

“Get the Hell Out of There” – Ohio’s Apocalyptic Chemical Disaster Rages On

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While the US government is dispensing millions of dollars in resources to treat balloons as an existential crisis, a small town in Ohio finds itself engulfed in what actually looks like the apocalypse. Perhaps by design, all of the drama surrounding violations of US airspace by Chinese spy initiatives has done well to keep what is becoming one of the worst environmental disasters in recent memory from getting any headlines.

The chaos began early last week when a train of more than 100 cars derailed in East Palestine, Ohio near the state’s border with Pennsylvania with roughly 5,000 residents. The accident launched fifty of those hundred freight cars from the tracks. Twenty of the freight cars on the train were carrying hazardous materials, ten of which were derailed. While the accident had no fatalities, of those ten cars, **five contained pressurized vinyl chloride, a highly flammable carcinogenic gas.**



Scenes from East Palestine

In order to address the volatile scenario around the crash site, the Ohio Emergency Management Agency executed its plan of venting the toxic gas with a controlled burn in order to evade an uncontrolled explosion which presented the risk of catastrophic damage. “Within the last two hours, a drastic temperature change has taken place in a rail car, and there is now the potential of a catastrophic tanker failure which could cause an explosion with the potential of deadly shrapnel

traveling up to a mile,” Gov. Mike DeWine warned in statement explaining the decision to take action to avert widespread devastation.

However, that operation sent large plumes of smoke containing vinyl chloride, phosgene, hydrogen chloride, and other gases into the air as the flames from the controlled burn raged on for days. Phosgene in particular is a highly toxic gas that can cause vomiting and respiratory trouble. The toxicity of phosgene gas is so potent that it was previously used as a chemical weapon during the First World War.

The hazardous airborne chemicals prompted officials to issue mandatory evacuation and shelter-in-place orders within a one-mile radius of where the train derailed. Those orders forced nearly 2,000 residents of East Palestine out of their homes. Despite the public safety risk in proximity to the crash site, over 500 people within the parameters of the evacuation order refused to leave their homes. However, those orders were lifted on February 8th, allowing residents to return to the area adjacent to the disaster.

Following the controlled burn, local authorities received multiple concerning reports from residents outside of the mile-long radius of the evacuation area conveying that the emergency posed by the disaster was far from over. One local farmer reported the sudden deaths of many of the animals on the premises of his farm, Park Dairy. The farmer, Taylor Holzer, also works with the Ohio Department of Natural Resources as a registered foxkeeper. Following the disbursement of chemical agents into the air from the controlled burn, many of the foxes on Holzer’s farm experienced fatal effects from the air quality surrounding the area.

“Out of nowhere, he [a fox] just started coughing really hard, just shut down,” Holzer recalled to local media outlet

WKBN 27 News. "This is not how a fox should act. He is very weak, limp. His eyes are very watery and weepy. Smoke and chemicals from the train, that's the only thing that can cause it, because it doesn't just happen out of nowhere," he added.

"The chemicals that we're being told are safe in the air, that's definitely not safe for the animals...or people."

Holzer's concerns were echoed by reports from other residents who described similar conditions near their own properties. One of those residents was Katlyn Schwarzwaelder, the operator of a local dog kennel in nearby Darlington, Pennsylvania. The catastrophe caused her to leave her home despite the fact that it lies more than 10 miles away from the site of the controlled burn. After fleeing to Boardman, Ohio, 15 miles away from the derailment, Schwarzwaelder stated she received multiple reports of dead chickens, fish, and other animals from friends and acquaintances. One affected resident told Schwarzwaelder that they let their 2-year old dog out to use the bathroom only for it never to return. When they embarked upon a search for their missing pet, they found it dead in their yard.

Testimony from Holzer, Schwarzwaelder, and others paints a drastically different picture than the official narrative tailored by officials who assured residents that the situation was under control. **The poor air quality presents short and long term health risks to the public considering the carcinogenic effects of the chemicals.** Carcinogens like vinyl chloride can cause cancer in organs including the liver, according to Kevin Crist, a professor of chemical and biomolecular engineering who also serves as the Director of Ohio University's Air Quality Center.

Although officials in charge of the emergency response utilized techniques like dispersion modeling in order to

calculate and mitigate the risk of airborne chemicals, **the chemicals disbursed following the derailment pose other significant risks of contamination.** Chemicals also spilled into the Ohio River toward West Virginia, prompting officials from the neighboring state to shut down water production in the area and turn to alternative sources for water supply. Soil contamination is another significant risk that leaves officials weary of broader implications affecting public health than those associated with the air pollution alone.

However, the magnitude of those risks hasn't been apparently recognized by the leadership across various states affected by the disaster. According to Pennsylvania Governor Josh Shapiro, there were no concerns regarding the air and water quality in the area. Nevertheless, the governor reiterated that a shelter-in-place order remained in effect for Pennsylvanians within two miles of East Palestine. Officials from the Environmental Protection Agency took a similar tone, stating nothing unexpected was seen following the controlled burn. James Justice of the EPA summed up his agencies position by saying "So far, so good and we're going to continue to monitor until the fire's out,".

While the immediate risks presented by a possible explosion following the train's derailment may have been averted, the emergency response may become an instance of a cure being worse than the disease it seeks to remedy. The accidents also brings the state of safety regulations surrounding rail transport of hazardous freight into a new light. Over the last five years alone, eight train derailments have occurred in the Pittsburgh metro area, leading to calls for increased oversight over the industry.

Despite the inherent risk that comes with transporting chemicals like vinyl chloride, the US Department of Transportation approved a rule to expand the scope of what hazardous materials can be transmitted by rail. The rule made

it permissible for liquefied natural gas to be shipped by train without additional safety regulations. This enables freight trains to transport 100 more tank cars with up to 30,000 gallons of the natural gas extracted from shale fields.

“The risks of catastrophic liquefied natural gas releases in accidents is too great not to have operational controls in place before large blocks of tank cars and unit trains proliferate,” the National Transportation Safety Board wrote in a comment in support of the proposed rule. In response to that comment, critics of the rule highlighted how a potential explosion of just twenty-two tank cars filled with liquefied natural gas holds the same amount of explosive energy as the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima in the waning days of the Second World War.

The ongoing crisis in East Palestine represents an environmental and humanitarian disaster that hasn't been seen in the United States in recent memory. The scenes from East Palestine look as if they're taken straight out of a horror film depicting nuclear winter.

I'm trying to gather information on this very serious situation in Ohio involving a train derailment with hazardous chemicals.

What I will say is this. Trust your eyes, ears and nose and get the hell out of there if your senses are telling you too.

– Erin Brockovich (@ErinBrockovich) [February 11, 2023](#)

In spite of that, the magnitude of this story has been seemingly scrubbed from the public view as national media outlets continue to run sensationalist headlines about issues that look innocuous in comparison. It is an instance of history being rewritten in real time, setting a precedent that would allow victims of other widespread devastation to be

swept under the rug. However, the scenes of the horror engulfing this small town in America's heartland may prove to make this disaster impossible to ignore, **rightfully putting the spotlight on the shortcomings of state and federal agencies tasked with emergency response management whose continued lack of accountability enables them to fail the American public time and time again.**

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