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EDITOR'S PICK

Guest column: Train explosions: A threat to Bend?

BY DIANE HODIAK

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Hodiak

Submitted photo

Editor's Note

Do you have a point you'd like to make or an issue you feel strongly about? Submit a letter to the editor or a guest column.

Sixteen train cars carrying flammable, Bakken crude oil derail near a small town. Four cars start leaking oil and three catch fire. Gridlocked traffic slows emergency responders while local firefighters fight hard to stop the fire while rescuing the injured.

The plume of smoke is enormous. Families are separated. Oil contaminates the nearby waterways and habitat.

This was the scene in Mosier in 2016 when a Union Pacific train hauling 96 tanks of crude oil derailed, spilling 42,000 gallons and sparking a large fire. Fortunately, no one died but 147 residents had to be evacuated, and the cleanup was a massive effort.

How did Union Pacific help Mosier overcome this disaster? Hardly. This irresponsible company just continued to run its trains after a hasty rebuild. Trains resumed while oil continued to leak out of the derailed cars while creating havoc in the community.

The city of Bend is on a principal route for these deadly fuels. Even worse, the number of “bomb trains” will increase, as the Trump administration signed an executive order in April 2019 to allow the rail companies to transport liquefied natural gas . A risky mistake, as experts question whether trains hauling the more explosive LNG can even be made safe. To approach safety, they would need to be transported in refrigerated cars, which is unlikely to happen soon. The oil industry lacks motivation to respond. They still haven’t completed the upgrades to oil tank cars that were requested by the National Transportation Safety Board.

Experts familiar with fuel transport say that the safety evacuation zone, a blast zone, for an oil train derailment or blast is half a mile from the tracks, stretching to a mile in case of fire. In Bend’s case, this blast zone includes downtown, its businesses, schools, churches, U.S. Highways 97 and 20, Pioneer and Pacific Parks, portions of the Deschutes River. For a train carrying LNG, the blast zone is even larger. Some anticipate it could be as wide as 5 miles. A derailment or explosion would doubtless cause millions in damages and lost lives.

A catastrophe involving oil trains is more than a remote possibility. We know it could happen because it HAS, multiple times. The most notorious was a deadly accident in 2013 when a runaway train derailed, spilling oil and catching fire inside the town of Lac-Mégantic in Quebec, Canada. Forty-seven people died and 30 buildings burned in the town’s center. About 1.6 million gallons of oil spilled. The town was decimated, and still hasn’t fully recovered. Damages were significantly beyond what insurers would pay.

Pictures show a large, unsightly gravel area where buildings once stood. To avoid this, Bend should prepare in the same manner that we prepare for other disasters, such as wildfire, earthquake or flooding.

Since 2013, there have been at least 16 oil train derailments and explosions recorded in the U.S. and Canada, including one potentially deadly derailment in New York in May.

The communities that are in the path of this dangerous cargo gain no benefit from this significant risk to health, safety and the potential costly damages, which could run into millions or billions. History has shown that we can't count on oil and gas companies. They have a poor record of addressing these risks and correcting inadequacies. Its time to ask our government officials do more to protect our health and safety and hold these corporations accountable.

So what can residents of Bend do about these potential disasters? This will be the topic of a presentation and discussion at a free webinar about oil trains on Tuesday, Oct. 13 at 6 p.m. Register at bit.ly/3lFPeOt

Diane Hodiak is executive director of 350Deschutes.