News
EarthBeat
Drone footage taken Feb. 6, 2023, shows a freight train derailment in East Palestine, Ohio. (O

Drone footage taken Feb. 6, 2023, shows a freight train derailment in East Palestine, Ohio. Some 50 cars from the train derailed the evening of Feb. 3 near the Pennsylvania border. No injuries were reported following the crash, which sparked a massive fire that continued to burn Feb. 4. (OSV News photo/Reuters/NTSBGov handout)

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An Ohio Catholic priest told OSV News "it will be a long time" before he and his parishioners feel secure in their surroundings, following a train derailment that dumped toxic chemicals into the environment.

"I'm just hoping this is not going to be another Love Canal," said Fr. David Misbrener, pastor of the Our Lady of Lourdes and St. Jude Parish Communities, located respectively in East Palestine and Columbiana, Ohio.

Love Canal is the New York state neighborhood that became the site of the U.S.'s worst chemical waste disaster after decades of stored toxins leached into the area's

soil and water.

On Feb. 3, a Norfolk Southern freight train's 38 cars derailed in East Palestine, sparking a massive fire that damaged an additional 12 cars. Of the 20 cars carrying hazardous materials, 11 derailed, according to the National Transportation Safety Board. The NTSB said it is investigating an apparently overheated wheel bearing as a possible cause of the derailment.

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The wreck sparked a massive fire, which was followed by a Feb. 6 controlled burn undertaken by authorities to eliminate some of the chemicals. The flames continued until Feb. 8, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Misbrener said he and his parishioners, many of whom are senior citizens, are now deeply concerned about the long-term environmental impact of the derailment — prompting him to reference Love Canal.

Residents packed a Feb. 15 town hall meeting on the derailment's environmental aftermath, demanding clarification about air, water and soil hazards from East Palestine Mayor Trent Conaway and Congressman Bill Johnson. Representatives from Norfolk Southern declined to attend, citing security concerns — a move that left many on hand angry.

Numerous local, state and federal agencies have been working to address the wreck, but "despite all of the cleanup … we're learning now how dangerous those chemicals were," Misbrener told OSV News Feb. 14, adding he thought the consequences of the derailment "could be much worse" than so far anticipated.

Residents of East Palestine, Ohio, and the surrounding community gather at a town hall meet

Residents of East Palestine, Ohio, and the surrounding community gather at a town hall meeting Feb. 15, 2023, to discuss safety and other environmental concerns they have following a train derailment that spilled toxic chemicals Feb. 3. (OSV News/Reuters/Alan Freed)

Amid ongoing concerns about the derailment's fallout, Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine called a Feb. 14 news conference featuring representatives from several state agencies. He

said it was "absurd" the train had not been deemed a "high hazardous material train" by the state's public utilities commission, and called on Congress to "take a look at how these things are handled."

Mary Mertz, director of the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, said "about 3,500 dead fish" from 12 different species have been counted across a 7.5-mile area spanning four different waterways — one of which leads into the Ohio River. There was "no evidence of non-aquatic species suffering from the derailment," she said.

Tiffani Kavalec, chief of the surface water division for the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency, said Sulphur Run — the waterway closest to the derailment — "remains contaminated but we're confident it is contained."

Authorities continue to monitor the air and soil, but residents remain uneasy, said Misbrener.

An air monitoring device is fixed to a pole in East Palestine, Ohio, Feb. 15, 2023, in the afterm

An air monitoring device is fixed to a pole in East Palestine, Ohio, Feb. 15, 2023, in the aftermath of a Feb. 3 train derailment that dumped toxic chemicals into the environment. (OSV News photo/Reuters/Alan Freed)

"We had the air and the water tested, but I still won't drink the water. I never did down there, anyway; that's just how I feel," said Misbrener, who resides at St. Jude Parish, some 11 miles from Our Lady of Lourdes and the crash site.

Misbrener said he is looking to stock his sacristies with bottled water for use at liturgies and sacramental celebrations.

The parish hall at Our Lady of Lourdes has become a temporary distribution center for donations of "bottled water, food, clothing, diapers and all the things you need in an emergency," he said.

Located just under a mile and a half from the derailment site, the parish church was initially closed as part of an emergency evacuation order, with the Feb. 5 Sunday Mass canceled.

The church was able to reopen in time for its feast day liturgy Feb. 10, during which Misbrener — in keeping with tradition — administered the anointing of the sick, a

gesture that took on new significance as it "kind of calmed people's nerves," he said.

As they try to "recover and return to normal," parishioners have been "checking in on each other" through "phone call chains," said Misbrener. "We really have an outreach to one another."