

NBC's *Today*

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7:01:05 a.m. [TEASE]

21 seconds

[ON-SCREEN HEADLINE: "Toxic" Atmosphere]

SAVANNAH GUTHRIE: Toxic atmosphere. Residents in Ohio voicing new health and safety concerns after that fiery train derailment.

ROBERT HELBECK: They're afraid to drink the water. They're concerned for bathing their babies.

GUTHRIE: The EPA chief heading back to the crash site today, while federal officials demand immediate safety improvements from the entire rail industry. We'll have the very latest.

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7:08:35 a.m.

3 minutes and 9 seconds

[ON-SCREEN HEADLINE: Outrage in Ohio]

SHEINELLE JONES: Also, this morning, the nation's top environmental official is heading back to the site of that toxic train derailment in Ohio where, nearly three weeks later, residents still have questions about their health and safety. NBC's George Solis joins us with the community's latest pleas for resources and answers. George, good morning.

GEORGE SOLIS: Sheinelle, good morning. Today, many residents eagerly await what head of the EPA, Michael Regan, will have to say. The second visit since the derailment this month. Now, the train's operator Norfolk Southern says, so far, they have removed more than 15,000 pounds contaminated soil and more than a million gallons of contaminated water but many residents are simply demanding more action. 18 days since the derailment of a train carrying hazardous materials in East Palestine, Ohio, the cause still under investigation with the preliminary report expected as early as this week. The NTSB chair telling NBC News investigators are looking at a mechanical problem with an axle as a possible cause of the crash.

NTSB CHAIR JENNIFER HOMENDY: Every accident we investigate is always 100 percent preventable.

SOLIS: The small town's nearly 5,000 residents left anxiously awaiting answers.

JUDY HOWARD-MACK: We don't think they're taking care of all the pollution that they should be, especially the soil and water.

SOLIS: The operator of the derailed train, Norfolk Southern, has given \$3.4 million in financial assistance to affected families. the CEO appointing a community liaison and vowing the company “will be in their community to help for as long as needed.” This morning, Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg is calling for immediate action from Norfolk Southern and the entire freight railroad industry, arguing that current rail safety regulations are too lax, demanding additional protection for employees and strengthening of infrastructure among other considerations.

TRANSPORTATION SECRETARY PETE BUTTIGIEG: We can’t treat these disasters as inevitable or as the cost of doing business.

SOLIS: The head of the EPA returns today and so far, ongoing testing of the air and water by the agency has shown no threat to the community according to the daily reports even though residents continue to report health issues.

SHELBY WALKER: I’ve had eye infections in both eyes — [SCREEN WIPE] — some respiratory issues.

SOLIS: Shelby Walker lives feet from the derailment site. Her doctor has not been able to determine the cause of her symptoms but she fears the long-term impacts of the accident.

WALKER: I don’t want to live in that fear of wondering are we going to get sick or not.

SOLIS: This morning, the First Church of Christ becomes a health assessment clinic. Senior minister Robert Helbeck has seen the struggle of his community firsthand.

HELBECK: They’re afraid to drink the water. They’re concerned for bathing their babies, so, yeah, it’s a real concern.

SOLIS: And joining the head of the EPA today are the governors of both Ohio and Pennsylvania, and it kicks off what will be a lot of attention in this town in the coming days. On Wednesday, former President Donald Trump is expected to come into town and on Friday, famed environmental activist Erin Brockovich expected to hold a town hall and the residents are fine with this attention, but what they really want is more action and accountability, Sheinelle.

SHEINELLE: Alright, George, thank you.