

# Hazardous material on Lancaster County trains: How we got the information

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The train that ran through Columbia on a Wednesday afternoon in May had cars with a red, diamond-shaped placard with 1075 in the center.

That indicated LP Gas, liquefied propane gas, which is highly flammable and explosive and commonly used in cooking and heating.

These placards and unique four-digit numbers are on all train cars with potentially hazardous materials and are searchable on Google.

But when railroads and government officials were asked for records of what hazardous materials move through Lancaster County, private companies were unresponsive, and county officials said the information was on a “need-to-know” basis.

## **Norfolk Southern’s response**

Norfolk Southern, whose response to the East Palestine, Ohio, derailment has been criticized in Congressional testimony, has rail lines in 25 Lancaster County municipalities.

Phone requests for comment from Norfolk Southern spokespeople went to voicemail in spring and were not returned.

A Norfolk Southern representative replied to an email inquiry with information regarding safety statistics on railroads in general and

directed questions to the Association of American Railroads for more information regarding the industry.

“I don’t have that kind of visibility,” Jessica Kahanek, senior director of media relations with the Association of American Railroads, said in an email response when asked what hazardous material moves through Lancaster County. She then referred to recent safety numbers on railroads.

Justin Shuey, deputy executive director of the Keystone State Railroad Association, directed a request for information on hazardous materials on rail in Lancaster County to Adrian Arnakis, the Association for American Railroads’ senior vice president of government affairs.

Asked for comment, Arnakis directed questions back to Kahanek, who re-sent her original email.

Connor Spielmaker, senior communications manager for Norfolk Southern, in an email response to a request for a phone interview on hazardous materials, said that information is given to first responders to create response plans, upon request by those authorized to receive the information.

He did not provide a timeline for completion of those requests. Efforts for a phone interview were unsuccessful.

Any local government official can annually request from railroads a list of hazardous materials transported through their communities, said Cory Gattie, a public affairs specialist with the Federal Railroad Administration.

Information is for assisting emergency responders in preparedness, Gattie said. It is considered “need-to-know” in accordance with Department of Homeland Security guidance and industry standards on hazmat transport.

The local government can be municipal and/or county-level officials, Warren Flatau, Federal Railroad Administration deputy

director of public affairs, said. However, there is no law requiring railroads to provide the list annually, and it's done voluntarily, Flatau said.

## **Lancaster County response**

Lancaster County has information from a commodity study completed in 2021 that details some hazardous materials, said Michael Fitzpatrick, Lancaster County commissioners' communications director.

A commodity study details information about the type, quantity, volume and distribution of hazardous materials in the county. It can include rail and highway transportation, as well as facilities that store hazardous materials.

The information is not shared publicly, Fitzpatrick said when asked for the report.

"Post 9/11, plan writers and administrators tend to safeguard this material," Fitzpatrick said.

Through a Right-to-Know request, the county provided redacted "2021 Hazmat Shipment List / Most Common Commodities List," along with the commodity report.

After an appeal for more information, the county provided its Hazardous Rail Transit Plan, which was redacted to protect sensitive information about the railroads and rail lines. A Right-to-Know request for past commodity reports for railroad hazardous materials was denied; the county said those records do not exist.

The information in the 2021 hazardous materials commodities list was gathered by the county by sending personnel out to train tracks to observe and record placards on passing trains, said Zack Gibbons, the hazardous materials administrator for Lancaster Emergency Management Agency. Gibbons said he did not know

how large of a team was used or how many times the team was sent out.

The Lancaster agency requested updated lists from Norfolk Southern, CSX and BNSF after the East Palestine, Ohio, derailment, Gibbons said, but as of mid-July, they had only received a response from CSX, who said it does not carry hazardous materials in the county.

## **Municipal responses**

Calls to municipal officials throughout the county for records of hazardous materials moving on trains were largely unsuccessful.

Officials from municipalities including East Donegal Township, Columbia, Manor Township, Conestoga Township, Martic Township, Drumore Township and Fulton Township did not return calls for comment. Others from Conoy Township and West Hempfield Township, when asked if they had any type of documents detailing hazardous materials on trains, said no.

## **Regional response**

Additionally, [Right-to-Know requests were filed with 11 other counties throughout central Pennsylvania](#) (Adams, Berks, Cumberland, Dauphin, Franklin, Juniata, Lebanon, Mifflin, Northumberland, Perry and York counties) as part of joint reporting with WITF to find out if records were maintained and available on hazardous materials moving on rail lines.

Only two – Juniata and York counties – provided specific lists.

Adams County officials were unresponsive. Perry County officials asked for a 30-day extension. Officials from Berks, Cumberland, Dauphin, Franklin, Lebanon and Northumberland counties said that they did not maintain the records that were sought. Officials from Mifflin County's Office of Public Safety said the office does not maintain a list of specific materials but provided a categorical list from 2015.