



NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD
Investigative Hearing

Norfolk Southern Railway general merchandise freight train 32N
derailment with subsequent hazardous material release and fires,
in East Palestine, Ohio, on February 3, 2023

GROUP	H
EXHIBIT	
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Agency / Organization

Norfolk Southern

Title

Statement for the Record – Robert Wood

Rob Wood, Opening Statement

Panel 2: "Circumstances that Led to the Decision to Vent and Burn Five Vinyl Chloride Tank Cars"

Good afternoon. Thank you for inviting me to be here today. My name is Robert Wood, and I am the Director of Hazardous Materials at Norfolk Southern. I have more than 22 years of experience in the rail industry, and 11 years of experience working with hazardous materials at Norfolk Southern. Prior to joining Norfolk Southern as a Hazardous Materials Compliance Officer in 2012, I was a hazardous materials emergency response contractor for the Company for 12 years. I also served 24 years with Birmingham Fire and Rescue with their Hazardous Materials response Team. I currently serve as Chairman of the AAR Hazardous Materials Committee.

First, like my colleagues, I want to express my regrets to the residents of East Palestine and the surrounding communities. Norfolk Southern's top priority is the health and safety of our employees, the communities we serve, and first responders who assist during our time of need. The emergency response to the derailment in East Palestine was no exception.

I learned of the derailment a few minutes after it occurred the night of February 3, and immediately started coordinating response efforts. I reached out to Scott Deutsch as he was my closest regional hazmat manager to the area and started coordinating with the most senior managers at the company and those closest to the area to ensure that everyone, including the emergency responders, had access to the train consist and understood that there was hazmat on that train.

Early Saturday morning, I got on a plane to East Palestine with several of my colleagues. Over the hours and days following the derailment, we worked closely with brave first responders

from dozens of nearby communities to deal with the unique hazards associated with this incident and prevent an uncontrolled explosion. We followed available guidance, for example, from the Department of Transportation and the Federal Railroad Administration. We also communicated consistently with other stakeholders on the ground, including the manufacturer of the vinyl chloride in the tank cars of concern, Oxy Vinyls, and with the Unified Command and Incident Commander.

Norfolk Southern personnel like myself, and our expert contractors, were assessing a high-risk situation in real time. We drew upon our decades of experience handling hazmat emergency situations and relied on the information available in chemical incident guidance documents, which note that exposure to numerous conditions and substances, including air, oxidizers, certain metals, and excessive heat can cause “explosive or violent polymerization.” Conscious of the need to act both swiftly and thoughtfully, we carefully assessed the situation. Collecting information on-site, we observed what we believed were multiple signs of polymerization in the tank cars carrying vinyl chloride or PRD failures. Our concern grew quickly because an uncontrolled explosion of the tank car would be catastrophic. Explosions involving tank cars carrying monomers or liquified flammable gases have occurred in the past, with devastating consequences, and if polymerization was occurring, rapid action would be necessary to prevent an uncontrolled, and potentially deadly explosion.

With this knowledge, we brought the best information we had to the Incident Commander and Unified Command. Because of factors that rendered other options too dangerous and potentially ineffective, a controlled vent and burn was determined to be the best and safest option by the Incident Commander, given the circumstances and information available at the time. The Incident Commander’s decision was supported by all members of Unified Command.

Throughout the response, Norfolk Southern professionals and contractors exclusively focused on protecting the health and safety of those involved, including first responders, the surrounding communities, and our own personnel. I share the commitment with all Norfolk Southern personnel to protect the communities we operate in and make rail safer.