

Lancaster first responders applaud rule change about information sharing for hazardous materials on trains

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Local emergency responders are applauding a new federal rule that requires train companies to give them immediate access to information about hazardous materials transported by rail after a train accident.

“It’s something that’s been long overdue, and it’s something that will help first responders have an idea of what they’re getting themselves into,” said Jay Barninger, emergency management coordinator for Columbia Borough.

The U.S. Department of Transportation’s Pipelines and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration announced the new rule Monday. It requires railroads, after an accident, to immediately provide local responders with information about hazardous materials on the affected trains, including the quantity and location of the hazardous materials. Companies are also required to provide a train’s origin and destination, emergency response information, and a designated emergency contact at the railroad.

As soon as a train company becomes aware of an accident, it must send the information to a “public safety answering point,” such as a local 911 call center, that can share the information with local first responders.

An LNP | LancasterOnline investigation published in July 2023 showed first responders in Lancaster County rarely, if ever, receive advance notice of trains carrying hazardous materials and that the

lack of information could potentially put emergency personnel at risk.

“That would be excellent information to have quickly in the aftermath of a train accident,” said Randall Gockley, president of the Lancaster County Firemen’s Association. The association represents more than 80 organizations with more than 750 members in the county. “It would help the information flow for the incident commanders to make quick decisions and more accurate decisions knowing what the materials are in the situation.”

The U.S. Department of Transportation’s Pipelines and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration proposed the rule in June 2023 and took public comment on the proposal through October. Attorneys general from Pennsylvania and 12 other states signed a letter supporting it.

Gockley and Barninger said they were happy to hear about the change.

“It gives us a lot of the tools that we need in our toolbox in order to know how to safely and quickly handle the incidents,” Barninger said.

For local first responders, the next step is seeing how the rule actually comes to fruition, Barninger said, but he is excited for the change.