

NorCal towns lack resources to handle oil train fires, spills

By Jane Braxton Little, Sacramento Bee

BNSF Railway trains carrying crude oil and other hazardous materials rumble through this Lassen County community every day – past homes, churches and a scant block from the downtown commercial center.

If a tank car were to derail and explode, Westwood Fire Chief Forest Duerksen would take the only action he's equipped for: Evacuation. Of all 1,000 residents.

Rural officials like Duerksen have been worried for decades about the chlorine, ammonia, propane and crude oil transported through their Northern California communities by BNSF and Union Pacific Railroad. But a dramatic surge in production in oil fields in the Midwest and Canada increased the volume from about 10,000 railroad tank cars in 2008 to nearly half a million in 2014. In 2015, the U.S. Energy Information Agency reported a 1,700 percent increase in crude oil transportation by rail.

The trains would run through Roseville, downtown Sacramento, West Sacramento, downtown Davis, Dixon and other cities. East of Roseville, the route is uncertain. Trains could arrive via Donner Summit, Feather River Canyon, or through the Shasta and Redding areas.

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