

# [Pa. Attorney General signs letter urging feds to require railroads to release more information about toxic freight in emergency situations](#)

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Attorneys General from Pennsylvania and 12 other states signed a letter last month to the U.S. Department of Transportation supporting a proposed federal rule to require railroads to make information about hazardous materials being hauled on their trains available electronically to emergency responders.

The October 27 letter expressed support for a Pipelines and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration rule introduced June 21 to require railroads, in the event of an accident such as a derailment, to send the details about freight to every emergency responder within 10 miles.

“It (the rule) should be fully supported because it is to the benefit of the safety of the communities, as well as to first responders,” said Randall Gockley, president of the Lancaster County Firemen’s Association. The association represents more than 80 organizations and more than 750 members in the county.

Gockley said first responders can’t easily deal with a freight train derailment or other accident if they don’t have a cargo manifest listing any potentially hazardous materials being hauled.

An LNP | LancasterOnline investigation published in July showed that 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 first responders in danger.

The letter signed by Pennsylvania Attorney General Michelle Henry and others also urges that the proposed rule be expanded to require railroads to periodically test their electronic communication tools and to develop contingency plans for providing freight information when other means are unavailable.

“This will not guarantee these derailments will not occur — however, we need a structure in place to enable our brave first responders to quickly and efficiently do their jobs to minimize impact,” Attorney General Henry said in a press release.

Freight trains currently carry a manifest, or train inventory, that can be shared by the engineer during an accident. If the engineer is injured or incapable of giving the information to emergency crews, then first responders must get the information directly from the train’s operator.

“I would hope there would be bipartisan support for this type of action and that it could move through quickly,” Gockley said.

Norfolk Southern did not respond to requests for comment. The company owns the train that derailed on Feb. 3 in East Palestine, Ohio, near the Pennsylvania border. The incident resulted in the intentional release and burning of toxic vinyl chloride and the evacuation of more than a thousand residents and drew scrutiny of Norfolk Southern’s operations from federal and state lawmakers.

In some cases, emergency responders can access hazardous material manifests through the AskRail app, which was developed in 2014 by Class 1 railroads like Norfolk Southern and Amtrak to provide real-time data. It is available only to verified emergency responders and there is no requirement that railroads use it.