

Train carrying anhydrous ammonia derailed and catches fire in North Dakota

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A train carrying hazardous materials derailed and ignited Friday morning near Carrington, North Dakota. A video of the derailment posted on X/Twitter by Doug Zink, a farmer near the crash site, shows several rail cars on fire emitting thick clouds of black smoke.

According to statements from Andrew Kirking, emergency management director for Foster County, 29 cars on a CPKC (Canadian Pacific Kansas City) train derailed at 3:45 a.m. local time in a marshy area near farmland. Water around the site reportedly slowed efforts to put out the fire, which burned for around 12 hours, but responders were able to suppress most of the fire by Saturday morning.

Bill Suess, spill investigation program manager for the North Dakota Department of Environmental Quality, said the cars were carrying anhydrous ammonia, sulfur and methanol. The ammonia caused the most concern for officials, as exposure to burning ammonia can cause coughing and irritation in the nose and throat in low amounts and in high enough exposure can cause burning sensation in the eyes and throat, blindness, lung damage and even death.

Officials did not issue an evacuation order for nearby residents, citing favorable winds that were carrying the smoke away from populated areas. However, on Sunday officials did issue a shelter-in-place order to the nearby town of Borduloc when a rail car began venting ammonia during removal, causing concern over air quality. The order was lifted later that day when air quality testing returned to safe levels.

Kirking added that each car would need to be evaluated individually and then emptied and relocated to reduce the amount of spillage before final removal of the cars could occur. "The situation is being closely monitored by environmental specialists to ensure as little product as possible is lost," he said.

No one was injured in the derailment or from the fire, according to official statements, likely due in large part to the remote location of the fire.

But the accident is reminiscent of the East Palestine, Ohio, derailment and fire in February 2023, during which corporate and government officials carried out a controlled burn of vinyl chloride, releasing toxic chemicals into the air. A June study of the incident found that carcinogens from the burn were found in 16 states, affecting a 540,000-square-mile area.

The derailment and burning of the chemicals were found to have been the result of poor maintenance by the company and a directive to burn off the material so that the rail line could be cleared as quickly as possible.

Train derailments are a part of daily life in the United States, the result of corporate negligence and ruthless cost-cutting. On average, three trains derail per day in the country.

- On Tuesday an Amtrak passenger train derailed and struck a tree in Franklin County, Missouri. While on Sunday two Union Pacific trains derailed, one carrying coal in Gibbon, Nebraska, and the other in Carson, California.

- Around 2:00 a.m. on Sunday, a Union Pacific worker was killed after being crushed by a train in Melrose Park, Illinois.

- In January, a Columbus & Ohio River Rail Road (CUOH) worker died on the job, while 55-year-old Chris Wilson, an employee of Norfolk Southern, was killed on the job in Alabama. In February, Randall M. Howell, 41, died in a road crossing accident in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina.

- Since October 2023, there have been eight fatal accidents in Brevard County, Florida, seven of which involved a Brightline passenger train. All deaths either involved a road crossing accident or a pedestrian being

struck by a train. On Monday, a 45-year-old pedestrian was struck and killed in Cocoa, Florida.

- This year three people in New York have been killed on the Amtrak line between New York City and Albany, including one last week near Schodack, New York.

- In June, two people were also struck and killed by trains in Mukilteo, Washington, and another in Burlington, North Carolina.

National Transportation Safety Board Chair Jennifer Homendy responded to the death in Melrose Park by posting on X that “50% of our open rail investigations involve rail employee fatalities, and we know from the @USDOTFRA rail #safety database that train accidents in rail yards are going up. We need to do more to improve rail and rail worker safety NOW.”

According to data from the National Safety Council, injuries in the rail industry have declined since 2007, but deaths are increasing. In 2022 there were 954 deaths compared to a low of 669 in 2012. Deaths and injuries for employees have reportedly declined, but an investigation by ProPublica found that rail companies use a variety of techniques to skirt around federal regulations on workplace accident and death reporting, frequently arguing that workers’ injuries are not work-related and therefore not required to be reported.

The report cites one incident in which a worker encountered rough track and received injuries to his back and spine that required surgery. The company argued that the track was not rough and that the injuries should be considered from outside of work, which would not require federal reporting.

Even with misreporting and the general decline, thousands of rail workers are injured every year, and 10 were killed in 2022.



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