

Washington Ecology Department Honing Response To Rail Crude Oil Spills

Local News

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Richland, WA - Last fall, rail cars carrying crude oil from North Dakota and Montana began making regular transits through Eastern Washington – including the Tri-Cities – mostly bound for petroleum refineries and fuel terminals in Puget Sound. This week, about 50 environmental emergency responders from the Washington Department of Ecology (Ecology) will be in Richland to learn how to safely and effectively respond to crude oil spills from trains – especially incidents reaching state waters such as the Columbia River. Shipping crude oil by rail is a new trend for our state. Until September 2012, Washington’s oil refining industry got nearly all of its crude oil from Alaska by oil tanker and Canada by pipeline. Most of the state’s five refineries have built or are working to construct new facilities to handle rail car shipments of crude oil. Some refineries are now prepared to unload unit trains made up of 100 or more separate rail cars filled with crude oil every day. On Wednesday May 8, Ecology spill responders will conduct an afternoon exercise in Richland’s Columbia Point Marina Park. No oil will be released during the drill.

Crude oil typically contains unhealthy levels of benzene, a known carcinogen, and other toxic chemicals. It is also heavier, thicker and can persist much longer in the environment than other petroleum products. During the training drill, Ecology responders will get practical experience using air monitoring instruments, working in protective gear to take samples and quickly assessing where and how to deploy equipment to help keep a crude oil spill from spreading in a river. While no trains in Washington have spilled crude oil since regular rail deliveries started about nine months ago, a single rail car can carry 34,500 gallons of crude oil. The training and drill will help prepare state responders should a spill occur. Every year Ecology handles 3,800 reports of oil and hazardous material spills and mounts 1,200 field responses to incidents that threaten public health, safety and the environment. Spill response training exercises form part of Ecology’s ongoing commitment to ensure a rapid, aggressive and well-coordinated response to incidents that pose an immediate threat to public health, safety and the environment.