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Train derailis; Missoula residents evacuated

By BETSY COHEN, Missoulian - 06/19/2006

A five-car derailment in the Montana Rail Link switching yard on Missoula's Northside delivered a rude awakening for residents on the 900 block of Phillips Street early Sunday morning.

Five cars in a 75-car train jumped a broken rail just east of the Scott Street Bridge about 5:30 a.m., shaking the ground and thundering to a halt.

In the tumble, valves on a car carrying ethanol — a colorless, flammable liquid made from distilled agricultural crops — broke and leaked about 12,000 gallons of the liquid before emergency crews were able to stop the flow, said Nate Nunnally, assistant fire marshal for the Missoula Fire Department.

When the leak was detected, Missoula police began knocking on doors to tell Phillips Street residents about the derailment and asked the four homes nearest the tracks to evacuate.

After living near the tracks for 20-some years, Renee Valley said, she's gotten used to the clanging and banging noise of the railroad.

And while the crash didn't wake her from her deep slumber, the knock on the door about 7 a.m. did. When her spouse, Dean Ickness, answered and Valley heard another voice say the word "evacuate," she shot out of bed.

It's a word that has been a nagging worry for her for the past several years.

"I live across from the railroad, and after the Alberton spill, you never know what can happen," Valley said, referring to a 1996 derailment and chlorine gas leak that forced residents of the town west of Missoula from their homes. "It was pretty scary to wake up that way and hear that word the word 'evacuate.'"

Ickness — who for years has called the Saturday night-Sunday morning shift at the railroad "amateur night," because that's when the yard is the noisiest — knew immediately the morning rumble was out of the ordinary.

He wasn't surprised to learn about the derailment or all the commotion

surrounding it.

After being briefed on the situation, the couple grabbed their Scottish terrier, Bonnie, went for a walk and then had a long breakfast at a downtown cafe.

Their initial fear dissipated when police described the cause for concern as “denatured alcohol,” and not a more potent chemical.

A regional emergency response team — a collaborative effort of 30-some emergency professionals that includes city police, county sheriff’s deputies, the Health Department, rural and city firefighters and railroad personnel — swarmed to the derailment within minutes of an emergency call at 5:28 a.m.

After stopping the leak, fire crews sprayed a foam blanked over and around the spill area, Nunnally said.

Although ethanol evaporates quickly, MRL will begin removing the saturated, contaminated soil first thing this morning, said MRL spokeswoman Lynda Frost.

Frost was at the rail yard until the cars were righted, the ethanol spill was under control and the Phillips Street residents were allowed back into their homes at 4:30 p.m.

The derailment, she hopes is the end of a recent rash of similar events for MRL.

In May, an MRL car derailed on the eastern edge of the rail yard, spilling diesel fuel onto the ground, and on Saturday, another derailment near Moiese dumped a load of timber.

MRL inspects rail lines visually every day and frequently by a machine called a rail detector that works much like an X-ray machine and looks for imperfections, Frost said. May 18 was the last time detector was used to examine the section of rail that caused Sunday’s derailment.

“We’ve had such a great record this year until these incidents, it’s strange,” Frost said. “People say things happen in threes and I say, ‘Yes, they do.’ “

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