

Chair Bill Johnson
March 28, 2023—Environment Subcommittee
**“Government Response to East Palestine: Ensuring Safety and
Transparency for the Community”**

As prepared for delivery

The committee will come to order.

First, I want to say thank you to some people. I give a special thank you to Chairwoman Cathy McMorris Rodgers, and all our staff, especially the committee staff, for the hard work putting this hearing together during such a busy time...and to the members on both sides for preparing and attending this hearing today.

When I first received this gavel, I **never** imagined that our first subcommittee hearing would be on something that hits so close to home. So, I want to especially thank all of my colleagues here, on both sides of the aisle, for your well wishes for my constituents, and for your genuine concern, participation, and willingness to help this small, rural Ohio community.

Next, I recognize and thank the first responders at the state and local level, who were on the scene immediately, who ran into the danger, risking their lives to respond to this incident with professionalism and bravery.

In particular, I recognize the firefighters, the **all-volunteer** firefighters in East Palestine, who jumped into action – into the smoke and fire -- to quite literally save the lives of their neighbors in this small, tight-knit village of fewer than 5,000 people.

It’s a spirit of unity and selflessness much more common outside of the Beltway than within it. But more on that in a moment.

Since this disaster happened, when we aren’t in session here in Washington, I have been in East Palestine, listening to the concerns of residents, and meeting with local and state officials, and federal agencies.

This includes our three witnesses here today. We have spent a lot of time in person and on the phone lately.

These witnesses have all been deeply involved in the response efforts, and I thank each of them for their commitment to assisting the East Palestine community, and for their willingness to take the time to appear here today.

Administrator Shore, and Director Vogel, thank you for representing your agencies so well, for you and your team’s responsiveness from the state and Federal EPAs. Your effective coordination has been and remains key to getting the cleanup done right.

And a very special welcome to Wes Vins, Columbiana County Health Commissioner, who has been on the front lines since the very beginning. Wes is a problem solver, and no matter if you

are a Republican or Democrat, he is ready to work with anyone to ensure the safety and health of this community.

Wes, thanks for being here...your input will be extremely valuable to our subcommittee as we dig into these important issues.

So that brings us to the theme of our hearing today. The intent of this hearing is to be precise and targeted, to get answers for the still-suffering residents of East Palestine.

Our goal, simply, is to try and know, what we don't yet know! The longer this goes on, more and more questions arise about the long-term health effects of chemical exposure, the testing that is needed for the soil, water and air, and the commitment of those responsible for the cleanup.

In addition, the cleanup, which is still ongoing by the way, has been a bumpy road to say the least. As we speak, there is a many-thousands-of-tons-toxic- dirt-pile, **still sitting there!** Very slowly being trucked out, because the proper, legal, certified disposal process was improperly turned into a political football.

I do wonder, if this train derailed in inner city Philadelphia, or an affluent Chicago suburb, rather than rural, 'flyover-country-Ohio' would those communities get the same treatment?

So, to those watching today, I know that many of you probably saw on the news the "plume seen around the world" at the outset of this disaster.

Almost immediately, folks on all sides of the political spectrum wanted to use this tragedy for photo-ops, or political gain on the national stage, or to drive clicks on social media.

But here's what we know...at some point, the cameras will go away. The news cycle will move on to something that gets better ratings.

But for this small community, this **isn't** over. It **isn't** going away. To them, it's very real.

Families are still displaced from their homes and children are missing school. These folks don't just get to move on to the next thing.

It is our job today to get answers for them, NOT to play politics at their expense.

Now, I know this happened in my district...so it's personal to me. But it could have happened in any of my colleagues' districts.

It is our job, to reassure this small community that here in Congress, on this committee, we will work to ensure the cleanup is completed and that we will not stop our questions and oversight until the health and environmental concerns of this community are addressed...because we'd do the same regardless of where it happened.

Now, I understand that our roles as national policymakers are significant here also.

I know that there has been some disappointment from my Democratic colleagues that the railroad isn't here today...more specifically, I read about this disappointment in a press release the Minority blasted out late last Thursday evening.

I want my friends on the other side of the aisle, who have **not** visited the site; have **not** seen the mountain of contaminated dirt still looming over the village, and who have **not** spent time with the worried families there, to understand this: This hearing isn't about **you**. It's not about **me** or any member of this subcommittee.

This hearing is about THEM...the citizens of East Palestine.

It's about those worried families who've had their lives flipped upside down. **It's about getting them answers, and ensuring their long term health. Period!**

Many aspects of this incident, the response and the cleanup, fall directly under this subcommittee's jurisdiction.

Whether it be CERCLA, hazardous waste disposal, chemical safety, EPA oversight...there's **a lot** to unpack here.

But if you want to talk rail safety, let's do that after this hearing. In fact, I introduced bipartisan rail safety legislation with my friend, colleague, and fellow Ohioan, Congresswoman Emilia Sykes, two weeks ago that I urge you all to consider cosponsoring if you truly want to help prevent what happened in East Palestine from happening again. That's a way we can hold railroads more accountable. But that legislation will have to go through the Transportation & Infrastructure Committee.

So, I urge my colleagues, to please take **OUR** responsibility here today seriously.

There are lessons to be learned from what happened in East Palestine, and we can use that, as members of the Environment Subcommittee, to inform our work for the American people.

With that, I recognize the Ranking Member, Mr. Tonko, for 5 minutes.