

In Illinois, Flames and Clouds of Smoke Signal Yet Another 'Bomb Train' Disaster

Derailment in Illinois near the Mississippi River affirms predictions that continued addiction to fossil fuels will be accompanied by dangers at every turn

By Jon Queally, staff writer, Common Dreams 3/6/15

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In yet the latest fiery example of a crude-by-rail disaster, a derailment on Thursday of a train carrying crude oil near the Mississippi River in Galena, Illinois (not far from the Iowa border) saw several cars burst into flames as thick black smoke billowed into the air.

Noting that this is third such derailment in the United States in as many weeks, environmental campaigners voiced immediate concern that government have proven immovable when it comes to curbing the dangers posed by the large increase in crude-by-rail traffic in recent years.

"The only thing more mind-boggling than three such accidents in three weeks is the continued lack of action by the Obama administration to protect us from these dangerous oil trains," declared Mollie Matteson, a senior scientist at the Center for Biological Diversity, in a statement on Friday morning. "The government has the authority to take immediate action to address this crisis – which puts homes, waters and wildlife at risk – and yet it has sat back and watched."

She added, "There are simply no excuses left for the Obama administration. The fact that these trains are still moving on the rails is a national travesty. The next explosive wreck — and there will be more, so long as nothing changes — may take lives, burn up a town or level a city business district, and pollute the drinking water of thousands of people. Enough is enough."

According to *Reuters*:

Dark smoke was seen for miles around the crash site, and the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency told local WREX.com that two of the cars were potentially on fire. Images posted online by Dubuque Scanner showed flames several hundred feet high, while aerial footage showed the wreck spread across two sets of track.

The train with 105 loaded cars - 103 of them carrying crude oil - derailed around 1:20 p.m. CST (1920 GMT), according to a BNSF statement. The incident occurred on what appears to be a major rail line alongside the Mississippi River that handles as many as 50 oil-trains a week, one official said.

"The sky is pretty dark down there, the smoke is pretty black," said Kevin Doyle, whose property borders the tracks. "If you're standing on the tracks you can throw a rock in the water."

The *Associated Press* [adds](#):

Firefighters could only access the derailment site by a bike path, said Galena Assistant Fire Chief Bob Conley. They attempted to fight a small fire at the scene but were unable to stop the flames.

Firefighters had to pull back for safety reasons and were allowing the fire to burn itself out, Conley said. In addition to Galena firefighters, emergency and hazardous material responders from Iowa and Wisconsin were at the scene.

Last month, citing internal data by the U.S. Department of Transportation, [the Associated Press revealed predictions by the government agency](#), given current trends, that train derailments such as this will continue to be commonplace in the years ahead, occurring at an average of 10 times a year, costing billions of dollars in damage, and putting a large number of lives at risk..

Following Thursday's disaster, *Mother Jones* was among the many news outlets making [note](#) of the growing and troubling trend of what have euphemistically become known as "bomb trains":

The image of smoldering oil train cars is now a familiar sight: Incidences of exploding oil trains have been [rapidly rising](#) in North America [thanks to the fracking boom](#) in North Dakota's Bakken oil fields (Bakken oil is [potentially](#) more flammable than normal crude) and the [slow transition](#) away from old, unsafe rail cars. Oil-by-rail carloads are [up 4000 percent from 2008](#) in the United States and this is the third derailment in North America in the last three weeks, including [a massive explosion in West Virginia on February 16](#) that injured one person and spilled oil into the nearby Kanawha River. In fact, a Department of Transportation

report [predicted](#) trains carrying crude and ethanol would derail an average of 10 times per year in the next two decades. This is bad news for people who live near railways and the ecosystems in which they reside.

In [an op-ed](#) for *Common Dreams* last month, Jared Margolis, a staff attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity and the author of a [recent report](#) on the crude-by-rail crisis, echoed this point by writing:

The unprecedented increase in U.S. oil train traffic from fewer than 10,000 rail cars per year in 2008 to more than 400,000 in 2014 has spurred virtually no corresponding increase in safety preparedness plans, not only putting towns and cities across America in routine danger, but leaving some of the nation's most imperiled wildlife and natural areas at increased risk from a catastrophic spill.

Even as the overall number of train accidents in the country has declined in recent years, the number of dangerous oil train derailments has increased — in part because the longer, heavier trains, often carrying more than 1 million gallons of oil, are more difficult to control and stop, according to rail safety accounts included in today's report.

In reality, Margolis concluded, there is "no way to safely transport the highly volatile crude from the Bakken oil field in North Dakota or the heavy crudes from the Alberta tar sands. Instead these extreme fossil fuels should be left in the ground for our safety and to avoid the impending climate catastrophe."