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Toxic spills more likely on roads than rails, study finds

RICHARD GAZARIK (MAILTO:TRIBCITY@TRIBWEB.COM?SUBJECT=RE: TOXIC SPILLS MORE LIKELY ON ROADS THAN RAILS, STUDY FINDS STORY ON TRIBLIVE.COM) | Tuesday, Nov. 15, 2011

A hazardous chemical accident in Westmoreland County is more likely to occur on a highway than on a rail line, according to a recent study of shipments on major highways.

A study commissioned this summer by the county's Department of Public Safety found that none of the 88 railroad accidents in the county since 2001 involved hazardous materials.

Trucks routinely transport extremely dangerous, corrosive or flammable materials along Interstate 70 and routes 22, 66, 119, 981 and 30 and other major roadways, the consultants found.

In the past decade, 271 truck accidents involved hazardous materials, ranging from 35 in 2001 to 25 last year, the study showed.

Pennsylvania highways carried more than 200 million tons of hazardous materials by truck and rail in 2007, according to the U.S. Department of Transportation, which conducts a study every five years. More than half of the shipments, mostly flammable liquids and petroleum-based products, are made by truck.

Though more materials are shipped by rail nationally, there are fewer accidents because train shipments are routed along the safest and most secure rail lines, according to the American Association of Railroads.

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4-QUESTION TRIB POLL

Did you have a problem with Tommy Shaw playing "Renegade" for Predators fans during the first intermission of Saturday's hockey game?

Jeff Harvey, president of JH Consulting of Buckhannon, W.Va., said the Westmoreland study's intent was to identify the various hazardous materials so firefighters and other first responders can use the information as a "building block for training" in case of an accident.

JH Consulting counted the number of trucks by stationing personnel along highways and intersections to list the types of placards identifying the class of materials being shipped.

The most dangerous materials transported through Westmoreland are toluene, sulfuric acid, chlorine and anhydrous ammonia, the study found. Harvey recommended that the county increase its training for responding to incidents involving toluene and chloride.

"That's because these materials are considered extremely hazardous substances by the EPA," he said.

The county conducts its own survey every two or three years to keep track of how much hazardous material is moving through, said Dan Stevens, spokesman for the county Department of Public Safety.

While some of the chemicals and gases transported in the county are classified as extremely hazardous by the federal Environmental Protection Agency, such shipments are routine, he said.

"It's just day-to-day stuff," Stevens said. "Businesses need them (the chemicals)."

The study logged no shipments of low-level radioactive waste or fracking fluids used in natural gas drilling in the Marcellus shale, which can contain benzene, toluene, xylene, fumaric acid, ethylene glycol, ammonia and chloride.

"We get notified when radioactive wastes come through," Stevens said. "In the past six years, we've had two. It's almost non-existent."

The survey also examined hazmat shipments by rail, although the consultants were able to obtain information only from the Wheeling and Lake Erie Railway Co. Officials at CSX and Norfolk-Southern did not provide information.

Trains carry mostly crude oil, liquefied petroleum gas, styrene, isobutane and propane, according to the study.

Of 190 manufacturing plants in the county that use hazardous materials, only 39 -- about 20 percent -- responded to information requests from the consultants. Under federal guidelines, the companies are not required to participate.

"We didn't expect to get responses from everybody," Stevens said. "Some don't need to report chemicals."

Harvey said the low response is not a cause for concern since county officials already know what materials are stored.

Those materials include diesel fuel, aluminum oxide, paints, chlorine gas, sulfuric and hydrochloric acid, caustic soda and ammonia.

The team creates scenarios in which a hazardous chemical or gas is released by accident or because of equipment malfunction, he said. The team goes through the procedures it would use to shut off a leaking valve or stem the flow of chemicals, working hand-in-hand with company employees.

Yes

No

No strong take

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"We've actually had people in the company suit up with us and show us how it's done," he said.

Stevens said the team, which is certified by the state, held a training exercise at a food processing plant in Arnold on how to respond to an ammonia leak. During an incident at the plant in July, the drill enabled the team to stem the leak quickly, he said.

Accidents involving hazardous materials in the county have been minor, according to statistics compiled by the National Response Center of the U.S. Coast Guard. Among them:

- In August, anhydrous ammonia leaked from the piping of the roof of U.S. Food Service in Greensburg.
- Diesel fuel leaked into Loyalhanna Creek in Latrobe in May after a fuel line broke on a tractor-trailer truck.
- State inspectors found hazardous waste and toxins on the grounds of the former Jeannette Glass factory in Jeannette in February.

Additional Information:

Some dangerous chemicals

Toluene 2-4 Diisocyanate -- Used in the manufacture of foams and coatings, the chemical is considered extremely hazardous. Vapors can cause death or permanent disability. Exposure can affect the central nervous, respiratory and gastrointestinal systems. It is a known carcinogen that can cause tumors of the pancreas and liver.

Anhydrous ammonia -- The pungent, colorless gas is used in fertilizer and household cleaners. Exposure can cause serious lung damage, even death.

Sulfuric acid -- It is found in fertilizers, oil refining and wastewater processing systems. Exposure can cause pulmonary edema, bronchitis, emphysema, skin burns, conjunctivitis and erosion of tooth enamel.

Chlorine -- The chemical is used in making plastics, solvents for dry cleaning, textiles, pharmaceuticals, insecticides, dyes and household cleaning products. Prolonged exposure can cause chest pains, coughing, choking, pulmonary edema, burning of the eyes and mucous membranes; it can reduce the amount of oxygen in the blood.

Source: National Institute of Health and the U.S. EPA.

Additional Information:

National hazmat facts

-- Rail accidents involving hazardous materials have declined by 90 percent since 2001 even though the volume of material shipped by rail has more than doubled since 1980.

-- More than 2.2 billion tons of hazardous materials, mostly flammable liquids and petroleum-based products, are shipped nationally.

-- About 1.7 million carloads of hazardous materials are shipped by train each year; 99.99 percent reach their destination without incident.

Source: Commodity Flow Study