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Massive rail cleanup in New Brighton

Investigation begins into derailment of 23 Norfolk Southern tankers carrying ethanol

Sunday, October 22, 2006

By Dennis B. Roddy, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Emergency crews in New Brighton last night began the delicate task of off-loading nearly 100,000 gallons of explosive ethanol from overturned rail cars, while several other derailed tankers blazed nearby.

It was part of a step-by-step plan to put out a fire that had burned for a day after part of an 86-car train ran off Norfolk Southern rails, sending some tank cars over a bridge and into the Beaver River and touching off a massive explosion. The wreckage also stalled east-west traffic on one of the most heavily traveled corridors in the Norfolk Southern Railway system.



Steve Mellon, Post-Gazette
Tank cars containing ethanol, an explosive chemical, continue burning yesterday in New Brighton, Beaver County, after 23 cars of a Norfolk Southern Railroad train derailed late Friday and burst into a fireball. Click photo for larger image.

[Locator Map for derailment](#)

Neither the train crew nor anyone in the town was injured, officials said. But hundreds of residents who live within a one-mile radius of the derailment were evacuated from their homes. They were allowed to return briefly last night to grab essential items, then most were sent off to hotels or relatives' homes. Residents from about 45 homes on 5th and 6th avenues were allowed to return for good later in the evening.

Ten hours passed between the 10:30 p.m. derailment Friday and the point at which emergency crews could set up posts near the jumble of tankers, some still shooting flames. Officials said it could take as long as three days to clear the wreckage.

"We have people in and around each of the cars," said Wes Hill, director of emergency management for Beaver County. "There's always a risk anytime you're dealing with these cars."

The emergency workers and officials from the National Transportation Safety Board had converged on New Brighton after 23 cars derailed just inside the borough limits. Moments later, a colossal fireball illuminated the night and sent hundreds of residents from their homes within the one-mile radius.

With Civil Air Patrol craft hovering overhead assessing the situation,



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emergency officials from Beaver and Allegheny counties conferred inside the borough building with railway crews to sort out a strategy for dealing with the blaze.

They decided to let what was burning burn away while removing what ethanol tanks they could.

Mr. Hill said the process would take time.

"They were full cars," he said. Each tank car was capable of holding 30,000 gallons of ethanol, a processed grain alcohol widely used as a gasoline supplement. The train was eastbound from a western refinery en route to a shipping point in New Jersey.

The cars that stayed on the tracks were hauled from the scene yesterday. Of the 23 derailed cars, some lay on their sides alongside the eastbound tracks, while others were jumbled at sharp angles after dropping from the bridge. Several of the cars continued to burn yesterday afternoon.

Earth in a park adjacent to the scene was saturated with the alcohol compound and a section of a brick foundation at the base of the bridge was dotted with flames where pockets of the ethanol had spilled. Atop the bridge, wooden rail ties smoldered and firefighters were posted nearby to make certain they did not erupt into full flame, imperiling tankers atop them.

By 5 p.m. yesterday, rail crews were moving heavy cranes to the scene to remove four cars that had tipped over in a row after they had crossed the bridge. Another crew shuttled empty tank trucks to and from the foot of the hill on which the tracks run to begin emptying a car that blazed from the top.

The touch-and-go procedure involved draining that tank car from the bottom and pumping it full of chemical foam. Then the contents of the other three cars was to be pumped into empty tankers moved up on parallel tracks.

At that point, the cranes were to move in to lower the now empty cars down a set of steps to be cut into the hillside below the tracks. A cutting machine was to be set up in the park below, and the \$50,000 tank cars were to be cut into scrap and hauled away.

Air was to be pumped into some of the remaining 20 cars to help burn off their loads. Still others would be pumped full of fire suppressant foam.

Still another car, tipped at a 45-degree angle from the railroad bridge, posed a trickier problem: It was leaking off its load of ethanol from an air-lock valve, from which the fuel burned in spurts. Crews were still assessing that problem last night.

U.S. Rep. Melissa Hart, R-Bradford Woods, whose district includes New Brighton, received a briefing yesterday from emergency officials who said they had decided to pump air into some of the tank cars to speed the burn off of the ethanol.

"They're going to accelerate the burn. As soon as it's burned out then they can start pulling things out and determine if the bridge is damaged," Ms. Hart said. "They've done some environmental studies already with the water and they seem to think there's no environmental hazard."

A spokeswoman for the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection said officials would continue to monitor the air and water.

Monitoring was much of yesterday's task as crews tried to figure out how best to handle the blazing tanks.



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"We've been monitoring, having a kind of wait-and-see attitude to see if the fire will stabilize and self-extinguish," said Larry Morley, New Brighton borough manager.

Mr. Morley said several blocks of the town's lower end along the Beaver River were evacuated.

"I felt the explosion. My house did one of those shakes, like lightning just struck in the front yard," Mr. Morley said.

Randy Dunn was one of those who were permitted to return home briefly as night fell. He went to his house on Sixth Street to feed his three dogs.

"These are my babies," he said.

Mr. Dunn said he was shaken out of bed by the blast.

"My wife, she yelled at me, 'Something's on fire.' The whole back of the yard was lit up," Mr. Dunn said. "It was just glowing red back here."

Atop a hillside on the other side of the river, residents gathered to watch the fire.

"You could see the flames up there. This whole hillside was lit up. Just an inferno -- the biggest fire I've ever seen," said Mike Parris.

The accident obliterated a stretch of tracks along the Norfolk Southern main line, closing a section used by 50 to 70 freight trains daily, as well as Amtrak passenger service.

A 10-member team from the NTSB planned to move in after all the fires were extinguished to determine what caused the derailment.

Last night, NTSB Vice Chairman Robert Sumwalt said 165 inches of damaged track was found on the bridge in the general area of the derailment and was being sent to Washington, D.C. for analysis. One question to be answered is whether the track was damaged before the derailment or by the derailment, he said.

He said the FBI, which routinely is called in as part of NTSB investigations, was on the scene yesterday and "feels there's no reason to believe there's any sort of sabotage" involved in the derailment.

The NTSB also recovered event recorders from all three locomotives that were part of the train. An initial reading showed that the train was going 36 to 39 mph within the posted speed limit of 45 mph for that section of track.

Mr. Sumwalt said the NTSB plans to interview the train crew today. Crew members underwent toxicology testing after the derailment, which is a federal requirement and standard procedure in such situations.

He said the three locomotives and first 22 cars of the train as well as 41 at the rear stayed on the track. Twenty three cars in the middle derailed.

Rudy Husband, a spokesman for the railroad, likened the effect on traffic to last month's landslide in Kilbuck Township that covered the tracks.

"The effect from the landslide -- you could just recycle that," he said.

Mr. Husband said Norfolk Southern had asked the CSX Corp. to allow it to reroute trains to CSX tracks nearby. He said NS tracks in that area are inspected twice weekly.

Norfolk Southern last night said that persons who have suffered financial loss

due to the accident can call 1-800-230-7049.

(Dennis B. Roddy can be reached at droddy@post-gazette.com or 412-263-1965.)

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