

Officials raise alarm over 2.4 million gallons of flammable gas parked in rail cars south of Sonoma

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The storage of approximately 2.4 million gallons of liquefied petroleum gas in dozens of rail cars south of Sonoma is raising public safety concerns and demands that the hazardous material be removed immediately.

About 80 rail cars filled with flammable gas are parked on tracks in Schellville just south of where Highway 121 intersects 8th Street East. The area is sparsely populated, but, according to officials, still within range of several structures that would be vulnerable in an explosion or fire, including a fire station, winery and lumber business.

“We don’t want an inferno in Sonoma Valley,” said Sonoma County Supervisor Susan Gorin, who has joined those calling for the rail cars’ removal.

The rail cars containing the gas were transported to the site two to three weeks ago by Northwestern Pacific Railroad, according to Mitch Stogner, executive director of the North Coast Railroad Authority, the public agency that oversees freight service on the line.

Stogner said federal guidelines governing the transport and storage of hazardous materials prevented him from confirming the precise number of rail cars and their contents at the Schellville site. But he did not dispute reports that of the 120 rail cars parked there, 80 are filled with liquefied petroleum gas.

He said each tanker has a capacity of 33,000 gallons.

“I think it’s important to point out that these tanker cars are stored all over the Bay Area,” Stogner said. “This is a fairly routine storage issue, and it’s in an extremely safe area in the middle of dairyland. It’s under the guidance of the Federal Railroad Administration, and it has been from day one.”

But officials with the Sonoma-Marín Area Rail Transit Authority, which owns the right-of-way, have characterized the gas storage as a major public safety threat, and contend Northwestern Pacific did not disclose the nature and timing of the shipment.

SMART general manager Farhad Mansourian notified Northwestern Pacific in a letter Thursday it would not allow the company to move any more freight along the rail line until the hazardous material is taken out of Schellville, except on a case-by-case basis and only after the freight operator has submitted detailed plans on the contents and destination.

Northwestern Pacific mainly ships feed grains and building supplies to customers along the Highway 101 corridor, according to Stogner. The company does not ship hazardous materials along the track where SMART is planning to begin passenger service later this year. The area where the liquefied petroleum gas is being stored is approximately 13 miles east of SMART’s main passenger rail corridor.

Whether SMART has the authority to demand the removal of the gas or to further restrict Northwestern Pacific’s freight operations beyond what the parties agreed to in 2011 operating agreement is disputed. Stogner said only federal railroad officials can make those determinations.

“We believe we met all of the rules,” he said.

A spokeswoman for the Federal Railroad Administration said Monday the agency dispatched inspectors to the storage site last week and is meeting with all of the parties in coming days to verify all federal safety regulations are being met.

In general, federal rules require rail cars loaded with hazardous material to be moved within 48 hours. However, operators are allowed to store such material on private tracks, so long as they have an adequate “safety security plan” in place. At a minimum, such a plan must include adequate background checks for employees handling the material and steps to prevent unauthorized access to rail cars.

Under federal rules, a private track includes those that are outside of a carrier’s right-of-way, or one leased to an operator “for exclusive use of that trackage by the lessee.”

Stogner said Northwestern Pacific has an exclusive freight arrangement on SMART's line, "which we always remind people is an independent property right and right to operate trains."

He said Northwestern Pacific picked up the rail cars in American Canyon and brought them west to Schellville, a distance, he said, of about eight miles by rail. He said the freight operator submitted a warrant with a SMART dispatcher detailing the shipment.

SMART disputes that account.

Mansourian's Thursday letter to NWP stated that bringing hazardous material into Sonoma Valley would, at a "minimum," require the freight operator to notify SMART dispatch of the nature of the shipment and to provide the agency with a safety and security plan, as well as an emergency response plan that included consulting with first responders.

Mansourian did not return messages Monday seeking comment.

Ray Mulas, chief of the Shell-Vista Fire Protection District whose family owns a dairy in the general vicinity of where the rail cars are parked, detailed his concerns in a Sunday email to SMART officials.

Calling the situation "unacceptable," Mulas stated the large amount of hazardous materials parked on the track poses a "significant risk to the adjacent community which includes the presence of our fire station." Among other things, the chief demanded a copy of a safety action plan.

In her emailed response Monday to Mulas, Jennifer Welch, SMART's police chief, stated the agency has been seeking that information from Northwestern Pacific "to no avail."

Former Congressman Doug Bosco, an investor in Sonoma Media Investments, which owns The Press Democrat, is a co-founder and owner of Northwestern Pacific. He referred questions Monday to Stogner at the rail authority.

Stogner said the plans call for the rail cars to remain at the Schellville location until needed by refineries for winter fuel blends, a period of time he said should not be longer than two months.

From his perspective, moving hazardous materials along the rail line is safer and more environmentally-friendly than moving them along roads.

John Williams, president of Northwestern Pacific Railroad, wrote in a Sept. 15 letter to SMART that federal railroad authorities were notified of the shipment of liquefied petroleum "from the outset."

But Gorin, whose district includes Schellville, called the storage of the hazardous materials "totally inappropriate" for that area. She said she has been in communication with the office of U.S. Rep Mike Thompson, D-St. Helena, to discuss her concerns.

"If it's meant for storage, then it should be in a refinery yard that is equipped with emergency equipment and plans, and first responders who are trained to deal with such emergencies," she said.

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