

NBC News

Heimdal, North Dakota, Evacuated After Fiery Oil Train Crash

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A tiny North Dakota town was evacuated Wednesday after a train carrying crude oil derailed and several cars burst into flames, local authorities said. It is the latest in a string of explosive oil train derailments that have raised concerns about the large volume of crude moving across America's tracks.

No injuries have been reported from the derailment of a BNSF train near Heimdal, North Dakota. The town, which in 2010 had a population of 27, has been evacuated, as have farms near the crash site.

"I was in the house at 7:15 a.m. when we thought we heard thunder," witness Jennifer Willis told NBC News.

She went out to the scene, about an eighth of a mile away, and found the area covered in black smoke.

"It was kinda awesome. It's kinda scary to hear it. It was like fireworks going off. You could hear little explosions going off. I sat there for 15 minutes and you could hear it going off," she said.

Fire crews from three nearby towns were called in, and BNSF said it was aware of the incident and cooperating with first responders.

The train had 107 cars loaded with crude oil and two buffer cars loaded with sand, officials said. Six derailed, and the others were pulled away from the scene to a safe distance.

The National Transportation Safety Board was sending a five-person team to the site, and the Federal Railroad Administration dispatched 10 investigators.

"Today's incident is yet another reminder of why we issued a significant, comprehensive rule aimed at improving the safe transport of high hazard flammable liquids," the FRA said in a statement. "The FRA will continue to look at all options available to us to improve safety and mitigate risks."

Last week, federal regulators passed new safety rules governing crude by rail, which has become a booming business thanks to the growth in U.S. oil production. Nearly 450,000 tankers of crude moved through North America last year, up from just 9,500 in 2009.

Kristen Boyles, an attorney for the group Earthjustice, said the rules are too weak and will take too long to take effect.

"We need to get these exploding death trains off the tracks now," Boyles said.

The Heimdal accident comes nearly two years after a tragic oil derailment killed 47 people and destroyed the center of a small Quebec town.

"There are trains pretty much all day going through," Willis said of Heimdal. "A lot of them carry grain and, of course, oil."

Jennifer Willis lives a half mile from the derailment site and witnessed the flames. The Wells County Sheriff's office told local news that BNSF has confirmed a train went off the tracks near Heimdal, ND.