

Train derailment sends crude oil cars into Kanawha River; explosions erupt

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By **Jeff Jenkins** in **News** | February 16, 2015 at 2:31PM Metro News
Train derailment eyewitness

UPDATE 11 p.m. Monday — CSX announced it was continuing an assessment to determine the number of cars derailed and the oil spilled. It said crews were working to contain oil found in Armstrong Creek that runs parallel to the company's tracks. The company also said fires around some of the wrecked cars would be allowed to burn out.

The company will open a Community Outreach Center Tuesday morning at Glen Farris Inn.

The U.S. Department of Transportation also late Monday night announced Federal Railroad Administration Acting Administrator Sarah Feinberg and the agency's chief safety officer, Robert Lauby, would be traveling to West Virginia to survey the site.

MOUNT CARBON, W.Va. — Multiple tanker rail cars carrying crude oil derailed Monday afternoon in Fayette County, triggering explosions and a 100-yard-high flames as several cars rolled through a residential subdivision and into the Kanawha River. CSX officials say "at least one rail car appears to have ruptured and caught fire."

At least one house was destroyed, but police have found no evidence of fatalities. CSX said one person was treated for potential inhalation (of fumes).

In a statement Monday evening CSX said its teams "are working with first responders to address the fire, to determine how many rail cars derailed and to deploy environmental protective and monitoring measures on land, air and in the nearby Kanawha River.

An undetermined number of cars of the CSX train, believed to be 12-15, jumped the tracks at about 1:20 p.m. Eyewitness Randy Fitzwater of Boomer said he thought a plane had crashed.

"I heard this loud noise. It sounded like a jet airplane flew over my house and then I heard an explosion," Fitzwater told MetroNews. "I looked across the river and I could see this big ball of flame." (Listen to Fitzwater's full interview above.)

Another eyewitness, who declined to give her name, told MetroNews “the flames were going at least 300 feet in the air ... black smoke everywhere.” She reported hearing several explosions “that shook my whole house. I could feel the heat through my door.”

Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin’s office said the tanker cars were carrying highly flammable Bakken crude from North Dakota to Yorktown, Va. Governor’s spokesman Chris Stadleman said it was unclear what caused the derailment or how many cars tumbled into the river.

State Public Safety spokesman Larry Messina said first responders had trouble reaching the scene because of road conditions from the snowstorm and the derailment itself.

Mount Carbon residents in the Adena Village area, which is just a few miles from Montgomery on state Route 61, were being evacuated. Residents across the river in Boomer also were told to leave their homes.

An evacuation shelter was set up at Valley Elementary School in Smithers and at WVU Tech’s gymnasium in Montgomery. CSX said it is working with the Red Cross and other relief organizations to address residents’ needs, taking into account winter storm conditions.

With water intakes at Montgomery and Cedar Grove closed, residents were asked to conserve water.

West Virginia American Water reported the intake for the Montgomery water treatment plant, which draws water from the Kanawha River a few miles downstream from the derailment, was shut down by 2:30 p.m. Spokeswoman Laura Jordan said the Montgomery treatment plant “was shut down before anything could reach the intake.”

CSX said “The train consisted of two locomotives and 109 rail cars and was traveling from North Dakota to Yorktown, Va.” Gov. Tomblin’s office said the train was hauling Bakken crude.

Bakken crude produced in the booming regions of Montana and North Dakota **could be more flammable and more dangerous to ship** by train than crude from other areas, U.S. regulators announced in January. A four-month study by the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration could force more rigid labeling of contents and require petroleum to be shipped in stronger rail cars.