

Chemical Desolation in Appalachia

Freight rail companies are running their trains ragged to boost profits. Sometimes they crash.

By [Jarod Facundo](#)

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In the village of East Palestine, on a late Friday evening, a Norfolk Southern freight train derailed on the Ohio side of the Pennsylvania border, causing tanker cars to rupture and catch fire, releasing thousands of tons of hazardous chemical compounds into the surrounding land and atmosphere. At the time of the crash, the known chemicals aboard included the highly toxic vinyl chloride and hydrogen chloride. An EPA document dump on [February 12](#) revealed additional carcinogenic chemicals were aboard too, as well as some highly flammable solvents and gases. Public documents reveal that four tank cars containing vinyl chloride were stacked together.

Responding before the reveal of the cargo's manifest, Jason Trosky, a resident of East Palestine, told the *Prospect*:

"A \$56 billion corporation knows where every one of its assets is at any given time ... The reason [Norfolk Southern] didn't show us the manifest is because the train was overloaded."

Twenty miles earlier, [grainy security footage](#) from an equipment plant in Salem, Ohio, showed flashes of white rising from the train tracks, sparks and flames—a possible indication of fire or malfunction. Before the derailment, Michael Graham, a spokesperson for the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), said the crew on board was notified of mechanical failure, prompting them to activate the emergency brakes, which caused the derailment. At time of writing, it was not known whether the hotbox detector, a device used to assess the parts of a rail car, in Salem or the one in East Palestine alerted the crew on board.

In the following days, reporting from The Lever detailed how Norfolk Southern [lobbied against](#) transportation safety rules designed to prevent the exact sort of disaster that happened in East Palestine. They spent big to block new rules requiring rail companies to

replace conventional air brakes with electronically controlled pneumatic brakes on cars carrying volatile or dangerous material. The new technology is far more effective at braking—unsurprising given that air brakes were designed in the 19th century—but the upgrades would have cost money.

Ben Ratner, a resident of East Palestine, recalled the immediate moments after the freight train derailed to the *Prospect*. He and his family arrived home from his daughter's basketball game. The phones buzzed and sirens rang overhead. From the Ratner home, the train tracks are visible from the backyard. He looked outside and saw flames. "I wasn't fully sure what was going on for our family and friends who live over there." So he stepped outside and walked toward the smoke and flames until he was stopped by firefighters. "I tried getting over to my friend's house and they weren't letting me cross the intersection," he said, solemnly, "I was very close to their house, but they were actually getting ready to leave as well." He then returned home.

By midnight, Ratner and his family decided they'd shelter in place. "Some people were leaving town, but our kids were getting ready for bed. We didn't know how serious it was." The following morning, Ratner relocated his family to his mother-in-law's house, just over two miles away from the crash site, as he went to work for the day. His wife called him, telling Ratner that evacuation for children was mandatory, citing alleged potential charges for child endangerment. Ratner described frantically running around town, being stopped from entering East Palestine, and eventually picking up the family's dog. By Sunday, his family had rented an Airbnb next to the family-owned coffee shop in Salem. At the time of the interview, he said his house was on a wait list for air quality testing and he was unsure of returning. He said: "Our kids are supposed to return to school on Monday."

An ominous FAQ document, with no company or government letterhead, appeared on the exterior doors of the residents of East Palestine. The document tells residents not to worry about their air quality or drinking water, and compared the inhalation of the chemicals in the air to breathing in smoke from a wood fire. Under the "Is my drinking water safe?" section, the document states: "It is improbable that substances from the derailment will impact the groundwater or drinking water wells in the area." Meanwhile, [according to the EPA](#), trace amounts of the chemicals aboard the Norfolk Southern train have been identified in the Ohio River and along the creeks sprouting off the river.

Additionally, the document states that children, the elderly, and other immunocompromised people are not at risk from exposure to the substances released from the derailed train. The document states: "While smoke from any type of fire can exacerbate asthma or other breathing difficulties, no long-term effect is expected from short-term exposure."

Trosky described the derailment as "It felt like our house blew up ... We got a little bit of smoke inside." He recalled a haze inside his house, and a sweet, metallic taste in his mouth. "We knew it was nothing good." On Saturday morning, the highway state patrol arrived at Trosky's home, urging him to evacuate him and his family. "The urgency wasn't there. It was like he was going through the motions," Trosky said. He immediately evacuated his 14-year-old twins, while he and his wife stayed behind. "You can't just go running from your home," Trosky said. He then described how his daughter had suffered from an upper respiratory episode. "I would assume it's some kind of chemical irritation in her lungs."

A resident outside of the one-mile evacuation zone recalled the experience from five miles

away. Emily Wright, a spokesperson for River Valley Organizing, said, “I feel guilty for not evacuating my family.” On Sunday, she was experiencing asthma symptoms. Her father, who already suffers from bilateral asbestosis, called her saying that his breath had been short all day. “We were told on the news,” Wright said, “the train derailed, it was on fire, but it was controlled.” It was not until Sunday night that authorities reported that some of the boxcars were filled with vinyl chloride. “All of a sudden I’m getting these emergency alerts on my phone, evacuating more people,” Wright said.

A controlled burn was scheduled for 3:30 p.m. on Monday, supposedly to prevent further explosions of the cars, but it released hydrogen chloride and toxic phosgene gas into the air. Wright told the *Prospect* that upon learning about the scheduled burn, she decided to pick her daughter up from school early. “I didn’t want her to be on the bus because she would have been on the bus route when it happened.” But the burn was delayed. Initially, the 3:30 p.m. time slot was chosen to avoid weather forecasts of 45 mph winds.

Around six o’clock, everybody in the Wright home began feeling nauseous. Her 84-year-old grandmother felt strange. Wright’s teeth were hurting, along with others in the house. And her father’s shortness of breath worsened. Similar symptoms were reported across five counties, even in some places in Western Pennsylvania. Later, Wright received pictures from 25 miles south of her, showing towns covered in darkness. “It didn’t even look like they had streetlights,” Wright said.

Wright’s account tracks with others further from the initial site. Jim Kosior, a resident of Darlington Township, Pennsylvania, approximately eight to ten miles away, described similar circumstances. Kosior posted footage on Twitter. Across a landscape of near total darkness, [Kosior says](#), “These aren’t storm clouds. This is the fucking shit they’re burning off in East Palestine.” When Kosior spoke to the *Prospect*, he said, “I’ve still got a burning in my lungs,” going on to describe ongoing symptoms of diarrhea and severe headaches.

From Monday to Wednesday, residents witnessed a string of press conferences that only left them more confused than they were from the start. In one of these press conferences, a local reporter was handcuffed and arrested for trespassing while [covering a news conference](#) about the toxic chemicals aboard. Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine, who led the conference in question, after the matter said that he was unaware the arrest took place.

“Less than 24 hours ago,” Ratner said, “they shut down a press conference after a few questions. And all of sudden we can go back home? You would have thought they had all that information [at the press conference].” He continued: “It’s hard ... People have to go back to their normal lives. And it’s gonna be sad if in a few years people start seeing negative health effects, [which] we’re already seeing.”

By Wednesday, residents were notified that the evacuation area was safe to return to based upon air quality samples “[below safety screening levels for contaminants of concern](#).”

The Ohio governor’s announcement urges residents with private wells to use bottled water until water testing is completed. In the announcement, DeWine states that Norfolk Southern would be providing free bottled water and free water testing through an independent contractor. He additionally notes that Norfolk Southern would be providing reimbursements for families displaced.

But many residents still have doubts. River Valley Organizing has collected photos

documenting the sustained damage across the region. These include pictures of discolored eggs laid by chickens after the crash.

In a private Facebook group, East Palestine residents have shared anecdotes of continued lung irritation, headaches, and more. Over the weekend, several residents posted images of their children suffering from rashes spread along their arms and faces. Others have described their homes as covered in residue, even after cleaning services were hired, suggesting that despite the notice that it was safe to return, residue from the accident remains in the air. Inside the group, they are urging each other to keep meticulous documentation for any future action against Norfolk Southern.

Those reimbursements touted by DeWine have drawn scrutiny. After the initial reimbursement announcement, Norfolk Southern expanded the program to include a \$1,000 “inconvenience fee” for each person inside a household. At the [Abundant Life Fellowship](#) in New Waterford, Ohio, Norfolk Southern has set up shop. The *Prospect* confirmed with John Fletcher, an employee for Norfolk Southern, that the company was providing inconvenience checks and reimbursements onsite.

East Palestine resident Zsuzsa Gyenes told the *Prospect* that on the first day she visited the Abundant Life Fellowship to claim reimbursements, there were only five people in attendance. But by the next day, there were hundreds. Gyenes said she waited for five hours and when she asked a representative from the company to review the paperwork ahead of time for the inconvenience check, her request was denied.

In order to claim the reimbursement, residents within one mile of the evacuation zone are required to show paperwork proving their residency and identification. For the \$1,000 “inconvenience fee,” residents are required to provide Norfolk Southern with a W-9 form, in addition to a Social Security number. Rumors have spread in the Facebook group that claiming one or both could waive a resident’s right to any future class action lawsuit.

Attempting to quash those rumors, Norfolk Southern spokesperson Connor Spielmaker told a Cleveland news outlet that accepting reimbursements or money would not bar them from filing future legal action. Some residents in the Facebook group have described speaking with attorneys who have provided similar advice.

However, Michael O’Shea of the Lipson O’Shea legal group says otherwise. In an interview with the *Prospect*, he said: “I would tell my clients not to give [Norfolk Southern] any W-9 information and not to sign any forms and not to cash any checks until we have a clear understanding from Norfolk Southern.”

In a similar [2005 incident in Graniteville, South Carolina](#), 5,400 residents were evacuated from their homes following a Norfolk Southern train crash that resulted in a chlorine spill. Residents who accepted compensation from the company forfeited their rights to any further damages. O’Shea brought up this instance to Norfolk Southern, but Norfolk Southern has not responded.

Against this backdrop, a blighted landscape remains. Advocacy groups have urged residents to call upon Gov. DeWine to request an emergency declaration from President Biden. At time of publication, an emergency has not been declared, leaving residents alone to attempt piecing their lives back together.

Under the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA), Norfolk Southern could be responsible for all cleanup costs at the site. So far, [the EPA has warned](#) the company that it's investigating the company under CERCLA. Trosky further damned Norfolk Southern. "People in East Palestine live day to day, not paycheck to paycheck." He derided the [\\$25,000 donation](#), inconvenience checks, and reimbursements as chump change. Photos shared with the *Prospect* by Trosky showed workers on the site working without respiratory protection.

"They're not even cleaning the trucks coming off that job site," Trosky said, talking to me on the phone while speaking from the disaster site. "There's zero containment of what's on their trucks." Trosky is concerned about the air quality, but what scares him most is the management of the cleanup site and contaminants that have seeped into the earth. Trosky continued: "In all the creeks, the fish are dead ... [Local authorities] kept giving [Norfolk Southern] the power. So now you're telling me that in less than five days," he paused, "they completely cleaned it up and it's safe to return?"

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Jarod Facundo is a writing fellow at The American Prospect. He has previously interned for The Nation, Dissent, the Prospect, and the Institute for Policy Studies. He is a graduate of Michigan State University's James Madison College.

Featured image: A large plume of smoke rises over East Palestine, Ohio, after a controlled detonation of a portion of a derailed Norfolk Southern freight train carrying toxic chemicals, February 6, 2023. (AP Photo)

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