

Protecting Your Community From Crude Oil "Bomb Trains"

- [Español](#)

Are you one of the 25 million Americans who live along a crude-by-rail route? Here's how to find out and what you can do about it.

July 06, 2016 [Amanda MacMillan](#)



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Good schools, crime stats, walkability, even pollution levels—these are just a few of the variables you typically take into account when considering a move to a new community. What may not come to mind, however, is whether millions of gallons of highly volatile crude oil are currently—or may someday soon be—barreling through town on a regular basis.

That's a very real issue for the 25 million Americans who live within a mile of a crude-oil-by-rail route, according to nonprofit environmental group Stand (formerly Forest Ethics). With the boom in fracking and resulting expansion of oil refining in the United States, tanker trains carrying flammable and explosive cargo are increasingly crisscrossing the country: Before the recent slump in gas prices put the brakes on the trend, oil-by-rail transport had increased from 9,500 carloads of crude in 2008 to more than 400,000 carloads in 2014, according to the [Association of American Railroads](#)—a 42-fold increase.

Accidents are on the rise, too. A 2016 investigation by *Chicago* magazine uncovered 17 derailments of North American crude oil trains significant enough to have generated news coverage in the previous three years. (Many other, minor accidents go unreported by the media.) The residents of Mosier, Oregon, were among the latest communities to learn about the consequences of such an accident in June 2016, when a 96-car train carrying North Dakota crude derailed, catching fire and spilling hundreds of thousands of gallons of oil into the town's sewer system and into the environmentally sensitive Columbia River Gorge.



Crude oil train derailment in Mosier, Oregon, June 3, 2016 Petty Officer 1st Class Levi Read/
U.S. Coast Guard

Believe it or not, things could have been a lot worse. The most serious rail disaster in recent history occurred in July 2013, when an unattended oil train rolled down a hill and exploded in Lac-Mégantic, Quebec, killing 47 people and destroying most of the downtown area. At least eight other recent derailments have also resulted in explosions—including the massive fireball unleashed when tankers from a 109-car crude train jumped the rails in Mount Carbon, West Virginia, in 2015—enough to earn this mode of transport its scary nickname: [bomb train](#).

Significant changes in the way oil is now shipped have contributed to this grim toll. Crude oil used to be carried on the rails “by manifest”—that is, on trains with a variety of other cargoes. But today’s “unit trains” carry just one cargo—often highly volatile crude from North Dakota’s

Bakken shale formation—and these trains may have 80 cars or more. While the volume of methods have changed, oversight and regulation of hazardous cargoes on railroads have fallen dangerously behind. NRDC is one of many advocacy groups that oppose the shipment of crude oil on unit trains, at least until more stringent regulations are put in place to make it safe. “We need to ensure that transporting oil by rail doesn’t put communities at risk,” says [Anthony Swift](#), director of NRDC’s International program, who studies oil production and delivery in the United States and Canada.

Unfortunately, under existing federal regulation of the railroads, moving crude oil on mile-long unit trains—with an increased risk of the chain reactions that can cause derailments, and toxic emissions leaking from the thousands of tanker cars in use at any time—is perfectly legal. The U.S. Department of Transportation is currently updating its guidelines for crude-by-rail transport, but judging from preliminary drafts, advocates don’t expect significant changes. Many people who live near rail corridors are not even aware of the potential danger, and few communities have the equipment and training to deal with a derailment involving volatile materials. But that doesn’t mean concerned citizens should feel helpless. First, find out if your town is in the path of potential danger. Then fight to protect it.

Find out if you’re at risk

If you live near train tracks, there’s a chance your home, school, or place of work could lie within the impact zone of a train route that carries crude oil. Stand, the environmental advocacy group, maintains a searchable map online that shows all known oil-by-rail routes, along with the government’s mandated half-mile evacuation radius for oil train derailments and one-mile potential impact zone in case of fire (at [Blast-Zone.org](#)). But keep in mind that even outside the blast zone, you’re not necessarily safe from a train disaster. “A derailment and explosion of multiple cars carrying Bakken crude has the potential for a much wider area of damage than shown on this map,” the website states.

Educate your local and state officials

If oil trains do run through your city or town, there may not be an easy way to stop them—at least not right now. What you *can* do is make your local and state officials, along with your fire department and emergency responders, aware of the risks your community faces. To be clear, there’s not much they can do to prepare for a worst-case situation, says Stand’s director of communications, Eddie Scher. “The best municipal fire departments in America are equipped to fight fire from a single roadway tanker truck. That’s about 10,000 gallons, or only one-third, of a tanker train car, and these trains can have 100 cars,” he says.

But fire departments that are aware of these risks can at least make smarter calls about how to proceed in the event of an emergency. In recent years, cities such as La Crosse, Wisconsin, and Orangeburg, New York, have staged mock derailments, funded in part by the federal government, to practice responses like road closures and transporting injured bystanders to hospitals. Local and state governments can also push for safer conditions, with regular inspections and upkeep of tracks and (often old and crumbling) rail bridges. [Some states](#) have

also begun requiring rail companies that transport crude oil through their cities to provide emergency response plans and the funds necessary to carry them out.

Your state can also play an important role in getting the federal government to act. Citing safety concerns after the June 2016 Mosier derailment, Oregon's Department of Transportation asked the Federal Railroad Administration for a ban on oil trains statewide. Urge your state officials to follow suit.

Make your own preparations

People who live in the path of a crude-oil-by-rail route should know about the potential for disaster, just as anyone who lives near an earthquake fault or in a flood zone does. This may not change your decision to make that place your home, but it should get you thinking about how you'd respond in the case of a sudden evacuation. Make a plan with your family about where to go in such an event and how to reach each other during an emergency, and keep disaster supply kits packed and at the ready.

"The emergency response officials who really understand this danger know there's not much else you can do to prepare," says Scher. "We've worked with one fire chief in Minnesota who tells people, 'Keep your sneakers close to your bed—that's all you can really do.'"

Fight future expansion

Since domestic oil production began rising sharply in 2008, petroleum companies have been sprinting to find new ways to get their product from the source—in Canada, North Dakota, and Montana—to refineries across the country. Usually that means building new rail terminals or requesting new permits to transport hazardous materials on existing tracks.

And that's where individuals and municipalities can make a big difference. While only the federal government can regulate train routes, city and state governments *can* control what new infrastructure gets approved within their borders. Many proposed rail projects must undergo state-level environmental reviews and public comment periods, Swift says. "If cities are along those proposed corridors, they can engage in the review and decision-making process. Drafting a letter simply stating some of the impacts that more crude-by-rail traffic would have is a good place to start."

Several communities have already successfully blocked expansion of oil industry infrastructure: Maryland state officials [denied an application](#) for a new crude-oil-by-rail terminal in Baltimore in 2015, the same year that the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, responding to strong community opposition, [withdrew approval](#) of a plan to transfer oil from trains to barges on the Hudson River. So far in 2016, proposed terminals in [Washington State](#) and [California](#) have also been hotly contested.

The environmental law organization Earthjustice keeps a [running list \(and clickable map\)](#) of communities fighting for protections against bomb trains. For now, Swift says, opposing the expansion of bomb trains is the best way to send a message to the federal government that the

risks they pose are unacceptable. “To make the situation better, you have to first stop making it worse.”

To raise awareness in your town, consider hosting an event during the week of July 6, the Stop Oil Trains Week of Action, which marks the anniversary of the deadly 2013 oil train derailment in Lac-Mégantic. “We’re involved with more than 100 local events around the country, everything from [protests on the train tracks](#) to rallies to candlelight vigils,” Scher says. “It’s a great opportunity to organize and start a conversation.”