

CN fuel cars derail, explode west of Edmonton

Dozens flee homes as train containing liquefied petroleum gas catches fire

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A CN Rail train carrying liquefied petroleum gas and crude oil has derailed and exploded about 80 kilometres west of Edmonton, prompting an evacuation in the tiny community of Gainford.

Parkland County Emergency Services says it received a call about the accident involving a westbound train around 1 a.m. MT Saturday. The 134-car, mixed freight train left Edmonton Friday night bound for Vancouver.

The Transportation Safety Board says 13 cars — four carrying petroleum crude oil and nine pressurized containers carrying liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) — left the tracks along Highway 16 and Range Road 61.

There was one "significant explosion" at the time of the derailment, followed by a "smaller one," said Carson Mills, a spokesman for Parkland County.

Nearby resident Elaine Hughes told CBC's Laura Osman she woke to her entire trailer shaking and looked out her window to see the entire sky lit up by the flames. After witnessing a fireball burst in the sky, however, she said the explosion quickly died down and she returned to bed.

It wasn't until 9 a.m. local time that officials arrived to tell her to leave her home.

Flames were still burning on the derailed CN rail cars Saturday night. Fire officials said they have little option but to let the fire burn itself out. (Courtesy: Transportation Safety Board)

Others, like Denise Anderson, said they received notice to leave closer to 3 a.m.

"Two fire and rescue guys came and banged on the door and [they] tell me I had to evacuate because there was a train derailment," she said. "They told me to get dressed and I had to go."

Many residents CBC spoke to said they were worried about pets and other animals left behind.

As of Saturday evening, most residents said they were told they would not be able to return home until at least Monday.

Fire is still burning

RCMP officers and emergency personnel are on hand and are working with CN and the TSB staff to manage the situation. Fire crews from Parkland County and Yellowhead County, as well as a HAZMAT crew from Edmonton, were also on scene throughout Saturday.

According to early reports by Mills, two of the pressurized cars containing liquefied petroleum gas caught fire at first. CBC was told that one car also exploded.

Early on, firefighters said the intense heat from the rail cars prevented them from getting close.

By mid-day Saturday, Evansburg RCMP reported three cars were on fire while Parkland County Fire Chief Jim Phalen said a fourth had been compromised.

Fire officials say they have little choice but to let the fuel burn itself off, resulting in a dark, billowing cloud of smoke that remained hanging over Gainford throughout the day.

“As long as we have the fire burning the gas that is being expelled from the pressure vessels, we know where that gas is — and it’s safer just to let it flare until the product is consumed,” said Phalen, estimating the time required for burn-off to be between 24 and 72 hours.

Despite the ongoing flames, CN spokesperson Louis-Antoine Paquin said the four crude oil tankers involved are still intact.

“CN has deployed a team of emergency responders from our safety and environment risk management operations and other forces,” he said, adding that safety executives are also on site and have reached out to municipal leaders.

Paquin said CN will cooperate fully with the TSB’s investigation into the cause of the derailment.

Traffic along Highway 16, a major route connecting Edmonton and Jasper, has been rerouted north along Secondary Highway 765, westbound along Secondary Highway 633 and returning southbound on Secondary Highway 757.

It is unknown when the highway will re-open, but will likely not be until Monday.

Paquin said it is still unknown when the tracks, which also run a VIA rail service, will reopen.

CN apologizes to residents of Gainford

Speaking at a briefing held Saturday night, Jim Vena, the Chief Operating Officer of CN, apologized to the displaced residents of Gainford, and commended the efforts of emergency responders.

“All of us at CN are very much aware of how this incident has disrupted your lives. I regret this very much and again apologize for the inconvenience you are experiencing,” he said.

“Within minutes of the derailment, we have had outstanding cooperation and support from the county, its emergency management, staff, the fire department, police, provincial responders and everyone else we have dealt with.”

Vena said the cause of the crash is still unknown as TSB investigators have been unable to get close to the wreckage to investigate the cause of the derailment. Electronic records show the train travelling at 35 kilometres per hour at the time it derailed.

The track had been recently inspected, said Vena, as was the train prior to leaving Edmonton.

When asked about the company’s safety record, Vena said CN was committed to running a safe railroad, and would be conducting its own investigation into the derailment in addition to supporting the TSB’s independent investigation.

“All I can say is we operate in a safe manner, day in and day out,” he said. “We move thousands of rail cars and hundreds of trains and we do it in a safe manner — and we need to find out what happened here.”

“CN will clean this up, remedy any damage, remediate the location and apply lessons learned as part of our continued efforts to improve safety,” he added.

Minister of Environment and Sustainable Resource Development Diana McQueen also addressed the media Saturday night.

“We are here, first of all, to ensure the incident is contained and to work to make sure the cleanup happens,” she said.

She said provincial officials are monitoring the environmental impacts of the derailment, including air quality and water contamination — both of which had been deemed to be not at risk.

State of emergency declared

Speaking Saturday morning, Parkland County Mayor Rod Shaigec said public safety is his utmost concern.

“Certainly this could have been worse, given the recent incident in Lac-Mégantic — that certainly does illustrate the threats to residents living along rail tracks. So we’re thankful it wasn’t of that magnitude.”

- **Lac-Mégantic disaster oil more dangerous than stated**

However, Shaigec said there was still a concern that another explosion may happen.

While emergency crews remain on the scene, the entire area is under a state of emergency.

The entire community of Gainford — roughly 100 people — has been evacuated, in addition to all residences within about two kilometres of the derailment site.

Evacuees were sent to the Entwistle Community Centre, about 20 kilometres from the derailment.

Suzanne Merrills, the community development coordinator for the county, said everyone has now been lined up with food, accommodations and other necessities, which are being paid for by the county and CN.

“Right now, our priority is to make sure the needs of the residents are met,” said Merrills, who added that many evacuees were able to move in with family or friends.

“It’s a nice, rural small community that really bonds together in times of need and really helps to support each other.”

Greenpeace slams Harper over derailment

While it is still unclear what kind of damage the derailment has caused, a spokesperson for Greenpeace Canada has already slammed Harper’s government, alleging it has put Canadians at risk.

- **CN derailment in Saskatchewan causes grass fire, oil leak**
- **Train derailment near downtown Calgary raises concerns**

“This kind of disaster will become the new normal unless the federal government takes much more effective measures to improve oil transportation safety,” said Mike Hudema, speaking for Greenpeace.

“The truth is that the Harper government has become such a cheerleader for the petroleum industry that it is failing in its duty to protect our communities and the environment.

“This is the third major derailment in Alberta in the last few months. How many more will it take before Ottawa implements transportation safety regulations that were recommended more than a decade ago?”