

Crews Work to Clear Derailed Train in Louisiana

LAWTELL, La. (AP) — Crews began replacing about 1,800 feet of track on Monday around the site of a derailed train that leaked a corrosive chemical and forced the evacuation of about 100 south Louisiana homes.

The Union Pacific train went off the tracks Sunday near Lawtell, about 60 miles west of Baton Rouge. Company spokeswoman Raquel Espinoza said the cause is under investigation.

"That section of track had just been inspected about three hours before the accident," she said. "There's no timeline on when the area will be completely clear. We're just taking it one step at a time so we can clear the scene in the safest manner possible."

Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal declared a state of emergency Monday. Espinoza said one railcar leaked sodium hydroxide, which can cause injuries or even death if it's inhaled or touches the skin. Another spilled lube oil and a third leaked dodecanol.

Espinoza said the leaks were plugged about 1 a.m. Monday.

Two people were on the train, an engineer and a conductor, at the time of the accident. Neither was hurt.

A man who was near the derailment was treated for a burning sensation in his eyes.

Espinoza said about 160 residents in an area 1½ miles around the accident site are affected by the evacuation. She said it's unclear how long those families will be asked to remain out of their homes.

"We're doing everything we can to assist these families who have been very understanding and patient," she said.

The company has made arrangements for affected residents to stay in hotels in the area and is coordinating meals for residents affected by the evacuation, she said.

Mona Prejean was driving with her husband through Lawtell, where she has lived for 63 years, just after the train derailed. She snapped a photo of the wreck with her phone.

"It looks like it was all smoky. We just weren't certain what it was," she said. "My husband reminded me that a lot of it could be toxic."

Prejean lives about 3 miles away from the derailment. She said she was pleased with the railroad and the government's response.

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"It's not an isolated area there, it's countryside. The homes are not that close together," she said. "I'm satisfied that the governor came down and they're doing everything they can."

Lt. Doug Cain, a spokesman for Louisiana State Police, said it likely will be late Monday or early Tuesday before crews finish replacing the damaged track.

"Then we will move two empty rail cars onto the new track and offload the vinyl chloride to get that out of the equation," he said of the very flammable chemical. "Once that's done, we can continue moving cars and getting them righted and out of the way."

Cain said an inspection Monday showed the damaged train cars remained stable.

"We've been monitoring the pressure and it's stable. There've been no spikes in pressure which is a good thing," he said.

He also said the state Department of Environmental Quality has been monitoring the air but there's no "indication of any offsite impacts."

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Associated Press writers Chevel Johnson in New Orleans and Jacob Jordan in Atlanta contributed to this report.

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