



## **Columbiana County Health District**

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**Testimony of**  
**Dr. Wesley J. Vins, DPA**  
**Health Commissioner of the Columbiana County Health District**  
  
**Before the United States House of Representatives’**  
**Committee on Energy and Commerce’s**  
**Subcommittee on Environment, Manufacturing and Critical Materials**

**March 28, 2023**

Chairman Johnson, Vice Chairman Joyce, Ranking Member Tonko and Members of the Environment, Manufacturing and Critical Materials Subcommittee, I am Dr. Wesley Vins and I am the Health Commissioner of the Columbiana County General Health District. I thank you for the opportunity to speak about the East Palestine, Ohio train derailment on behalf of the residents of Columbiana County and our Board of Health. I have served the local community for 14 years as Health Commissioner and I am very familiar with the local perspectives, community concerns and family needs relating to the February 3<sup>rd</sup> Norfolk Southern train derailment.

Thankfully, the derailed train fire is out and the smoke has cleared, but the ongoing concerns for health effects and environmental impacts to drinking water remain within the community. In addition to requesting their private water wells to be tested, residents have expressed concerns about immediate health issues of sore throats, head-aches and anxiety, as well as unknown long-term health conditions, including the development of cancer.

To address some the most immediate health concerns of the residents, our agency partnered with the Ohio Department of Health and the East Liverpool City Hospital to establish a Health Assessment Clinic at the well-known First Church of Christ, near downtown East Palestine that also included a mobile clinic van from the local Federally Qualified Health Center. The temporary services include the completion of an Assessment of Chemical Exposure (ACE) survey with a registered nurse during the 1-hour evaluation prior to a physical exam conducted by a physician. Toxicology and stress counseling are also available. To date, 312 residents have been evaluated with some being referred to a primary care physician or mental health counselor for follow-up.

To respond to the resident’s drinking water concerns, private wells in the priority areas of East Palestine and south along the streams can voluntarily be tested. So far, approximately 175 residential wells have been tested in the initial round of sampling, with dozens currently being sampled a second time to ensure drinking water continues to meet standards. The sampling effort is conducted by local health district staff using an independent laboratory. At the same time, the Norfolk Southern contractor also



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collects a water sample for comparison. All water sample results are transparently shared with the homeowner.

As we move forward with the recovery for the residents of the East Palestine area, I believe we need to implement some key initiatives to protect the community and improve public trust. The first and most obvious initiative is to improve rail safety, which I realize may be outside of the scope of this committee, but as we can see improved rail safety is necessary to protect the public's health across the country and to prevent families from experiencing this trauma again. When rail safety legislation is presented, I ask that you seriously consider the issue by relying on industry experts and good common sense to prevent such a disaster from happening to another community.

The second initiative that I would consider in addition to a medical reimbursement model, would be the establishment of a health and wellness center in the village of East Palestine for area residents to utilize to address their long-term physical health concerns, anxiety and stress and well as a central location for local resources and information. Families that have health concerns due to potential or unknown exposures related to the February 3<sup>rd</sup> derailment should have a local medical provider made available at no cost to them.

The final initiative creates a long-term private well sampling program for ensuring safe drinking water at the homes in the priority areas where municipal water is not available. I am requesting that the local health district be funded to operate this program with an independent laboratory and local agency staff. The deployment of local personnel instead of a corporate contractor will provide the highest level of confidence and transparency to the community, where maintaining trust in the water that families consume on a daily basis is paramount.

In conclusion, I must recognize that it is a shared responsibility of the federal, state and local government officials, like you and I, to ensure that the residents of the East Palestine area are not forgotten, overlooked, or minimized, but are instead made whole by holding Norfolk Southern accountable to make it right. This was not East Palestine's fault.

Thank you again for the opportunity to present today and at this time, I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.