



Workers clean up derailed oil train cars in downtown Lynchburg, Va., a day after an April 30 accident there. Containment booms to prevent oil from spreading into the James River weren't put in place for hours.

PHOTO BY CURTIS TATE/MCT

# Oregon has no plans for river spills by oil trains

By Rob Davis | *The Oregonian*  
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**W**hen a CSX oil train derailed and caught fire April 30 in Lynchburg, Virginia, dumping more than 20,000 gallons of crude into the James River, the spill wasn't controlled for hours.

If a similar accident happened on an Oregon waterway, the response could be just as slow. Like Virginia, Oregon doesn't have any state law requiring railroads to plan for oil spills. Readiness has lagged.

Almost 500 million gallons of crude oil moved alongside Oregon waterways last year: the Columbia River, the Deschutes, the Willamette and Upper Klamath Lake. It's a new phenomenon, one that has introduced the risks of potentially catastrophic spills to some of the state's most iconic rivers, best-known salmon runs and world-renowned fishing destinations.

But despite months of nationwide public scrutiny of crude-by-rail safety, concern from Oregon Gov. John Kitzhaber and efforts by state regulators, spill planning is still a mess.

"It's moving very slow," said Scott Knutson, a U.S. Coast Guard oil spill official. "There's a lot of equipment. It may not yet all be in the right place for the changing transportation picture in the Northwest."

After the Virginia accident, an oil sheen spread 12 miles downriver. Containment booms, floating plastic barriers used to corral spills, weren't deployed for several hours, Virginia regulators say.



had been declared a federal emergency under the authority of Oregon's governor. That would not happen quickly after a derailment.

"We have limited to no authority to respond off site," said Scott Clemans, an Army Corps spokesman. "Off our own project sites, our capability and authority are both very limited."

A spokeswoman for Kitzhaber said the governor's office has asked railroads for more information about their response capabilities. And environmental advocates say coordination must improve.

Oil train terminals shouldn't be able to expand or open until the region is ready for spills along railroads, said Brett VandenHeuvel, director of Columbia Riverkeeper, a local environmental group.

"Oregon and the Pacific Northwest are being subjected to a grand experiment right now, moving explosive oil through communities and along our waterways with no preparation, no forethought, no planning," VandenHeuvel said. "It's a huge problem."

