

Oil in North Dakota Derailment Was Treated to Cut Volatility

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By MATTHEW BROWN and BLAKE NICHOLSON Associated Press



CORRECTS NAME OF SOURCE TO CURT BENSON INSTEAD OF CURT BEMSON - This photo provided by Curt Benson shows smoke and fire coming from an oil train that derailed, Wednesday, May 6, 2015, in Heimdal, N.D. Officials say 10 tanker cars on the BNSF caught... [The Associated Press](#)

AP

A shipment of oil involved in an explosive train derailment in **North Dakota** had been treated to reduce its volatility — a move that state officials suggested could have reduced the severity of the accident but won't prevent others from occurring. Hess Corporation spokesman John Roper said the oil complied with a state order requiring propane, butane and other volatile gases to be stripped out of crude before it's transported. That conditioning process lowers the vapor pressure of the oil, reducing the chances of an explosive ignition during a crash.

Despite the treatment of the crude in Wednesday's accident, six cars carrying a combined 180,000 gallons of oil caught fire in the derailment 2 miles from the town of small Heimdal in central North Dakota. The town was evacuated but no one was hurt.

Investigators on Thursday recovered wheel fragments from the scene. Those will be sent to a government laboratory for analysis, said **National Transportation Safety**

Board spokesman Keith Holloway. A defective tank car wheel is suspected to have played a role in another oil train accident, in Galena, Illinois, on March 10. The North Dakota train was traveling 24 miles an hour, Holloway said, much slower than the 50 mph limit imposed by federal regulators.

The state volatility standard went into effect last month. It came in response to a string of fiery oil train accidents, including a 2013 derailment in Lac-Megantic, Quebec that killed 47 people and a derailment and fire near Casselton, North Dakota last year.

Members of Congress have called for a stricter, national volatility standard for crude moved by rail.

Roper said the Hess shipment was "fully in compliant with North Dakota's crude conditioning order." It was tested immediately prior to loading onto a BNSF Railway train in Tioga and had a vapor pressure of 10.8 pounds per square inch — compared to the 13.7 pounds per square inch maximum under the state standard.

Reducing the explosiveness of crude moved by rail was not supposed to be a cure-all. Federal regulators last week announced a new rule that calls for stronger tank cars better able to withstand a derailment and more advanced braking systems to help keep fuel-carrying cars on the tracks.

"Our oil conditioning order in no way will prevent an accident," said Alison Ritter with the North Dakota Industrial Commission, which set the vapor pressure standard. "Oil is still going to burn. That's why the oil was produced. But it's not as explosive."

The first witness on the scene Wednesday, 68-year-old Heimdal resident Curt Benson, said he heard and felt an explosion in his house and then witnessed three or four more explosions when he got to the scene. He said it was nowhere near the magnitude of the Casselton explosions, which he saw on television footage.

"I would say that ours was somewhat minor compared to theirs," Benson said.

Casselton Fire Chief Tim McLean said the disaster outside of that city appeared much worse than the Heimdal incident, but there were other factors to consider than just the volatility of the oil. The Casselton derailment involved more than twice the amount of crude and different kinds of tanker cars, he said. Another freight train, carrying soybeans, also was involved in Casselton and provided more fuel for the fire.

Democrats in Congress contend more needs to be done to reduce the danger of oil shipments by rail that pass through more than 400 counties including major metropolitan areas such as Seattle, Chicago and Philadelphia. Most of that oil comes from the Bakken region of North Dakota, Montana and Canada.

"Why do we let trains with this volatility pass through every day? Why are we letting these guys get away with that?" U.S. Sen. **Maria Cantwell**, a Washington state Democrat, said in an interview last week after federal regulators unveiled the braking and tank car rule. BNSF vice president Mike Trevino did not immediately know how much of the oil in Heimdal burned, how much spilled and how much was left in the cars after the fire was extinguished.

The railway was working to remove the derailed cars and repair the track Thursday. It planned to re-open the line Friday afternoon, Trevino said.

The line runs next to an intermittent waterway known as the Big Slough, which drains into the James River about 15 miles downstream. Oil got into the slough, but it was contained and was being recovered, state Emergency Services spokeswoman Cecily Fong said early Thursday.

The tank cars that burst into flames were a model slated to be phased out or retrofitted by 2020 under a federal rule announced last week. It's the fifth fiery accident since February involving that type of tank car, and industry critics called for them to be taken off the tracks immediately to prevent further fires.

For residents of Heimdal and surrounding Wells County, which oil trains cross daily, the disaster was the realization of something they always feared might happen, County Commission Chairman Mark Schmitz said.

"It's definitely been in the back of everybody's minds," he said.

Brown reported from Billings, Montana.

Train Hauling Crude From ND Oil Patch Derails, Catches Fire

BISMARCK, N.D. — May 6, 2015, 8:18 PM ET

By BLAKE NICHOLSON and MATTHEW BROWN Associated Press



This photo provided by Curt Bemson shows smoke and fire coming from an oil train that derailed Wednesday, May 6, 2015 in Heimdal, North Dakota. Officials say ten tanker cars on the BNSF caught fire prompting the evacuation of Heimdal where about three dozen people live. No injuries were reported. (Curt Bemson via AP) The Associated Press

AP

A train that derailed and caught fire early Wednesday in rural **North Dakota** was hauling crude from the state's oil patch, raising questions about whether new state standards intended to reduce the volatility of such shipments are sufficient.

The six tank cars that exploded into flames were a model slated to be phased out or retrofitted by 2020 under a federal rule announced last week.

It's the fifth fiery accident since February involving that type of tank car, and industry critics responded to the latest with calls for them to be taken off the tracks immediately to prevent further fires.

No injuries were reported in the derailment of the 109-car BNSF railway train at around 7:30 a.m. That prompted the evacuation of the 20-resident town of Heimdal, about 115 miles northeast of Bismarck.

The **Health Department** was monitoring air quality and advising people not to breathe in the smoke. The danger from the smoke was mainly the particles it contains such as ash, not toxic chemicals, State Environmental Health Chief Dave Glatt said. Rain might have helped wash some of the particles out of the smoke, though it might also keep the plume closer to the ground and more likely to be encountered by people, he said.

In the immediate aftermath of the accident, BNSF vice president Mike Trevino said, the intensity of the blaze prevented firefighters from directly attacking the flames. As of Wednesday evening, two cars out of six continued to burn, he said.

State officials initially reported 10 cars on fire but later revised that to six. They were hauling Bakken oil loaded in the Tioga area, said Jeff Zent, spokesman for Gov. Jack Dalrymple.

The six cars that caught fire were carrying approximately 180,000 gallons of oil, Trevino said. Investigators haven't been able to get close enough to the spill to determine how much of the oil burned off, spilled or remained in the cars, authorities said.

Curt Benson, a 68-year-old retired sheriff who alerted authorities, said he was getting ready for the day when the explosion outside town rattled his house. With the large number of oil trains that come through the community each day, he figured that was the cause.

"I got in my car, still in my underwear, had shaving cream on my face, and drove down there," he said.

There was no immediate word on the cause.

Industry representatives and state officials said oil companies have been complying with a standard that went into effect April 1 requiring them to remove propane, butane and other gases that occur in North Dakota crude to reduce the chance of tank cars catching fire. There was nothing to immediately indicate a violation of that rule with the train involved in Wednesday's accident.

The crude in the tank cars was being shipped by the Hess Corporation, and regulators were seeking details on tests of the crude done by the Texas-based company prior to the accident, said Federal Railroad Administrator Sarah Feinberg.

Hess representatives did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

North Dakota officials said the new standard makes the volatility of treated oil comparable to unleaded gasoline.

Members of Congress, who have called for a stricter standard to be imposed at the federal level, said Wednesday's accident underscored that more needs to be done to prevent oil train fires that could cause a major disaster in an urban area. In 2013, a train loaded with crude from the Bakken region derailed and exploded in the small town of Lac-Mégantic, Quebec, killing 47 people.

"With trains carrying this highly-explosive material by homes, schools and businesses each day, we need a strong national volatility standard as opposed to a patchwork of state laws," said U.S. Rep. Nita Lowey of New York, the ranking Democrat on the House Appropriations Committee.

Tessa Sandstrom with the North Dakota Petroleum Council said safety efforts should instead focus on preventing accidents through enhanced inspections of tracks and railroad equipment.

The rail line through Heimdal runs next to an intermittent waterway known as the Big Slough, which drains into the James River about 15 miles downstream near Bremen, North Dakota.

There were preliminary indications that some oil from the derailed cars got into Big Slough, but it will be difficult to verify until the fire dies down, Glatt said. In a similar incident outside Casselton, North Dakota, in December 2013, almost all of the spilled oil was consumed in the fire, he said.

The Federal Railroad Administration, the National Transportation Safety Board and the **Environmental Protection Agency** all sent investigators. The EPA planned to gauge any contamination to waterways in the vicinity, spokesman Rich Mylott said.

Since 2006, the U.S. and Canada have seen at least 24 oil train accidents involving a fire, derailment or significant amount of fuel spilled. Wednesday's derailment comes after the Department of Transportation announced a rule Friday to toughen construction standards for tens of thousands of tank cars that haul oil and other flammable liquids.

Feinberg said the Heimdal accident was "yet another reminder" of the need for changes that have been resisted by the oil industry, which has said it could take more than a decade to get unsafe tank cars replaced or off the tracks. She said federal officials planned additional steps to improve oil train safety but offered no specifics.

The cars that derailed were constructed under a 2011 voluntary rail industry standard intended to make them tougher than older cars that were long known to pose a safety risk. But the new cars, each carrying 30,000 gallons of fuel, have proved equally dangerous.

Roughly 22,000 of the new cars that are used to haul crude oil lack an extra layer of protection to shield them against fires.

Brown reported from Billings, Montana.