



# News Release

Washington Department of Ecology news  
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11-338

## *Ecology fines BNSF \$3,000 for sodium hydroxide spill, requests railroad demonstrate better initial response coordination*

**OLYMPIA** – The Washington Department of Ecology (Ecology) is fining BNSF Railway \$3,000 for spilling 150 gallons of liquid sodium hydroxide to the environment in Pierce County.

On Feb. 26, 2011, a BNSF freight train had an accident in which 13 rail cars derailed near Chambers Bay at University Place – including four 15,000-gallon capacity tank cars fully loaded with 50 percent sodium hydroxide solution.

Sodium hydroxide, also called lye or caustic soda, is a highly corrosive chemical used in many industrial manufacturing processes, including pulp and paper, textiles and soaps and detergents. It is also used as drain cleaner.

Three of the derailed tank cars ended up on the Puget Sound shoreline. About 50 gallons of sodium hydroxide spilled from one of the damaged tank cars on the beach. A fourth tank car landed on the bank under two damaged box cars but did not spill any liquids.

While the standing sodium hydroxide was removed and the remaining chemical neutralized around the damaged rail car, the spill area was inundated during several high tides until the tank car was removed four days later. Under Washington law, beaches are considered to be state waters and it is illegal to spill any amount of oil or other toxic chemicals on them.

Besides BNSF and their environmental cleanup contractor, Ecology, West Pierce Fire & Rescue, Pierce County Sheriff's Office, Anderson Island Fire Boat, Pierce County Hazardous Incident Team, U.S. Coast Guard and the King County Sheriff's Office Guardian One Helicopter responded to the incident.

On March 1, 2011, another 100 gallons of sodium hydroxide spilled when equipment operators lost control of a damaged tank car after it was removed from the shore. The chemical spilled into a large puddle of water near an unpaved access road adjacent to the rail tracks. It was vacuumed up and the contaminated soil was excavated.

After all the rail cars were removed, samples were collected to make sure cleanup measures had effectively removed or neutralized the sodium hydroxide.

Ecology also billed BNSF \$6,370 to recover the state's costs for responding to the derailment and chemical spill.

## Ecology fines railroad company \$3,000 for sodium hydroxide spill - 2 of 3

In addition to the penalty and cost recovery order, Ecology noted a lack of coordination with local responders that resulted in safety challenges during the initial stages of the response.

Ecology asked the Fort Worth, Texas-based railroad company to submit a written report within 30 days describing how BNSF will better coordinate with the designated incident command agency and other public response agencies during future hazardous material spill incidents that involve the company.

“BNSF and their contractors did a good job responding promptly to the environmental hazard and working diligently to get their tracks open and commerce moving again,” said Jim Sachet, who oversees Ecology’s spill response activities in southwest Washington.

“However, we are concerned because the railroad did not do a good enough job coordinating their initial response activities with West Pierce Fire & Rescue – the designated incident command agency for hazardous material incidents for the region where the derailment occurred.”

Under state and federal law, companies responsible for oil and hazardous chemical spills are required to work in close coordination with local, state and federal responders. During the response on Feb. 26, however, Sachet said better coordination was needed to ensure the safety of all workers responding to the incident.

“We continue to evaluate all elements of our response efforts to ensure public and environmental protection. We are working with local emergency responders on future teamwork response procedures,” said Gus Melonas, BNSF Regional Director of Public Affairs. “This includes BNSF’s hosting Pierce County response personnel to the Association of American Railroads’ Security Emergency Response Training Center in Pueblo, Colo.”

BNSF has 30 days to appeal Ecology’s \$3,000 penalty with the state Pollution Control Hearings Board or file an application for relief before the full amount is due.

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**For more information:** [www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/spills/spills.html](http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/spills/spills.html)

**More about derailment incident, including Ecology’s summary of findings:**  
[www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/spills/incidents/ChambersBayDerailment/ChambersBayDerailment.html](http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/spills/incidents/ChambersBayDerailment/ChambersBayDerailment.html)

### **Past incident news releases:**

[www.ecy.wa.gov/news/2011/070.html](http://www.ecy.wa.gov/news/2011/070.html)  
[www.d13.uscgnews.com/go/doc/21/1026159/](http://www.d13.uscgnews.com/go/doc/21/1026159/)

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[www.d13.uscgnews.com/go/doc/21/1026043/](http://www.d13.uscgnews.com/go/doc/21/1026043/)

**Ecology's website:** [www.ecy.wa.gov](http://www.ecy.wa.gov)

**Ecology's social media:** <http://www.ecy.wa.gov/about/newmedia.html>

**Broadcast version**

The state Ecology Department has fined BNSF Railway three thousand dollars for spilling one hundred fifty gallons of sodium hydroxide to the environment in Pierce County.

Sodium hydroxide is a highly corrosive chemical used in industrial manufacturing processes.

The chemical spills occurred February Twenty-Sixth and March First, Two-Thousand Eleven, after four rail tank cars derailed near Chambers Bay at University Place.

Fifty gallons spilled on the Puget Sound shoreline and one hundred gallons spilled during recovery operations.

To address some safety concerns, Ecology also asked BNSF to document how they will better coordinate with public response agencies during future hazardous material spill incidents.

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