

More Than 100 Groups Demand EPA Conduct Dioxin Testing in Areas Impacted by the East Palestine Train Derailment

Experts and advocates urge EPA to make a deeper commitment to protecting impacted communities by conducting a comprehensive and transparent process of dioxin testing

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Today, River Valley Organizing and more than 100 groups from Ohio, Pennsylvania, and across the country sent a [joint letter](#) to U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Administrator Michael Regan and other EPA leadership with expert recommendations on how to test for dioxins in East Palestine, Ohio and other communities impacted by the Norfolk Southern train derailment disaster. Although the EPA recently [ordered](#) environmental testing for dioxins in the aftermath of the Norfolk Southern train derailment, the EPA has not shared the testing plan with the impacted communities for their review and input.

The full text of the letter and list of signers can be found [here](#).

Dioxins are persistent bioaccumulative toxic (PBT) chemicals that break down very slowly, build up in the food chain and in our bodies, and can cause cancer and other serious health problems. Dioxins are [created](#) when chlorinated chemicals and materials like vinyl chloride and polyvinyl chloride (PVC) plastic are burned—exactly what occurred following the East Palestine derailment. On March 2nd, the EPA finally ordered environmental testing for dioxins in the aftermath of the Norfolk Southern train derailment after pressure from River Valley Organizing, community members, advocates, and elected officials including Senators Sherrod Brown (D-OH) and J. D. Vance (R-OH).

The letter to EPA was developed in collaboration with key groups in Ohio and Pennsylvania such as River Valley Organizing (RVO), along with Toxic-Free Future, and other allies from across the country. In the letter, the groups make recommendations on how this testing should be conducted to improve transparency, rebuild public trust, and comprehensively

address possible releases of dioxins from the disaster.

The letter states, in part:

“Communities surrounding and downwind of the derailment have a right to know whether the fire resulted in elevated concentrations of dioxins. The testing must be transparent and comprehensive. This would help demonstrate EPA’s commitment to comprehensively responding to this disaster, rebuilding trust with East Palestine and other impacted communities, and advancing environmental justice.”

River Valley Organizing has released a list of five community demands based on a community meeting attended by more than 200 residents in East Palestine, including independent testing and testing for dioxins. Those demands are [outlined here](#).

“The people of East Palestine and surrounding communities have been clear: they want comprehensive, independent environmental testing – including for dioxins,” said **River Valley Organizing Co-Executive Director Amanda Kiger**. “This is a key demand that is necessary to build public trust. This community deserves to know what potential toxic chemicals they will have to live with for years to come due to Norfolk Southern’s greed.”

“The people of East Palestine and surrounding impacted communities in Ohio and Pennsylvania have a right to know if they’ve been exposed to these very dangerous chemicals,” said **Mike Schade, Director of Mind the Store, a program of Toxic-Free Future**. “It is critical that the EPA ensures that the testing process for dioxins is both transparent and comprehensive. Just like PFAS, dioxins are toxic even at very low levels of exposure. And, immediate action must be taken to protect these communities.”

“Expanding the range of testing to include dioxin makes sense,” said **Matthew Mehalik, Executive Director of the Breathe Project**. “[As](#) more testing data continues to come in, it is clear that there is more to be concerned about than was initially communicated. Innocent people who have been engulfed by this disaster need to know the extent to which this and other residual chemicals were and are present so that key questions at the foundations of their lives and livelihoods can be addressed and any chance of healing can begin.”

“Dioxin is one of the most toxic chemicals ever tested,” said **Stephen Lester, Science Director of the Center for Health, Environment & Justice**. “Exposure to dioxins can cause cancer, reproductive damage, developmental problems, immune effects, skin lesions, and other adverse effects. It’s important for the residents of East Palestine that accurate and transparent testing for dioxin be done at the lowest levels possible, so that the residents can begin to understand the risks they face and can make informed decisions to protect their health.”

“Any soil testing plan put together must be under rigorous oversight of the U.S. EPA, including strict quality control measures and split-sample testing so that reported findings can be verified,” said **Ted Schettler, M.D., M.P.H., Science Director for the Science and Environmental Health Network**. “Norfolk-Southern has obvious financial conflicts of interest in the outcomes of all environmental testing and public health evaluations.”

“It is unfortunate that the EPA took a month to decide to test for dioxins, and then rather than doing it itself, is having Norfolk Southern consultants to do the actual testing,” said

Judith Enck, former EPA Regional Administrator and President of Beyond Plastics.

“The testing plan is too limited and should be revised to require some testing inside people’s homes, at schools, and air filters in schools and buildings and cars should be tested, not just soil. Rain has likely driven contaminants toward groundwater and that water should be tested over a period of months and year.”

Background on the 2023 Ohio Train Derailment Disaster

Five train cars were punctured and burned containing 115,000 gallons of vinyl chloride in uncontrolled conditions for numerous days, making it possible that dioxins and related chlorinated substances were formed and released into the communities surrounding the disaster site. Four train cars of polyvinyl chloride plastic also burned, also possibly forming dioxins. Vinyl chloride is a known human carcinogen and is primarily used to manufacture PVC (vinyl) plastic materials, such as “luxury vinyl” flooring, piping, siding, packaging, and toys. There have been elevated levels of dioxins released in other major accidents involving chlorinated chemicals—from the [2004 explosion at the PVC plant](#) in Illiopolis, Illinois, to the [1997 Plastimet PVC recycling fire](#) in Ontario, to the 2001 [World Trade Center attacks](#).

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