

The Bradford Era

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Drinking water samples collected in Gardeau are acceptable

HARRISBURG - Samples collected from wells in the Gardeau area of the Norfolk Southern train derailment do not exceed acceptable pH levels for drinking water, according to a statement released by Norfolk Southern Corp. Tuesday.

Norfolk Southern has tested more than 100 samples to date from residential wells between Gardeau and Driftwood, where the train derailed June 30.

The site will continue to be cleared of rail equipment and lading, with remediation and restoration to follow. Norfolk Southern said it will continue to work closely with state and local agencies involved to mitigate the effects of the derailment as quickly as possible.

The train cars leaked roughly 48,000 gallons of sodium hydroxide into the Sinnemahoning-Portage Creek, raising stream pH levels and killing most of its organisms. Fish kill was reported as far as 35 miles downstream from the spill the day after. The concentrated chemical leached into and dissolved most of the organic material in the soil and stream bottom, resulting in an organic soup which traveled downstream.

Biologists from the Department of Environmental Protection Northcentral and Northwest offices sampled the organisms living at the bottom of the stream, known as benthic macroinvertebrates last Thursday. These creatures, which include crayfish, snails and aquatic worms, are used as indicators of pollution in streams. They are able to live in a wide range of water quality conditions.

The head of the DEP Northcentral Region biologists, Tom Randis, reportedly said conditions in the Driftwood Branch of the Sinnemahoning Creek were "bleak."

It has been predicted that it could be five years before the affected streams fully recover, though the pH levels of affected streams below the spill have returned to normal, with the exception of about two miles of water on Portage Creek and Big Fill Hollow, reports on Saturday indicated.

The DEP and local agencies have warned residents to keep children and pets away from the stream until another report is released. Streams are being re-evaluated this week.

The Federal Railroad Administration completed its on-site probe into the cause of the derailment, but FRA officials say it may be weeks before the final report is released.

Norfolk Southern said in its release Tuesday the company "sincerely regrets the environmental damage resulting from the derailment, as well as the inconvenience experienced by residents of McKean and Cameron counties."

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