

Get The Facts On The Virginia Train Derailment

Associated Press

MORE DOMESTIC OIL, MORE TRAINS

The Lynchburg train derailment and fire comes amid a surge in domestic oil drilling that has prompted oil companies to move increasing amounts of crude by rail over the past several years. The number of carloads of crude shipped on major US railroads skyrocketed from fewer than 10,000 in 2008 to 415,000 last year, according to the Association of American Railroads and the Federal Railroad Administration. The largest concentration of tank cars is coming out of the Bakken oil patch of North Dakota and Montana, where there is limited capacity to move crude using pipelines, historically the industry's transportation mode of choice.

EXPLOSIVE PROBLEM

Much the oil is being hauled by a fleet of tens of thousands of flawed tank cars that are prone to rupture during derailments. That can set off massive fires when the cars that carry more than 30,000 gallons of oil each break open and explode. Exacerbating the potential hazard is the high volatility of oil from the Bakken — a sweet, light crude that regulators say contains higher concentrations of explosive gases than conventional heavy crudes.

Some companies have been accused of misclassifying cars carrying Bakken crude, setting the stage for firefighters or other first responders to potentially underestimate the combustibility of the oil when they are dealing with a derailment.

STRING OF ACCIDENTS

The proliferation of oil-carrying trains has led to a spike in accidents.

Prior to Lynchburg, there were eight significant rail accidents involving crude oil in the U.S. and Canada since March, 2013, according to the National Transportation Safety Board. That includes the July derailment of an oil train in Quebec that slammed into the town of Lac-Mégantic, triggering an explosion and fire that killed 47 people and levelled a downtown neighborhood.

THE RESPONSE

In response to the accidents, the U.S government has said it will more aggressively enforce tank car classification rules so that volatile oil shipments aren't mislabeled. Companies still lack specific testing requirements for the crude, and the oil industry has said it could be another month or more before it comes out with new industry standards.

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Meanwhile, railroads in February agreed to take some steps of their own, including slowing trains from 50 to 40 miles per hour through major cities, increasing the frequency of track inspections and improved emergency response planning along routes that carry oil trains. However, those rules are voluntary and federal officials have said they don't have any direct enforcement powers to make sure the railroads are following through.

HOW MANY TRAIN CARS WERE INVOLVED?

The National Transportation Safety Board said that 13 of the train's 105 cars derailed and three fell into the James River. The NTSB said all of the train cars contained crude oil.

INVESTIGATION UNDERWAY

The NTSB said a team of specialists is in Lynchburg to examine the train and condition of the track. Jim Southworth, an NTSB railroad investigator, said during a briefing Thursday that he didn't have further structural information on the track or train, but he said the train was going 24 mph at the time of the crash. The speed limit for trains in the area is 25 mph.

CLEANUP PROCESS

In a statement Thursday, CSX said it has removed the non-derailed cars from the scene, alleviating blocked road crossings in the community and providing personnel better access to the derailed cars. Efforts continue to re-rail the remaining cars, the company said.

Crews were using cranes and other heavy equipment to remove damaged rail cars.

WHERE WAS IT HEADED?

In the case of the CSX train that derailed in downtown Lynchburg, Virginia, the train carrying crude oil from the Bakken shale region in North Dakota and was handed off to CSX at Chicago en route to Yorktown, Virginia.

Oil comes by rail, truck or ship to Plains All American Pipeline L.P.'s Yorktown Terminal. The facility has about 6 million barrels of storage capacity for crude oil, black oil, propane, butane and refined products. It has a deep-water port on the York River where it can receive and delivery product from ships and barges. It also receives units from trains and has an unload capacity of about 140,000 barrels per day. Oil then leaves, headed for refineries along the East Coast.

The refinery was originally built in 1956 and was most notably owned by Amoco. Although it changed hands over time, it was sold to Western Refining in 2007. Texas-based Plains All American Pipeline acquired the Yorktown facility in December 2011 from Western Refining, which shut down the facility in 2010.

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