



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Norfolk Southern Derailment and Explosion Raises Serious Concerns for All Pittsburgh-Region Residents

Pittsburgh, Pa. – The Norfolk Southern 50-car derailment that erupted in a massive fire in East Palestine, Ohio, an hour's drive from Pittsburgh, raises serious health and safety concerns for all regional residents who currently live in close proximity to similar train traffic carrying toxic materials directly through neighborhoods where people live.

The risks from these derailments and the lack of preparedness for such accidents can and should be avoided, say members of Rail Protection Pittsburgh (RP3) and the Breathe Project.

"What people don't realize is that currently 40 to 50 percent of all of the volatile Bakken crude oil going to the East Coast refineries comes directly through Pittsburgh and the heart of Oakland," said Glenn Olcerst of RP3, a local group of Pittsburgh residents who've worked to address community concerns. "With the Shell Petrochemical Plastic plant and other shale operations in our region, the length and volume of these 'bomb' trains is only going to increase exponentially.

"How long will it be until one of these trains explodes in a major metropolitan area like ours?" Olcerst added.

According to media reports, a one-mile area around the still-burning train fire was evacuated. HAZMAT units have reported to the scene, which means that hazardous materials may be emitting dangerous pollution into the air. RP3 and the Breathe Project call on Norfolk Southern for full transparency on the material burning in the rail cars.

In addition, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency must monitor the air quality around the accident and identify the contents of the plume not just in the immediate area but outside and downwind from the 1-mile evacuation area.

"The exact identities of the hazardous chemicals released into the air from the explosion and fire last night should have been known and disclosed immediately to residents, first responders and local government officials responsible for protecting the public in an emergency," said Dr. Ned Ketyer, president of Physicians for Social Responsibility Pennsylvania. "Not knowing that information during and after the evacuation puts those individuals in proximity to the spreading toxic plume at risk for health consequences, some of which may appear days or weeks from now."

"Residents within a tight radius are the only ones warned of health risks," added Larry Simms of RP3. "Not a single public agency has cautioned the tens of thousands downwind of the burning train to stay indoors."

"The EPA's announcement that the air quality is 'safe' is less than reassuring, because [regional radar picked up on the plume of smoke](#) cutting across Beaver county at least 15 miles from the site," added Matthew Mehalik, executive director of the Breathe Project.

One of the consequences of being a natural gas liquids hub are the serious risks associated with transporting of those products through communities, whether by rail or pipelines. Both explode and cause damage within a blast zone prompting 1-mile evacuations like we saw in East Palestine. Our region is experiencing an alarming frequency of derailments recently, raising questions about infrastructure conditions, railroad operations, and risks to people's homes.

Recent major recent derailments in the region include:

- Feb 2023 East Palestine (Columbiana County, OH)
- Nov 2022 Steubenville/Costonia (Jefferson County, OH)
- May 2022 Harmar Twp (Allegheny County, PA)
- Feb 2022 Big Beaver (Beaver County, PA)
- Feb 2022 Morris Twp (Greene County, PA)
- Dec 2021 Clairton (Allegheny County, PA)
- Dec 2021 Baldwin (Allegheny County, PA)
- Aug 2018 Pittsburgh South Side (Allegheny County, PA)

According to the Federal Rail Administration, at least one train "slips off" the tracks every day in the United States. There are 176,000 Pittsburghers living in the derailment blast zone and 74 percent of whom live in Environmental Justice Areas.

"Pittsburgh has been just plain lucky to date in terms of not being the locus of a major catastrophe," said Olcerst. "We cannot expect to keep playing this game of 'Russian Roulette,' and we need to start learning from the lessons that the previous eight local derailments have offered."

If a derailment occurred along Norfolk Southern Tracks that runs through East Liberty, more than 34,000 people in a 1-mile radius would be at risk of an explosions and would need to evacuate. The region's public safety operations center would fall within this radius of risk.

Regional public safety experts have been raising concerns about these risks for some time, including [Pittsburgh Bureau of Fire Chief Darryl Jones](#) (see 1:50:20 - 1:56:15), and experts at a [national conference on oil trains convened in Pittsburgh in 2015](#).

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