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Freight train derailed in Mansfield: Route 32 closed, shelter-in-place ordered



Photos of the Mansfield train derailment. More than a dozen cars were derailed on Thursday morning. PHOTO COURTESY OF AARON FLAUM/ FACEBOOK

by Patrick Boots
STAFF WRITER
HE/HIM
patrick.boots@uconn.edu

A freight train derailed in Mansfield Depot on Thursday morning, with several railcars falling into the Willimantic River, causing a shelter-in-place order and a continuous, multi-day area closure and cleanup operation.

The derailment happened around 9 a.m. near the Eagleville Pond in the vicinity of Stafford Road, also known as Connecticut Route 32, and involved a train with 41 cars and two locomotives, according to officials.

> **"It is more of a 'keep your windows closed, be aware, be alert' just in case something does happen."**
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> JOHN ROACHE, MANSFIELD'S FIRE CHIEF

The rear 10 cars derailed, nine of which rolled over on their side with six carrying liquid propane fuel. Other cars on the train were transporting goods including lumber and food-grade grease. No leaks were detected from the cars containing propane, according to officials.

"Fortunately, with the lack of a leak, we didn't have to do any evacuations," said Adam Libros, Mansfield's emergency management director, Thursday afternoon.

In an abundance of caution, officials issued a shelter-in-place order for residents within a half mile of the scene.

"It is more of a 'keep your windows closed, be aware, be alert' [directive] just in case something does happen," said John Roache, Mansfield's fire chief during the press conference. "We continue to monitor... to make sure there are no spills, no leaks, and no hazard to the community."

One conductor and one engineer were onboard the train when the derailment occurred, but no injuries were reported.

Although no dangerous propane leaks were detected, over 2,000 gallons of grease spilled and had to be contained.

"There does not appear to be any hazard to [the grease]," Roache said. "It is basically animal fat."

Stafford Road remains closed to motorists between South Eagleville Road and Route 44 East. Mansfield town officials said the area closure was anticipated to last days.

Emergency responders and hazmat crews from the Mansfield and University of Connecticut fire departments, the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection and the Department of Emergency Services and Public Protection responded to the scene.

"We are going to do a continuous monitoring as long as it takes, as many days, whatever the time frame is, and that's going to be dependent on the train company and their recovery operations," said Rich Scalora, the emergency response coordinator for DEEP.

Mansfield Town Manager Ryan Aylesworth declared a local state emergency to facilitate the response and cleanup operation.

Although the University of Connecticut is located nearby to the incident, university officials said the accident "does not have any impact on the operations or safety of UConn's campuses" in a UConn Alert message, but recommended students and visitors to seek an alternate route during the closure.

The New England Central Railroad, operator of the freight train, dispatched additional crews from Maryland and Pennsylvania to assist with the cleanup. The railroad is a subsidiary of the international Genesee and Wyoming railroad holding company headquartered in Darien.

Brian McClain, vice president for G&W's northeast division, said that the train originated in Palmer, Massachusetts and was en route southbound toward Willimantic. The single-tracked rail line where the incident occurred, also owned by NECR, stretches from New London northward to Vermont and is a Class III railroad.

Officials said it is too soon to determine a specific cause for the incident, but manifests and onboard data are being investigated by the Connecticut Department of Transportation. Cranes and other heavy duty clean-up equipment will remain on the scene until operations can be restored.

"The Town of Mansfield enormously appreciates the response...from all of our different agencies and partners," Aylesworth said. "This is why we have mutual aid, [and] it really takes a team, for any community in their time of need."

He noted that "any number of things...could have happened," in regard to a potential environmental impact, and that the community is "very fortunate."

While the corridor where the derailment occurred is an active freight line, it does not meet current standards for passenger rail service without significant refurbishment. Amtrak last operated limited service, as part of its Montrealer long-distance route, until 1995.

"Significant rehabilitation of the right-of-way is anticipated to improve speed and reliability that would provide for competitive passenger rail service," a 2017 study assessing the feasibility of such service states. "The Vermont portion of the line was recently upgraded and is assumed to be in a good state or repair; full or partial rehabilitation of 111 miles of the right-of-way in Massachusetts and...[would cost] an estimated $277.5 million."

The proposed Mohegan Line passenger rail service, which would use the NECR corridor, would see stations serving points between New London and Massachusetts, including new stations in Willimantic and Storrs-Mansfield.



This Thursday, a train derailed near the UConn Storrs campus.

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