



ERIE COUNTY HAZARDOUS MATERIALS/WMD EMERGENCY RESPONSE TEAM

Cheektowaga TIMES

HAZMAT officials stop dangerous leak

By John J. Hopkins Times



URGENT MATTER... This view looking west from the Harlem Road "long bridge" that spans the Bison train yard Monday shows emergency crews working to mitigate a leak of organic peroxide. (Times photo)

Disaster was averted Monday afternoon when local HAZMAT crews contained a leaking shipment of highly flammable organic peroxide inside the Bison train yard in Sloan.

The chemical has an extremely low fire "flash point" of 78 degrees, which made Monday afternoon's high temperature of 85 an extremely volatile potential accelerant.

According to Cheektowaga Emergency Services Coordinator Earl Loder, simple contact between organic peroxide with hot air could trigger an explosion.

"It was not a very friendly thing," Loder said of the chemical compound. "It was 150 degrees in the truck, which made us all nervous."

Organic peroxide, which is widely used in the plastic and rubber industries, also poses a health threat. It is a known eye and skin irritant, and some forms can cause death if inhaled or ingested in large doses.

The leak was found in one of 80 cylinders containing the peroxide inside a tractor trailer that had been removed from a train in the yard's intermodal facility. The 33-pound cylinders are made of fiberglass. Organic peroxide bonds with most metals, necessitating the fiberglass containers.

Loder said that the chemical may have been leaking for as long as five days. A truck driver who apparently was planning to deliver the trailer to a Lockport

location discovered the leak.

"When the driver saw it leaking, he refused to touch it," Loder said.

How the leak went undiscovered for five days is not known. Loder noted that trailers are often unloaded from trains, then sit in the yard for several days before they are picked up.

"It should be reported immediately. It probably sat back there and nobody looked at it," Loder said. "There wasn't much of a puddle on the ground because it was probably evaporating."

No damage to the blacktop was detected, Loder added, which is unusual with chemical leaks. This may have contributed to the time lapse.

Evacuation of the yard and nearby homes and businesses was not required, because the wind was light.

A portion of the rail yard was cordoned off by emergency crews. A command post, staging area and decontamination area were set up, and a medical team with an ambulance was on site.

Sloan firefighters sprayed water on the trailer to cool its contents, but even that simple act initially posed a challenge for Erie County HAZMAT officials.

The trailer was surrounded by several trailers on both sides, and their individual contents were unknown. Because water does not mix well with certain chemicals, Loder said the contents of the adjoining trailers had to be determined before soaking the leaking trailer.

"It's a lot of investigating and paper checking before we do anything that we'd regret," said Loder. "It's a typical HAZMAT incident. They're long-term."

When the trailer was opened, HAZMAT members found organic peroxide fumes, but they did not detect the compound in its liquid form.

Monday's incident, which began around 4 p.m., lasted roughly five hours.

"It was a long day," Loder said. "Nobody got hurt, so that's always a plus."

Because Cheektowaga hosts the New York State Thruway and major railroad lines, hazardous materials are transported through the town on a regular basis, Loder added. He said that HAZMAT incidents occur more than once a year in town.