

# Tankers Carrying Oil Derail, Catch Fire in Va.

LYNCHBURG, Va. April 30, 2014 (AP)

By ALAN SUDERMAN and MICHAEL FELBERBAUM Associated Press

Several CSX train cars carrying crude oil derailed and caught fire Wednesday along the James River, with three black tankers ending up in the water and leaking some of their contents, becoming the most recent crash involving oil trains that has safety experts pushing for better oversight.

Nearby buildings were evacuated for a time in downtown Lynchburg, but officials said there were no injuries and the city on its website and Twitter said firefighters decided to let the fire burn out. Three or four tankers were breached on the 15-car train that CSX said was on its way from Chicago to an unspecified destination. Most of the cars were knocked off the tracks.

Online photos and videos showed large flames and thick, black smoke right after the crash before the fire burned itself out. Still, officials were keeping people out of the area.

Nicole Gibs, 32, a server at the Depot Grille, just across the street, said she was waiting on a table when she heard a train that sounded louder than usual. She saw several train cars wobbling, and then one fell over, sparking a fire immediately. Several other cars also toppled "like Tyco trains," she said.

The manager yelled: "Evacuate!" and the restaurant immediately began emptying, with some people in wheelchairs being carried down steps as the fire raged, filling the air with black smoke. The people from the restaurant moved a block away, then two.

"You could feel the heat like you were standing by a campfire," Gibs said. "It was hot."

Concern about the safety of oil trains was heightened last July when runaway oil train derailed and exploded in Lac-Megantic, Quebec, near the Maine border. Forty-seven people died and 30 buildings were incinerated. Canadian investigators said the combustibility of the 1.3 million gallons of light, sweet Bakken crude released in Lac-Megantic was comparable to gasoline.



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"This is another national wake-up call," Jim Hall, a former National Transportation Safety Board chairman, said of the Lynchburg crash. "We have these oil trains moving all across the United States through communities and the growth and distribution of this has all occurred, unfortunately, while the federal regulators have been asleep."

"This is just an area in which the federal rulemaking process is too slow to protect the American people," he said.

There have been eight significant oil train accidents in the U.S. and Canada in the past year involving trains hauling crude oil, including several that resulted in spectacular fires, according to the safety board. Also Wednesday, two locomotives and three freight cars of a CSX train derailed near the East Carolina University campus in North Carolina, and leaked a chemical for fertilizer. Environmental officials said it posed little danger.

Lynchburg city manager Kimball Payne said about 50,000 gallons of oil were missing from the tankers, but fire officials were unsure how much had burned up and how much had spilled into the water. Those estimates are based on thermal imaging done of the three tankers that were partially in river. Each car holds 30,000 gallons of oil, Payne said.

City spokeswoman JoAnn Martin said there's no impact to the water supply for Lynchburg's 77,000 residents because it only sources from the James in times of drought

Still, drinking water was the first concern for Lynchburg resident Mark Lindy, a network engineer who came with his son, Zach, to look at the accident scene. He said he planned to buy a week's worth of water for his family just to be safe.

"I'm not drinking tap water, that's for sure," he said.

Booms have been set up and have appeared to contain the spill, the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality said. The agency said it will oversee the oil cleanup and assess the river for any environmental impacts.

CSX said it is "responding fully, with emergency response personnel, safety and environmental experts, community support teams and other resources." Martin said CSX cleanup crews were expected to be on the



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scene by midnight and anticipate being done by close of business Thursday.

The NTSB said it is sending investigators, as is the Federal Railroad Administration.

Grady Cothen, a former Federal Railroad Administration official, said given the recent wet weather in Virginia and the accident's location near a river, it's possible that soft subsoil may have weakened the track, Cothen speculated.

Railroads "try to catch that before it gets out of hand," but aren't always successful, he said.

As for oil train safety problems, in one of her last acts before leaving office last week, outgoing National Transportation Safety Board Chairman Deborah Hersman warned the Obama administration that it needs to take steps immediately to protect the public from potentially catastrophic accidents even if it means using emergency authority.

The safety board has long recommended that the Department of Transportation toughen its design standard for the kind of rail tank cars used to transport crude oil and ethanol. The cars are too easily punctured or ruptured, even in low-speed accidents. Their flammable contents are then spilled, fouling the environment and often igniting.

"We are very clear that this issue needs to be acted on very quickly," Hersman told reporters at the conclusion of a two-day forum the board held on the safety of rail transport of oil and ethanol.

Glen Besa, the executive director of the Virginia chapter of the Sierra Club, reiterated those concerns.

"This accident is a potent reminder of the dangers that come with our dependence on dirty fuels and reinforces the need for better safety measures and increased emergency preparedness," Besa said in a statement.

In 2011, the oil, ethanol and railroad industries agreed to toughen standards for rail cars known as DOT-111s, which are the kind of tank cars used to transport most flammable liquids. However, since then, there have

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been several accidents in which cars built to the new standards ruptured. NTSB officials have said the voluntary standards don't go far enough.

It's most likely the tank cars involved in the Lynchburg accident were older DOT-111s or new "enhanced" DOT-111s because that is what is primarily being used to transport crude oil, said Bob Chipkevich, a former head of NTSB rail accidents investigations.

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Felberbaum reported from Richmond. Associated Press writer Joan Lowy in Washington, D.C., contributed to this report.