

As Health Concerns Escalate After Ohio Train Disaster, Advocates Want to ‘Take Back Our Rail System From Greedy Profiteers’

By [Dr. Brenda Baletti](#)

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Evidence continues to mount of serious health and environmental impacts from the derailment and explosion of a [train carrying toxic chemicals](#) in East Palestine, Ohio, earlier this month, raising concerns for local residents.

Despite [releasing more details](#) about air and water contamination resulting from the crash, regulatory agencies like the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) have continued to affirm that it is safe for residents to return to their homes after they were initially evacuated. But they have been cautioned [not to drink the water](#).

The EPA said Monday night that it “has not yet detected any concerning levels of toxins in the air quality that can be attributed to the crash,” [ABC News reported](#). The agency continues to screen individual homes in close proximity to the site.

“I think it’s beggar’s belief when you look at those astonishing pictures from that burn-off that happened earlier last week that there could be a safe environment for people to return to their homes,” NewsNation Washington Bureau Chief Mike Viqueira told Briahna Joy Gray and Robby Soave on a recent episode of The Hill’s [“Rising.”](#)

While [lawmakers in Washington](#) and the mainstream media were slow to respond to the disaster, [environmental groups](#), [rail workers](#) and local residents have been calling out the corporate interests profiting from disasters like these.

Ross Grooters, a member of Railroad Workers United and city council member for Pleasant Hill in Iowa, tweeted, “It’s time to take back our rail system from greedy profiteers”:

Do not let this thing be normalized. It’s time to take back our rail system from greedy profiteers who externalize risks and reap profits at our expense.

<https://t.co/GqboanC8LJ>

— Ross Grooters (@RossGrooters) [February 6, 2023](#)

What happened?

On the night of Feb. 3, 50 cars of a freight train derailed and burst into [100-foot flames](#) in East Palestine, Ohio, a small town of approximately 4,700 people about 50 miles northwest of Pittsburgh.

Investigators said [a broken axle](#) caused the cars to go off the track.

[Twenty of the cars](#), operated by Norfolk Southern, were carrying toxic chemicals and combustible materials, including carcinogenic [vinyl chloride](#), that [triggered a fireball](#) and cloud of thick black smoke over the town when the train crashed.

Residents on both sides of the Ohio-Pennsylvania border were ordered to evacuate, as **Gov. Mike DeWine** of Ohio raised alarms about a possible explosion. Officials carried out a “[controlled release](#)” of toxic chemicals to neutralize burning cargo inside some of the train cars.

State and local [officials told residents](#) they could return to their homes on Feb. 8, given that, “Air quality samples in the area of the wreckage and in nearby residential neighborhoods have consistently shown readings at points below safety screening levels for contaminants of concern,” according to [a press release](#) by Pennsylvania **Gov. Josh Shapiro**.

Fears of a wider health and environmental disaster are growing, after a 150-car freight train operated by Norfolk Southern derailed and a so-called controlled burn released toxic chemicals in East Palestine, Ohio. <https://t.co/eWmbGh09q1>

— Robert F. Kennedy Jr (@RobertKennedyJr) [February 14, 2023](#)

Hazardous chemicals killing animals and making residents sick

Since returning to their homes, some residents have complained of feeling ill. Others reported the [death of wildlife and pets](#). Residents living as far as 10 miles away have [found dead chickens](#) in their yards. Residents also reported a strong lingering chemical smell in the area. The Ohio Department of Natural Resources reported at least 3,500 fish have died within a 7.5-mile radius of the crash site.

Then, on Friday, the [EPA sent a letter](#) to Norfolk Southern Railway Co. citing additional hazardous chemicals that “either are known to have been and continue to be released to the air, surface soils and surface waters.”

The chemicals were found through water sampling in the Ohio River — which provides drinking water for more than five million people — in storm drains and in soil.

Chemicals include [ethylhexyl acrylate](#), an eye, skin and respiratory irritant that’s toxic to aquatic life; [ethylene glycol monobutyl ether](#), a carcinogen that can be absorbed through

the skin and cause liver and kidney damage; [butyl acrylate](#), an extremely flammable chemical that can burn skin and eyes and cause permanent lung damage; and [isobutylene](#), a highly flammable compound that can irritate eyes, nose and throat, and cause coma or death at high levels of exposure, [Environmental Health News reported](#).

On Tuesday, 11 days after the crash, officials told residents to [use bottled water](#) until testing could confirm whether the local water supply was safe to drink because the Ohio EPA confirmed the presence of chemicals, including butyl acrylate, in the Ohio River Basin, potentially affecting up to 25 million people.

Ohio EPA Chief [Tiffani Kavalec](#) reported Tuesday that a chemical plume is moving down the Ohio River toward West Virginia.

Ohio EPA Chief Tiffani Kavalec:

"We know that there is a plume moving down the Ohio River...We think it's on its way around Huntington, West Virginia." pic.twitter.com/o3cLEE62tH

— Chief Nerd (@TheChiefNerd) [February 14, 2023](#)

Some residents concerned about the health effects filed a lawsuit against Norfolk Southern, [NPR reported](#).

An eco-horror caused by corporate abuse

"The fiery train crash in East Palestine is just the latest in a series of preventable tragedies," Food & Water Watch Pennsylvania Director Megan McDonough [said in a statement](#).

Food & Water Watch Pennsylvania is one of several organizations and analysts pointing to the power the chemical and transportation industries hold over government policies as the root cause of the crash and calling for policy change.

Rail Workers United, an inter-union alliance of rail workers, argued last week that the crash "was a predictable consequence of [Wall Street-backed policy](#) decisions that have hollowed out the industry's workforce, pushed remaining employees to chronic exhaustion, and sacrificed safety for profits," [Common Dreams reported](#).

When current transportation safety rules were first created, the federal government sided with industry lobbyists limited regulations governing the transportation of hazardous compounds, allowing trains like the one in Ohio to haul dangerous materials without being subject to stringent safety requirements, [according to The Lever](#).

Norfolk Southern paid top executives millions, spent billions on stock buybacks and decreased the size of its workforce, which increases safety risks. It also blocked a shareholder initiative that would have required it to mitigate the risks of transporting hazardous materials.

Industry-friendly policies over the last decade led to a [major uptick in derailments](#), forcing the Obama administration to propose improved safety regulations. But the Obama measures were watered down after industry pressure.

The Trump administration, which received more than \$6 million from the rail industry, then rescinded some of those watered-down rules, including one that would have required a better braking system on the Ohio train.

The Biden administration, with Pete Buttigieg as transportation secretary, made no move to reinstate the rules.

“Norfolk Southern’s environmental disaster is the latest in a long string of corporate malfeasance committed right under the secretary’s nose,” according to Revolving Door Project Executive Director [Jeff Hauser](#).

But it wasn’t just the failure to regulate the rail industry that created this crisis. McDonough also placed responsibility for the disaster on the growing petrochemical industry in the region. She said:

“Community groups, grassroots organizations and public health experts have been warning for years that the fracking and petrochemical polluters in our area pose serious health dangers to our communities. Yet lawmakers from both parties have encouraged the growth of pipelines, petrochemical plants, and new fracking wells dangerously close to our homes and schools. Expanding these [dirty energy](#) networks means transporting hazardous and even potentially deadly chemicals by pipeline, truck and train — putting millions of us at risk every single day.”

Other experts allege the decision to sacrifice human and environmental health to corporate interests also continued after the crash.

Environmental lawyer **Steven Donziger**, who represented more than 30,000 indigenous people in their case against Chevron for polluting their land, alleged that the dangerous decision to do a “controlled release” of hazardous chemicals was made in order to open the railways.

Ohio train disaster is an eco-horror caused by corporate abuse. Norfolk Southern detonated the fireball below to "dispose" of cancer-causing chemicals because it was cheaper and the rails could open faster.

They "nuked" a small town for profit.<https://t.co/SaCbXGcQsO>
<pic.twitter.com/qTB40Eu05a>

— Steven Donziger (@SDonziger) [February 15, 2023](#)

Two Wall Street analysts — Bank of America and Cowen — published reports Tuesday indicating that Norfolk Southern won’t see a major hit to its bottom line following the train disaster, [FreightWaves reported](#).

Bank of America’s Ken Hoexter said the company will likely have to pay a \$40 to \$50 million “casualty charge.”

But, “as rail service is restored, rail shares have historically not seen a material impact from accidents on a 3-month horizon,” Hoexter wrote.

In 2022, Norfolk Southern generated [\\$12.7 billion in revenue](#) and \$3 billion in profits.

Media and politicians more concerned with Chinese balloons than East Palestine

Viqueira, who has been covering the story closely, told hosts Gray and Soave on a recent episode of “[Rising](#)” that he thought the political fallout from the lack of response by Washington was going to be significant.

Gray agreed. “The news seems to be very transfixed on the Chinese balloons and not at all seem to be wanting to dedicate much time to this ongoing environmental crisis,” she said.

Viqueira said that part of the reason the story hadn’t been covered was political. He said that there are people asserting there is “apathy because these folks are a working-class community in eastern Ohio. That’s [what people are saying] on the left.”

“On the right people are blaming the administration for not caring just on the basis of electoral politics because that area in that particular county — Columbiana County — in eastern Ohio voted I think 45 in favor of Donald Trump,” he added.

Buttigieg has come under significant fire for ignoring the train derailment.

Former Ohio State Senator Nina Turner tweeted this:

He jokes about balloons while ignoring East Palestine, OH.

We deserve better than this. pic.twitter.com/tAcNniSPMQ

— Nina Turner (@ninaturner) [February 13, 2023](#)

[Buttigieg made his first comments](#) about the derailment ten days after the event and only after he had been slammed in the media.

Viqueira continued, “What I think is a serious concern is a relative lack of attention to what is most obviously an environmental catastrophe... [and] an economic catastrophe for the people of Eastern Ohio.”

“Locally they’re putting the cart before the horse and sending people back before they’re even sure themselves are authorities whether or not it is a safe environment,” he said.

Gray said this was just one of many times where people have been told there is nothing to be concerned about, when in fact there is. She gave the example of the first responders during 9/11 who later got cancer at alarming rates, of the water in Flint Michigan and of soldiers exposed to hazardous chemicals in Iraq and Afghanistan.

“People have been taught by history not to believe these kinds of claims,” she said.

Gray also commented on the long history of corporations evading responsibility for environmental and human disasters they cause:

“So often unfortunately what happens when these corporations deal with hazardous materials and there are accidents like these they’re either judgment proof [where] the cost of actually making people whole, the value of all of those lives, the harms of the

environment is so big that it would bankrupt the company and courts tend to be protective of companies and keeping them in business. ...

“Or they’re able to shield themselves from liability or actually having to pay the judgments, the way that Chevron has been able to do with that historically large ... \$9 billion lawsuit that was won for their polluting in the Amazon.”

Watch a discussion of the Ohio disaster on “Good Morning CHD” [here](#).

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Featured image: [@blckndgldfn/Twitter](#) (left); [@StrictlyChristo/Twitter](#) (right)

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