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East Palestine, Ohio residents report long-term health problems from 2023 Norfolk Southern rail disaster

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Residents of East Palestine, Ohio say they have long-term health problems stemming from the massive derailment of a Norfolk Southern train in February 2023. In a bid to reopen the tracks as soon as possible, the company decided to burn off highly toxic vinyl chloride from chemical tank cars, citing a bogus risk of explosion.

Jami Wallace is a lifelong resident of East Palestine and an outspoken critic of the handling of the disaster by Norfolk Southern, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, as well as both the Biden and Trump administrations.

Jami is married and a mother of a daughter who was 3 at the time of the derailment. Jami was working as a Human Resource Director. Now she is working as a research assistant.

Jami spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about the disaster and the effect it has had on herself, her family and the community.

“I have been diagnosed with asthma. I’ve been diagnosed with hypothyroidism. I have a cyst on my right ovary that I see a surgeon about next week and I have low activity in the memory portion of my brain. I am going to get an MRI this month to see if I have brain lesions or possibly a brain tumor.”

On February 3, 2023, 38 cars derailed on a Norfolk Southern freight train near East Palestine, Ohio, 11 cars of which carried hazardous chemicals. The derailment was caused by an overheated wheel bearing that failed after warnings and alarms were ignored by the company.

Three days later, company and government officials carried out a so-called “controlled release and burn” in which five tanker cars carrying 1.1 million pounds of vinyl chloride were punctured and set on fire.

This produced a towering inferno over 300 feet high and a black plume visible for miles that sent contaminants across the surrounding countryside. Chemicals that didn’t burn flooded into the ground and nearby creeks.

Jami’s home, shared with her husband and daughter, was within a mile of the site. They evacuated that evening alone with most of the town’s residents.

Norfolk Southern and government officials declared it safe to return two days later, and within 15 minutes of lifting the evacuation order, trains began rumbling through the town again.

“The night of the derailment, I was home with my daughter and her cousin. My husband and his brother went out to have drinks. My mom called and said they were evacuating everyone within a mile radius, so we grabbed a few things and rushed out the door.

“With hotels in the area booking up, we slept on the floor of my brother’s hotel room thinking we would be home in the morning.

“When the evacuation was lifted, my husband asked where we were going and I said home. If the EPA said it was safe, it was safe.

“As soon as I pulled in the driveway, I started coughing, face was burning, my skin was turning red and I knew, my body knew it was not safe to be there.

“Almost immediately following the derailment and burning, residents began complaining of respiratory problems, blistering noses, burning eyes and sore throats. Many suffered from headaches, nausea and dizziness.

“A week after the derailment, I was having a lot of issues breathing and coughing. I was diagnosed with an upper respiratory infection.

“I took antibiotics and steroids but that didn’t help. I went back and they put me through three rounds of steroids and antibiotics and it still didn’t go away.

“I’m almost 50 and you know your body. I’ve had hundreds of upper respiratory infections in my life, and I know that was different.

“My daughter and husband had the same. My daughter had

the same diagnosis, but got better after one round of medicine, but we kept her away from the chemicals. My husband just never went to the hospital; he is a typical man.”

Jami later became a leader of a community group, the Unity Council for the EP Train Derailment, which fought for residents to reject a class action settlement which left the railroad off the hook. She says, based on her connections with other residents, similar issues are affecting hundreds of residents throughout the area.

“A woman contacted me [that] her husband died of lung cancer about six months ago. She has just been diagnosed with breast cancer in one breast and now they want to biopsy her other breast.

“A man came down with a rare form of breast cancer after the derailment, and he had to have a double mastectomy. Now the cancer is moving to other parts of his body. Many people have had surgery on their thyroids and had their thyroid removed.

“A friend of mine called and her husband both got diagnosed with neuropathy. Another friend and her husband are on seizure medication.

“In the beginning,” Jami said. “There were more symptoms. We saw a lot of people with upper respiratory infections, chemical bronchitis or rashes.

“Then we started seeing things like seizures, so you could tell it was getting a little worse. Seizures, neuropathy, things like that. And now we’re seeing a lot of heart attacks and cancers and things of that nature. I just watched it move from symptoms to long-term illness and now we’re already seeing terminal illnesses.”

Asked if she knew for sure that these illnesses are caused by vinyl chloride exposure, Jami said no. She explains that when the testing is done to establish safe levels of exposure it is only done on one chemical at a time, not the soup of chemicals they were exposed to.

“We can learn from our past disasters. When you look at every other chemical disaster in the United States—they all have respiratory issues; they all have thyroid issues; they all have neurological issues; they all have gastrointestinal issues.

“There’s a profile. A lot of the symptoms we’re seeing in East Palestine are the same symptoms that our Gulf War veterans saw when they came home after being exposed to the chemical burn pits.”

The primary chemical involved in the open burn was vinyl chloride—used to make PVC plastics. Estimates put the total vaporized/handled volume at around 1.1 million pounds.

Burning vinyl chloride produces dioxins and other toxic byproducts. Independent testing and whistleblower documents have found traces of dioxins and a range of other hazardous compounds in soil, water and furnace filters after the burn.

Additional chemicals on the train and detected afterwards included butyl acrylate, ethylhexyl acrylate, ethylene glycol monobutyl ether, isobutylene and residues like benzene—all of which present acute toxic and/or carcinogenic hazards when

released into the air or water.

The contamination spread into surface water systems (creeks and the Ohio River basin), soil and the local atmosphere; thousands of dead fish and wildlife were reported and residents many miles away smelled chemical fumes.

Jami explains, “This affected every part of your life. I have a six-year-old. I’m married. I’m sick all the time. I’m at the doctor’s, more in the past three years than I probably have been in my entire life.

“It affects your job. It affects you financially even with insurance, my medical bills are stacking up. I have health insurance through my current job, and even with that the out-of-pocket expenses and the co-pays, my bills are stacking up.

“We’re one of the poorest communities in the state of Ohio. We’re part of Appalachia and a lot of people don’t have any medical insurance at all. I feel like the very, very least we deserve to have is medical insurance, not just for ourselves but for our children. We don’t know what their medical issues are going to be in the future. They’re the ones that are going to truly pay and if my daughter gets sick and can’t work, she needs to have some kind of insurance.

“It affects me mentally. I get phone calls every single day from residents that are sick, some of them are terminal. These aren’t just random people. These are people that I grew up with. People that I love. My family. Mentally watching everyone’s health decline.

“I knew it would come. I just didn’t know it would come this fast. And it is being ignored by the government.

“We continue day after day to show evidence of how our government betrayed us, how we were fed lies, but there has been *zero* action from our government to right the wrongs for the community. Instead, they ignore us and continue to leave us sitting in contamination while they study us.”



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