

Freight Train Derails, Causing Fiery Blast

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COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) — Part of a freight train carrying ethanol derailed and caught fire in Ohio's capital city early Wednesday, shooting flames skyward into the darkness and prompting the evacuation of a mile-wide area as firefighters and hazardous materials crews monitored the blaze.

Norfolk Southern said it appeared about 11 cars of a southbound train derailed around 2 a.m. near Interstate 71, southeast of the Ohio State University campus. They went off the tracks north of downtown, in an industrial area blocks from residential neighborhoods.

Joel Priester said he watched the blast from his home two blocks away.

"I saw flames, then I heard a loud sound, like a boom, and saw the flames shooting higher," he said. "It looked like the sun exploded."

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Three of the burning cars were tankers carrying ethanol, said Assistant Chief David Whiting of the Columbus fire division. After viewing the scene in daylight, authorities decided to let the fire burn out instead of trying to extinguish it.

It wasn't immediately clear what caused the derailment.

Two people who ran toward the scene before the explosion were injured but were able to take themselves to a hospital, fire Battalion Chief Michael Fowler said.

Norfolk Southern said none of its workers were hurt.

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Photographer Chris Mumma said he was more than 10 miles away in New Albany when he saw the night sky brightened by a "huge illumination" that he later learned was an explosion. He said he went to the scene to take photos and saw punctures on top of the train that were spewing flames 20 to 30 feet high. He also noticed an odd odor.

"I noticed there was a chemical smell, and I was inhaling it so I backed up a little bit more because I wasn't sure what I was getting involved with," he said. Mumma said it made him so nauseous that he ended up at the hospital.

About 50 evacuees were at an American Red Cross aid site set up at the state fairgrounds.

Among them was Linda Ogletree, who lives a block from the accident site.

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"I was in the house and heard the explosion, then I ran outside to see where it was coming from. The whole outside was lit up," she said.

She said she walked to the end of the street with other people but took off running when an explosion occurred.

Norfolk Southern said two locomotives and three of the train's 98 freight cars were safely removed from the scene.

Associated Press reporter Shelley Adler in Washington, D.C., contributed to this report.

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