

Eric J. Brewer
Director of Emergency Services for Beaver County
U.S. Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works
March 9, 2023

Thank you for the opportunity to speak before you in reference to the current emergency in East Palestine, Ohio that is directly affecting the residents of Beaver County, Pennsylvania. This derailment occurred under 1000 feet from the Pennsylvania/Ohio border in East Palestine, Columbiana County, Ohio.

I am Eric Brewer, Director of Emergency Services for Beaver County. I am the appointed Emergency Management Coordinator for Beaver County as well as the Chief of the Beaver County Hazardous Materials Response Team. I have been with the Department of Emergency Services for 28 years, the last seven as the Director. I obtained Professional level Certification as an Emergency Manager through the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency and I am certified as a Hazardous Materials Incident Commander through the Pro Board accreditation process. I recently retired from the Federal Government's National Disaster Medical System where I served as a medical specialist. This team responded to disasters and large planned events throughout the world.

I am speaking as a member of the community as well as a first responder who was on scene the night of the derailment. The week following I spent at the Emergency Operations Center in East Palestine and continue to go there for meetings and updates. I consider myself the typical Western Pennsylvanian; blue collar, hardworking, son of a steel worker, who has worked hard to get where I am today. My family has been in Beaver County for over 100 years. I was born and raised here and continue to reside here. I am part of the community.

I am not an expert on air quality, water quality, health effects or rail cars.

Beaver County is located in southwest Pennsylvania approximately twenty miles northwest of the city of Pittsburgh. The County is bordered on the west by the States of Ohio and the panhandle of West Virginia; the south by Washington County; the east by Allegheny and Butler counties; and the north by Lawrence County. The predominate feature of the County is the Ohio River which enters from the southeast and flows to the center of the county before turning southwest and exiting the state to form the boundary between Ohio and West Virginia. The remainder of the County is characterized by gently rolling foothills and valleys of the Appalachian Mountain Range. Beaver County is comprised of 2 incorporated, third class cities (Aliquippa and Beaver Falls), and 52 boroughs and townships.

Beaver County is home to the Beaver Valley Nuclear Power Station, the first commercial, central-generation nuclear energy station in the United States. Also operations began in November 2022 at Shell Petrochemicals which is an ethylene cracker plant in Potter Township, Beaver County.

Beaver County has had its share of disasters. On September 8, 1994, US Air Flight 427 crashed in Hopewell Township, Beaver County killing all 132 crew and passengers on board. This prompted one of the longest investigations in the history of the NTSB. On October 20, 2006 a Norfolk Southern freight train derailed in New Brighton Borough, Beaver County. The train contained 86 cars of ethanol, of which 24 cars either derailed, were damaged, or were leaking. A fire began and it was determined the safest option would be to allow the fire to burn itself out. The fire continued for a few days prompting an evacuation of approximately 100 people from their homes.

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On Friday, February 3, 2023, at approximately 9:15pm I was contacted by the Emergency Management (EMA) Director of Columbiana County. She said she was enroute to a reported train derailment near the county line and requested mutual aid from the Beaver County Haz-Mat Team. A few minutes later their Director called me back and requested our foam unit as they had a major derailment with multiple rail cars on fire. I notified our team that we would be responding with a full response as mutual aid to Columbiana County for a train derailment. Beaver County Fire Departments were also requested to assist with water so approximately 18 departments from Beaver County responded mutual aid with tankers to supply water. We (hazmat) arrived at the command post around 10:15pm which was set up at the Leake Oil gas station on Taggart Road. On our arrival there was active fire among several rail cars. As the mutual aid hazmat response team our mission is to assist the primary hazmat response team. The primary focus was to obtain the train consist and start to research the contents of the tank cars and other cargo. As more agency's showed up the command post was established in a garage on the Leake Oil property. Norfolk Southern hazmat personnel arrived on scene after 11:00pm and their hazmat contractor arrived shortly after. At approximately 12:00am, after research of the contents it was decided to shut down fire suppression operations and move all firefighters out of the immediate area and to let the tank cars continue to burn. This is not an unusual decision. The last derailment I was on the tank cars burned for a few days. This decision was primarily the suggestion of the Norfolk Southern Hazmat Coordinator as well as their contractor from SPSI. The command post was also relocated to the East Palestine Fire Department. Based on the initial information it was decided to initiate a 1-mile shelter in place from an area just east of Leake Oil. This put the 1-mile radius barely into Beaver County, it did not appear there were any residents affected by this 1-mile radius. The fire eventually burned out early Sunday morning.

Sunday evening we received a call from Columbiana County EMA and advised us that railroad officials were concerned about one of the tank cars starting to "heat up" and if the temperature reached a certain point there was a possibility of detonation and we should consider 1-mile evacuation due to the possibility of explosion. Ohio officials also notified us that the official 1-mile radius would now be from the Leake Oil address. This would add additional residents from Beaver County in the 1-mile evacuation zone. We contacted the Darlington Twp Emergency Management Coordinator to advise the residents in his area of the 1-mile "recommended evacuation". It was stressed that this was "recommended" as we cannot force residents out of their houses in accordance with Pennsylvania Title 35 in regards to Health and Safety. Darlington officials went door to door to advise residents of the recommended evacuation. We also used mass notification systems as well as IPAWS to alert the public. There were social media posts about arresting people who would not leave during the evacuation. Let me be clear, this was not the case in Pennsylvania as this was a recommended evacuation and not a mandatory evacuation.

Monday morning we assembled at the Emergency Operations Center that was set up at the East Palestine Elementary School with several other agencies. We learned that Norfolk Southern wanted to do a controlled detonation of the tank car in question. We were assured this was the safest way to take care of the railcar that was causing the problem. This was to occur around the noon time frame on Monday. When we were in one of the planning meetings we learned from Norfolk Southern officials that they now wanted to do the controlled detonation

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on 5 of the tank cars rather than just the one that everyone was thinking. This changed the entire plan because it was going to be a bigger impact to the area. This confusion was because Norfolk Southern officials did not communicate and were not in the room when the planning process was happening. The Ohio Governor was present in the room and the Pennsylvania Governor was on a speaker phone during the talks when this confusion happened. Both Governors made it clear to Norfolk Southern that they needed to communicate better during the whole process. After more planning and meetings the controlled detonation eventually occurred around 4:40pm.

Most of the area of concern in Beaver County, Pennsylvania uses wells for their main source of water as this is a rural area and there is no municipal water system in that area of the county. Since the Monday of the controlled detonations we have fielded thousands of calls from concerned citizens wanting to know if they can drink the well water, feed their livestock and if the air is good to breath. These calls were referred to the PA DEP or the US EPA as we are not the professionals on this matter. We continue to field calls from concerned citizens and attempt to help them with whatever information we can get them.

I continue to get asked, as well as many other emergency managers, about how prepared areas are for a train derailment. Emergency Management consists of Prevention, Mitigation, Preparedness, Response and Recovery. I'll focus on one of those phases, Preparedness. The goal of preparedness is to lessen the impact of a disaster, not prevent it. There will continue to be disasters and there will be losses in a disaster however we can lessen the impact through preparedness. Although it should not take an emergency such as this, I hope this is an impetus for better support of Emergency Management Programs. Most Emergency Management systems across the country have outdated laws, are underfunded, understaffed and in some areas are non-existent until a disaster happens. This needs corrected at all levels of government. Hiding an Emergency Management program in a fire department or sheriff department, in my opinion, are outdated.

In closing, this was a train wreck, there is no script for this. There was not a binder that I can reach for labeled "train wreck". I have one for floods, winter storms, radiological emergencies, etc. but not one for a train wreck. Did we do things the way everyone would have liked, No. Are there things that we can work on, most definitely. Everyone needs to know that we did the best we could with the information and training we received. In the end, no one was killed during the response. This was a once in a lifetime event for most responders. This was what we consider a "large-scale" emergency. While we were not the primary agency to respond to this disaster, we were at the scene late Friday night and have had many sleepless days and nights that followed.

My message has been consistent and yes I am being selfish. I want the residents of Beaver County to be taken care of the same as those that were affected in East Palestine and I want our first responders to be taken care of. The cost associated with this emergency should not be a burden to the taxpayers of Beaver County nor any of the local municipalities.

A disaster is not a matter of if, it's a matter of when.

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The following are some of my observations associated with this incident:

1. Transparency. There was a lack of transparency from Norfolk Southern. They needed to be upfront on what they planned to do. There cannot be confusion between the agencies during critical planning.
2. Reimbursement. We need the proper reimbursement for the first responders.
3. Health monitoring for first responders needs to be done. Whether this is a CDC or State Health Department initiative, someone needs to see that it is carried out.
4. Residents need reimbursed appropriately for all of their bills and inconveniences. In my opinion, those Beaver Countian's who were affected are not being treated equally.
5. Residents are very concerned about their wells and air quality and want answers.
6. While this was not a Presidential Disaster Declaration that would normally follow the Stafford Act policy, FEMA resources could have been used earlier. They didn't arrive until the week of February 19th.
7. There appears to be a miscommunications between EPA Region 5 and EPA Region 3. This holds true to FEMA Region 5 and FEMA Region 3.
8. Emergency Management Programs at all levels of government are underfunded, understaffed or in some cases not thought of until something happens. This oversight leads to lack of preparedness.