carrying vinyl chloride, a toxic substance, was carried out on February 6, 2023, three days after the train derailed near East Palestine. In that crash, 38 cars of a 151-car freight train derailed. 11 of the 38 derailed cars carried toxic chemicals, several of which caught fire at the time of the derailment.

At the time, Norfolk Southern claimed that five remaining tankers were in danger of exploding, justifying the decision to drain them and burn off their contents. This claim was widely questioned by public safety experts last year, who noted that a more likely explanation was that this dangerous maneuver was being carried out to return the rail to operations as quickly as possible. However, Norfolk Southern’s account was not publicly contradicted by government safety officials at the time.

The “controlled release and burn” was nothing of the sort. Charges placed on the tanker cars were detonated and contents of the cars were allowed to dump onto the ground, where it was set on fire in a towering inferno which sent flames hundreds of yards into the air and

smoke billowing out for miles. This move contaminated the soil, ground water and atmosphere of the surrounding region with vinyl chloride and dioxins.

The *World Socialist Web Site* reported last June that the company knew at the time that cars were not in danger of exploding.

Paul Thomas, vice president of health, environment, safety and security at OxyVinyls, the manufacturer of the vinyl chloride, testified at a congressional hearing in June that on three separate occasions they informed Norfolk Southern that it was their opinion that the chemical was not undergoing polymerization, a chemical reaction that could lead to an explosion, and that the tankers did not have to be detonated.

Instead, they recommended that the cars be allowed to cool and then drained of the vinyl chloride.

Both safety experts and residents of East Palestine, Ohio questioned the decision to detonate five rail cars carrying vinyl chloride.

“We basically nuked a town with chemicals so we could get a railroad open,” hazardous material expert Sil Caggiano said.

Caggiano told the WSWS that had Norfolk Southern not exploded the cars and instead allowed them to cool, they would have had to remove and clean up the rail cars before they could open the tracks.

“The alternatives to what they did would have taken too long and cost them too much money. If they had put the fire out, they would still have had to handle every one of those containers and its contents as hazardous waste, all non-marketable, and they would have to have gotten rid of all that contamination. This

way, they don't have contamination anymore. It burned up and it spread over God knows how much. They got off very cheap in my book."

Residents who spoke with the WSWs in the days and weeks after the explosion expressed the belief that the explosion and a premature lifting of an evacuation order was done in order to allow Norfolk Southern to reopen rail traffic on the very busy route.

"This doesn't surprise me," said one resident who asked that her name not be used. "We all felt they just wanted to get trains running again. This is a busy track, trains run day and night. One about every 15 minutes. Once the governor lifted the evacuation order, a train was coming within five minutes.

"They didn't care how many people were getting sick, it was all about the money to them. They came into our homes with little handheld readers, not much bigger than barcode scanners you see in supermarkets, and told us it was safe.

"Now we find they weren't even testing for some of the chemicals that were on that train.

"A lot of people want to move on, and I don't blame them. I want to move on too, but the problem is many people are still sick and we don't know what this is going to do to us in 5, 10 or 20 years.

"I don't trust any of them. Not the railroad, the EPA, the government, they all lied to us."



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