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# After Oil Train Derailment, Will West Virginia Finally Protect Its Water Supply?

BY [KATIE VALENTINE](#) POSTED ON FEBRUARY 17, 2015 AT 4:55 PM



*A train derailment that sent a tanker with crude oil into the Kanawha River on Monday is still smoldering Tuesday, Feb. 17, 2015, near Mount Carbon, W.Va. Fires burned for hours after the train carrying more than 100 tankers of crude oil derailed, sending a fireball into the sky and threatening the water supply of nearby residents, authorities and residents said Tuesday.*

CREDIT: AP PHOTO/CHRIS TILLEY

West Virginia is reeling from an oil train derailment that destroyed a house, forced the evacuation of about 2,400 people and spilled oil into the state's Kanawha River.

Experts say that the official response to the spill makes it clear that the state has learned

from its past experiences with water contamination — namely the chemical spill that shut off water for 300,000 people in the state last year. But questions still remain as to whether or not the water protection reforms enacted in the wake of the historic chemical spill will withstand recent efforts to weaken them, and whether state lawmakers will take further steps to protect the water supply after the derailment.

Evan Hansen, president of West Virginia think tank Downstream Strategies, told ThinkProgress that officials took a “cautious approach” in responding to Monday’s derailment in order to prevent oil from contaminating the drinking water of West Virginia residents near the derailment, which occurred near the town of Boomer. Officials closed the water intakes for Montgomery and Cedar Grove, WV, after the derailment.

“It would appear that they’ve learned from Freedom Industries spill,” Hansen said. Officials didn’t turn off water intakes in the aftermath of that spill, which meant that the chemical — crude MCHM — entered the tap water supply of thousands of West Virginians.

Andrew Whelton, assistant professor of environmental and ecological engineering, agreed. He said that, because of last year’s chemical spill, West Virginia’s state government is far better prepared now to deal with water contamination events like this — though he said an event like this, that impacted a few thousand people, is easier to deal with than an event like the chemical spill, that impacted 300,000.

The derailment hasn’t caused a major inconvenience so far to Melissa Ellsworth, who lives just outside Montgomery, West Virginia. Ellsworth said she hasn’t had tap water since she woke up on Tuesday morning, though West Virginia American Water reopened the intake at the Montgomery water plant around 1 p.m. on Tuesday, so she’s waiting for her water to come back on. She said she was able to buy water last night, after she was warned her water would be turned off, and said there were also distribution stations set up where she could go to get free water. She said she also thought the response this year was better than the response to last year’s chemical spill.

Still, for Ellsworth — and many others in West Virginia — the news of the derailment was disturbing. Ellsworth said she could smell the smoke from the burning oil tankers — which fire crews are letting burn themselves out — from her home, five miles away from the derailment site. And she said she was grateful no one had been injured or killed in the derailment.

“These trains go through very densely populated areas all throughout Southwest West

Virginia,” she said. “The fact that only one house was destroyed was remarkable. This certainly is a frightening wake-up call.”

Hearing that no one was killed was also a relief to Angie Rosser, executive director of the West Virginia Rivers Coalition. Now, Rosser is concerned about the other impacts of the derailment: mainly, how much oil was spilled — a figure that hasn’t yet been released — and how it might impact the Kanawha River. She’s also worried about how the state will respond to the derailment — whether it will prioritize measures that protect water sources against contamination, or whether it will ignore the event altogether.

“We’re getting tired of this. This is in about a year our third drinking water contamination event in the state,” she said, referencing the chemical spill in Charleston last year and a diesel spill that shut off water in Lewisburg last month.

So far, however, West Virginia’s state legislature hasn’t shown that it wants to make water protection a priority. Earlier this month, state lawmakers introduced a bill in the House and Senate that would drastically scale back regulations on aboveground storage tanks that were put into place following last year’s chemical spill. According to Hansen’s Downstream Strategies, under the bill, the number of tanks subject to regulation would fall from about 50,000 to fewer than 100. The bill also exempts all tanks related to the oil and gas industries. It is currently being discussed in committee meetings.

Hansen said that the derailment was a reminder to West Virginians that chemical storage tanks weren’t the only threat to their water — that trains, trucks, and barges also can create major contamination events. He also said it points to the need for better protections for bodies of water that are used as drinking sources, and to the need for water utilities to be made aware of what sorts of materials are being carried by trains, and on what schedule they’re being carried, so they can plan for emergencies like this one. Last year, West Virginia’s Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management declined to release information on what routes oil trains take and how much oil is shipped through the state. That information is desperately needed by water utilities, Hansen said.

“How can you make sure that you know what actions to take immediately after incident if you don’t know what type of substances being transported?” he said. “I think at the very least, that information needs to be shared with public water utilities trying to protect source water.”