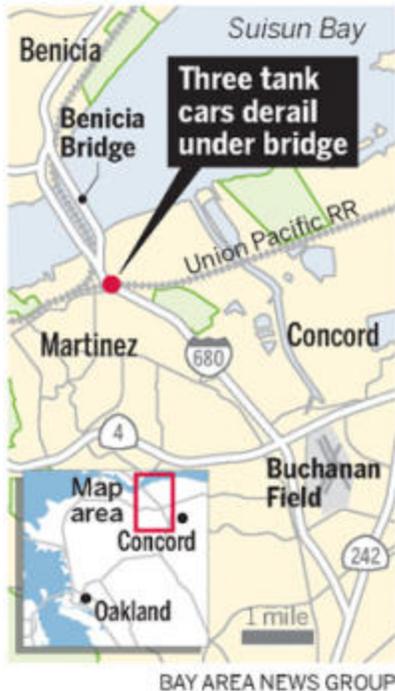


Train derailment rekindles safety fears along East Bay's refinery belt

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MARTINEZ -- Three tank cars carrying a hazardous liquid derailed Wednesday morning on train tracks under the Benicia Bridge, and although there were no reports of leaks, the incident rekindled fears about the potential dangers of derailments along the East Bay's industrial and refinery belt.

"Thank God there were no leaks. We may have dodged a bullet here, but it does bring up that discussion again about hazardous materials," Martinez Mayor Rob Schroder said. Cities throughout the Bay Area have expressed concern over the past year about the possibility of derailments and explosions in their communities, particularly in light of growing shipments of crude by rail nationally and several high-profile derailments in North America. The East Bay is laced by five oil refineries, all located near dense population centers.

Wednesday's derailment involving rail cars carrying sulfuric acid happened at about 8 a.m. along Mococo Road, across the tracks from Marina Vista Avenue, as the train was headed to Eco Services in Martinez, said Matt Kaufmann, assistant director of hazardous materials for Contra Costa County.

The sulfuric acid contained contaminated hydrocarbon, but none of the materials spilled, Kaufmann said.

Union Pacific Railroad also took air samples and found no vapors were released from the trains, according to Francisco Castillo, the railroad's director of public affairs.

"Sulfuric acid is highly dangerous and toxic," said Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia, of Richmond, who also sits on the Bay Area Air Quality Management District board. "Had there been a leak, it would have been worse. That's why I call it a near miss."

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Union Pacific workers delivered the shipment of 20 rail cars on Monday evening from its tracks to an industry line used by Eco Services, officials said.

It is unclear what caused the derailment and where the train began its journey to Eco Services, which frequently receives similar shipments from nearby refineries.

The company removes hydrocarbon from sulfuric acid that occurs during the refining process, Kaufman said. Shell Oil and Tesoro each have refineries within a mile of the company.

By 9:30 a.m., Contra Costa County Hazardous Materials crews were on scene, along with scores of Union Pacific employees, but the cars remained derailed, including one that was tilted all the way on its side. Officials were waiting for a crane to arrive to move the tank cars back onto the tracks.

Between January 2012 and October 2015, 4,321 train derailments -- more than three per day on average -- were reported in the United States, according to Federal Railroad Administration data.

This incident also raises the issue of local control over railroad activities; cities such as Martinez "have absolutely no control over the rail lines or what is shipped through our communities," Schroder said. In the East Bay's case, Schroder said, U.S. Representatives Mike Thompson, D-Napa, and Mark DeSaulnier, D-Concord, have been "very proactive" in dealing with railroad safety issues.

Although the tankers weren't carrying crude oil, anti-crude-by-rail activists around the Bay Area say this incident is a reminder of the potential dangers in transporting explosive materials by train.

"These kind of derailments are an example that our community and all the up-rail communities would be in grave danger if crude-by-rail projects are approved," said Andres Soto of the environmental group Benicians for a Safe and Healthy Community. "We're so

glad that (the WesPac oil terminal project) was taken off the table in Pittsburg recently. ... These trains go under bridges, and if there was an explosion, the volatility involved could destroy those bridges. It's a regional issue."

In recent years, several proposed crude-by-rail projects have sparked contentious debates around the Bay Area and nationally. Some of these concerns started after a July 2013 disaster in Canada, when a train carrying more than 70 crude oil cars derailed, causing a massive explosion in a Quebec town that killed 47 people and ultimately cost the Canadian Pacific railroad company nearly \$450 million in a legal settlement with the victims' families.

Last year, anti-crude-by-rail activists in Pittsburg celebrated when the WesPac oil terminal project, which originally envisioned unloading as many as five 104-car oil trainloads a week, was taken off the table. In Benicia, a similar controversy surrounds a Valero proposal to deliver crude by rail to its refinery there. Residents opposed to the project are planning to voice their opposition at a Feb. 8 Benicia Planning Commission meeting, Soto said.

Currently, tank cars used to transport crude oil can puncture from impacts of less than 10 miles per hour, although the U.S. Department of Transportation is in the process of adopting more stringent standards for such cars, according to Jackie Prange, a staff attorney for the Natural Resources Defense Council.

"The concern is that had this been a crude oil train, it's much more likely that the tank cars would have punctured," Prange said.

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