

[MUSIC PLAYING]

CATHY WURZER: Here's what we know so far about that train derailment. Residents are returning to their homes following the derailment in the wee hours of this morning that prompted an evacuation of the small town of Raymond. That's about 90 miles west of the Twin Cities.

Nearly two dozen Burlington Northern Santa Fe rail cars carrying ethanol and corn syrup left the tracks around 1:00 this morning on the edge of town, leading officials to evacuate some residents. No one's been hurt. We have reporters Mark Zdechlik and Kirsti Marohn on the ground. They've been there all morning.

First, we're in talk to Mark, who's in Raymond. Mark Zdechlik, thanks so much. Can you recap what we know so far?

MARK ZDECHLIK: Well, yeah. It's a very small town, about 250 homes or something like that. And early this morning just after 1:00 AM, a freight train passing through went off the tracks. The train had mixed freight, but it included some cars with ethanol. They caught on fire and piled up.

And that was cause to tell everybody in the town to leave in the middle of the night. Law enforcement went around and banged basically on doors. And folks left for a nearby town called Twinsburg. Some also just went to homes in other neighboring communities. And that's kind of what's been going on here this morning-- a really, really long night for a lot of people.

CATHY WURZER: Oh, I'm sure. I know that Governor Walz is been there. He was talking to first responders and residents and then talked to reporters. What did he have to say?

MARK ZDECHLIK: Yeah, he actually put us in the back seat, so to speak. He got to one of the shelters in a church, and addressed the community members from the town that were sheltering there, and took questions from them, and then moved on to the reporters. The governor basically said that he was very proud of the response. So many local first responders descended on this little town in the middle of the night. And here's a little bit of what the governor said about his impressions when he got to the scene of the derailment this morning.

TIM WALZ: I think the biggest thing that probably everyone who pulled up on that saw was the number of first responders that were there and the number of different community names that were on those trucks. And so the first thing is is that-- I think it's very reassuring. I think Minnesotans feel this way. I certainly do-- is, when something happens, your neighbors are there. And the biggest thing was is to see that row of first responders out there.

CATHY WURZER: So it sounds like there was a pretty robust response from all manner of different communities around Little Raymond, Minnesota. Say, Mark, what do we know about the tanker cars themselves?

MARK ZDECHLIK: Well, this community is benefiting from the fact that the cars are these upgraded cars called 117-Js. And they're designed for situations like this to prevent explosions. While there is a fire burning at the site of the derailment, there are no explosions. And the law enforcement here is not anticipating any because of the way these cars are built-- I understand kind of triple-walled cars so that they will not explode in this situation.

So apart from the mess of the cars and some of the ethanol that's leaking out and burning, the situation is sort of very much contained at this point. And they're waiting for clearance from federal government officials to put some fire retardant on those burning railcars. And then they'll move on.

CATHY WURZER: Mm-hmm. OK. Say, this is, of course-- we have a state response, a local and a state response to this. I understand the governor's been briefed by US Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg.

MARK ZDECHLIK: He has. It happened very early this morning. And they talked. He spoke a little bit about that at the shelter when he arrived in this part of Minnesota. The head of the railroad was here, as well. Burlington Northern Santa Fe CEO Katie Farmer apologized to members of the community that were displaced and made it clear the railroad will make them whole if they had to miss work, or you know get hotel rooms, and that kind of thing. And she also tried to reassure folks in the room that it's her contention that, despite all the attention to train derailments recently, rail freight is a safe way to move freight.

KATIE FARMER: 99.99% of all hazardous commodities get moved to destination without incident. So you know, whether or not you're hearing more about them, I wouldn't really necessarily weigh in. I can tell you what the statistics are. And that is, 99.99% of all hazardous commodities get to destination without incident. So we are very safe. We are very effective movement of hazardous commodities, as well as all commodities.

CATHY WURZER: Say, Mark, is the Burlington Northern Santa Fe railroad cleaning up its own mess?

MARK ZDECHLIK: It's my understanding that they are more suited to do this than anyone else. They have teams that are specially trained to do this. So the local first responders are kind of leaving that up to them, according to the governor. And they're going to be taking care of it.

They can't put that foam that they're going to be putting on until they get clearance from the National Transportation Safety Board. Representatives from the NTSB are on their way here. And as soon as they give the all clear go ahead, they will be putting some foam down to put the fires out, and then begin cleaning everything up. And they note, the foam they're using is a special foam that they say will not pollute the groundwater here. So all in all, I mean, after a very long several hours, the situation here is looking like it's taken a pretty decent turn.

CATHY WURZER: OK. Mark Zdechlik, thank you so very much. We appreciate your time.

MARK ZDECHLIK: You're welcome. Bye.

CATHY WURZER: Another one of our reporters covering the Raymond derailment is Kirsti Marohn. She's been talking to folks who've had to evacuate, pulled out of their homes in the wee hours of the morning. And Kristi is on the line right now. Hey, Kristi, how are you?

KRISTI MAROHN: Hi, Cathy. I'm doing OK.

CATHY Where are you right now?

WURZER:

KRISTI I'm actually at Unity Church in Prinsburg. That's just a few miles south of Raymond, where the derailment occurred. And this is where the residents were taken after they were evacuated. Some are taken first to a nearby school just down the street, and then they were moved here this morning.

MAROHN:

So there's been cots set up so they could try to get some rest. They've had food available. They served a hot meal at lunchtime.

You know, these people had to leave their homes really quickly. And they couldn't take much with them. They didn't have really clothes or medications that they might need.

A few did bring their dogs. We've seen a couple of little dogs running around. But you know, people here have been trying to get some rest. And there's been a lot of Red Cross first responders around to try to help people.

CATHY Did you have a chance to talk to anyone?

WURZER:

KRISTI Yeah, I've talked to a few people. Most said it was really quite a shock when they were awakened this morning at, like, 2:00 AM by authorities letting them know about the derailment and if they were in the evacuation zone that they needed to get out. I met Gale and Ardelle Rosine. They're both retired teachers.

MAROHN:

And they've lived in Raymond for 53 years. Gale said, he didn't know what to think when first responders banged on their door. And then he saw the flames from the burning train.

GALE ROSINE: This is about 2:00 in the morning. The flames were just skyrocketing. And so it was very dangerous. And it was probably a less than a quarter of a mile, even, out of Raymond. So it's really close.

KRISTI So the Rosines got out fast. And they've been here at the church. They have left now. They were well cared for.

MAROHN: They said they were happy with the response. But they were definitely looking forward to returning home.

And like the Rosines, many of the people here at the shelter were older. Some had medical concerns. I also talked to Rose Day. She had just returned home after having an operation. Here's what she said.

ROSE DAY: I got the phone call. And then I started looking out. And then I saw flashing lights and stuff. And then they started coming through the mobile home park, which is behind me, and knocking on doors.

So I started-- I hadn't unpacked from getting home from having my knee replaced. So I threw the rest of the stuff together and had it ready. And then the fire department came and knocked on my door. I let them in.

But then I didn't have a ride. So then I called 911 because I thought, maybe they'd have something lined up. Well, then Deb Brandt-- she drives ambulance, and I've known her for a long time-- she picked me up and brought me to Prinsburg Care-- so lifesaver.

KRISTI Yeah, so it's really quite a scary experience for a lot of people.

MAROHN:

CATHY Oh, my gosh, I could only imagine. You know, I'm wondering about the response about the safety concerns going forward here after the derailment. Are people talking about that?

WURZER:

KRISTI You know, most people I talked to said they haven't had a lot of concerns about the railroad in the past. There have been a few derailments in the past-- nothing quite like this. But most seem to trust the authorities when they said it's safe to return to their homes.

MAROHN:

And most here have cleared out of this church now. They're kind of folding up the cots. And most people are gone.

So the people I talked to said they really appreciated having this place to come to. It was really chilly this morning. And everyone's been kind and helpful. So I didn't hear a lot of concerns, going forward, about hazardous materials, or fumes, or anything like that. Most seem like they feel pretty safe to return.

CATHY OK. And obviously, authorities thought it was safe for them to return, as well.

WURZER:

KRISTI Right. Exactly. Yeah, I did talk to Kandiyohi County Sheriff, Eric Tollefson. And we asked why he felt it was safe enough for people to return home. And here's what he had to say.

MAROHN:

ERIC Just because of the contents of the trailer, I mean, the corn syrup and ethanol, which is-- one of them described it as industrial-grade vodka-- that and just the fact that the fire is-- I mean, it's very small. I mean, these folks have dealt with this before. They know what to expect when the cars are pulled apart and they're spread apart. They'll be there, and hit it with foam right away. I mean, even with the fire actively burning, there was no-- even downwind, there was nothing. Because alcohol burns very clean.

TOLLEFSON:

KRISTI Yes, I'm sure there will be you know some questions people still want to have answered. But for the most part here, I think they're just glad to be returning to their homes now.

MAROHN:

CATHY I'm sure they are. All right, Kristi, thank you so very much. Good job.

WURZER:

KRISTI You're welcome, Cathy.

MAROHN:

CATHY That's NPR reporter Kristi Marohn reporting from the evacuation center in nearby Prinsburg, Minnesota. So we've heard from some residents of Raymond about being rousted from their homes in the wee hours as train cars were burning. Ardell Tensen is the mayor. He's also the assistant fire chief in Raymond. And of course, he's been busy with the emergency response and fielding questions from reporters.

WURZER:

And we appreciate your time, Mayor Tensen. Thanks for being with us. I thought we had the mayor. Sorry about that. Obviously, we thought we had him on the line. And I think we might have lost him.

So just to recap, in case you're just tuning in here late, our top story, of course, is this train derailment in Little Raymond, Minnesota-- very small town in west central Minnesota close to Prinsburg, that area. 22 cars derailed at about 1:00 this morning and sending flames into the air. As you heard, Kristi Marohn talked to some of the residents.

Of course, residents are going back into their homes at this point. So it looks like the bulk of the emergency is over. We want to talk about two other ethanol spills that have been caused by train derailments in the past. Cleanup is sometimes tricky with these train derailments.

The two specifically that we're going to talk about next-- one happened in Balaton, Minnesota in 2004 and Cambria, Minnesota in 2006. Mark Toso was senior hydrologist with the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency at the time. We've called Mark to just find out a little bit more about what it takes to clean this mess up. Welcome. Thanks for being on the show, Mark.

MARK TOSO: Yes, no problem.

CATHY WURZER: So going back to Balaton and Cambria, those are two pretty big derailments. I recall, the Balaton incident had some 40,000 gallons of ethanol spill and ignite-- so kind of a similar situation, happened late at night. People were told to leave their homes. In this situation, some of the cars that derailed were full of corn syrup and ethanol. What are the specific concerns with those two substances in this situation?

MARK TOSO: Well, the corn syrup isn't really, obviously, a human health issue, since people consume corn syrup. And frankly, neither is ethanol, since people drink ethanol, too. But Balaton and Cambria were pretty significant releases of ethanol to the surface. And it doesn't appear to me-- at least, I haven't heard anything about how much ethanol was spilled at this release. But it doesn't sound like it was that significant.

CATHY WURZER: When you hear that authorities are going to be putting down some foam to extinguish the fire, and we have some storms that are coming in, how might that affect the cleanup?

MARK TOSO: Well, the biggest issue with ethanol is obviously from outside fire effects. If it gets into a surface water, or a stream, or a river, it's very, very biodegradable. And so what it'll happen is it'll basically suck all the oxygen out of a water body and kill fish and other aquatic organisms. And be honest with you, corn syrup does the same thing. So that's kind of the biggest concern with storms coming in-- is containing the ethanol, making sure it doesn't get into any surface water bodies.

CATHY WURZER: So let's go back to the two derailments that you were on the scene at in Cambria and Balaton. Do you remember what happened with those, how much of a mess it was?

MARK TOSO: I wasn't actually directly involved with the actual derailments. What we did was, back in the early 2000 when ethanol production was increasing and obviously incidents like this were happening, there was a lack of knowledge of how to clean up ethanol spills and what the long-term effects were. So Minnesota kind of led the country in doing research on this.

And we got money from EPA. We collaborated with several universities, including University of Minnesota, University of Nebraska and got some money from, actually, industry groups, too. And we basically took these sites, which were just initially responded to. They weren't cleaned up to any significant extent.

We just said, they're not really hurting anything right now. That's just watch them and see what happens. So that's what we did with those two sites. And in 2011-- I believe it was-- we published a guidance document, so to speak, on how to clean up ethanol and what the dangers were when it was in the ground, especially groundwater.

CATHY WURZER: Mm-hmm. Wow. OK. So by the way, can I just circle back for just a moment? One of the elements of some of these derailments, of course, are the fires that occur. How much does that impact air quality? Is it measurable?

MARK TOSO: Well, like, I think the mayor-- or whoever you had on earlier-- said that the ethanol burns rather cleanly. So I think that's kind of a plus for that. The one thing that I don't think anybody's mentioned yet is I think this is actual fuel-grade ethanol from an ethanol plant going to be blended with gasoline.

And there's a very small amount, like 3%, gasoline that is in the ethanol to denature it so it can't be consumed. I think that's just a very, very minor effect. But it kind of gives the ethanol a characteristic odor. It doesn't smell like anything you'd want to drink.

CATHY WURZER: Mm-hmm. OK. Thanks for being specific about that. So before you go here, before we talk to the mayor, what are you going to be looking for because of your background just in the next several days, into the next few weeks as this cleanup continues?

MARK TOSO: Well, provided they contain it and it doesn't get into any surface water bodies-- it kind of depends on how much spills, too-- if it gets into groundwater, the other issue with ethanol, because it's so biodegradable, it basically turns into methane, which is natural gas. So what our research really uncovered was one of the biggest issues with it getting into groundwater is it can produce natural gas, which can get into buildings and cause issues associated with that. It's pretty rare for that to happen.

And I think the state of knowledge is out there. I certainly know BNSF is well aware of these issues. And so is the state of Minnesota. So I don't think that's going to be a problem. I think they'll do a pretty good job of monitoring and cleaning up this release.

CATHY WURZER: OK. Mark Toso, thank you for your time and your knowledge.

MARK TOSO: Yeah, no problem.

CATHY WURZER: Mark is a former hydrologist with the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, who did some research on the cleanup of ethanol spills in Minnesota. It's 12:24 right now. As I mentioned, we heard from some residents of Raymond earlier in the show about being evacuated from their homes at about 1:00, 1:30 this morning as those train cars were burning after the derailment.

Ardell Tensen is with us. He's the mayor and assistant fire chief in Raymond. He's been a pretty busy guy for a number of different hours here. Mayor, thanks for joining us.

ARDELL TENSEN: Yeah, no problem.

CATHY WURZER: Say, what are you seeing right now? What's happening out there?

ARDELL TENSEN: Right at this moment, we just got a little bit of fire going yet. Some ethanol that is basically spilled on the ground is just burning. They're just burning that off. Other than that, most of it's pretty contained.

They are allowing their residents to come back into town pretty soon here. They're waiting for someone yet to come in and sign off for the railroad yet before they allow them to come back in. But they will be this afternoon yet sometime, so.

CATHY WURZER: Did you all have to put some foam on the fire? Or are you letting it burn out? I mean, how is that working for you?

ARDELL TENSEN: Oh, yeah, we've foamed and watered. Quite a few agencies are here. We used thousands of gallons of water. Basically, the containers that weren't on fire, we kept them cooled down. And then we foamed it just to contain it to one spot, basically, so it wouldn't spread.

CATHY WURZER: It sounds like the tanker cars themselves-- this could have been a lot worse, given that these tanker cars are special cars that are not meant to split open, I understand. Is that right?

ARDELL TENSEN: Right. Yeah. So basically, if they're doing anything, they're just leaking a little bit.

CATHY WURZER: OK. So when did you find out about the derailment? What was your morning like?

ARDELL TENSEN: No, it started out, like, at 1:02 in the morning, I believe. I got the page. And yeah, it's what, I'd say, a good 20 cars are derailed here and just folding them up like an accordion.

CATHY WURZER: It looks like an accordion, looking at some of the pictures I'm seeing here in front of me. And you said what when you got that page?

ARDELL TENSEN: Well, I guess my first thoughts were if-- I live on the other side of the tracks. So my first thoughts were, am I even going to get across the tracks? But the derailment never really made it into Raymond. It's right on the edge of Raymond. So basically, getting across the tracks wasn't a problem.

CATHY WURZER: I've been to Raymond. Was it right by the grain elevator there?

ARDELL TENSEN: Yeah, just before that, basically almost straight across from the Tensen Marine business.

CATHY WURZER: OK. And of course, Raymond sits right next to the railroad. And I'm assuming that your fire department has been trained in what to do in case something like this happens.

ARDELL TENSEN: Oh, yeah. Actually, we just went to a training in Clara City just two weeks ago. A bunch of guys went over there. Then we just basically got updated in it not too long ago.

CATHY WURZER: Good. That's good news. What kind of training do you have to have to deal with fires caused by a train derailment?

ARDELL TENSEN: Well, basically, I guess most of it is just caution type stuff. Just be careful. Know what you're dealing with. Basically, the main thing is find the engineer, and get their logbooks, and find out what they're hauling, and figure out what the placard numbers are, I guess.

CATHY WURZER: Mm-hmm. So in case-- again, it could have been worse. I suppose it could have been carrying, like, a chemical or something like that. Yeah.

ARDELL TENSEN: Oh, yeah.

CATHY WURZER: Let me ask you about residents. What are you hearing from your residents?

ARDELL TENSEN: I really haven't heard a whole lot. We had about four different groups running around evacuating early this morning. And we got a lot of them on school buses. And we brought them over to Prinsburg to start with.

And those people from Prinsburg are being returned to the Christian Reformed Church in Raymond now. So not too long and they'll be able to go home pretty soon.

CATHY WURZER: So it sounds like this had a heck of a response. I mean, you all got to the scene-- your local fire department. You were there. All kinds of different fire departments from around the area responded.

State officials are there. You had a response from the federal transportation-- Pete Buttigieg, the Secretary of Transportation is weighing in on this. Are you a little surprised by the amount of attention being paid to this derailment?

ARDELL TENSEN: Oh, yeah, a lot of attention, actually-- a lot of phone calls this morning, too, from senators. And actually, I met with Governor Walz this morning on the highway here.

CATHY WURZER: Final question--

ARDELL TENSEN: A lot of attention.

CATHY WURZER: Yeah, it looks like it is. Yeah. Final question for you-- the National Transportation Safety Board is going to start investigating, I guess. What are your next steps?

ARDELL TENSEN: I guess our next step is just being safety for Burlington Northern here. Basically, we'll just be their safety line as they clean up. And we're going to work with other agencies to kind of take turns so Raymond doesn't have to be out here 24/7.

CATHY WURZER: OK. I know you're real busy. I really appreciate your time. Stay safe, and thank you so much.

ARDELL TENSEN: Thank you.

CATHY WURZER: We've been talking to Ardeell Tensen. He's the mayor. He's also the assistant fire chief in Raymond, Minnesota. He's been responding to this train derailment and subsequent fire in the town just west of the Twin Cities.