

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-17-91](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

Recent rail accidents involving hazardous materials, such as crude oil, have raised questions about local emergency responders' ability to take protective actions in the aftermath of such accidents. Along with FRA, PHMSA is responsible for ensuring the safe transportation of hazardous materials by rail through issuing and enforcing railroad- and shipper-safety regulations.

GAO was asked to review efforts that enhance preparedness for hazardous materials rail accidents. This report examines: (1) the factors selected local emergency planners report affect preparedness; (2) the actions selected railroads have taken to support preparedness; and (3) the actions DOT has taken to support emergency planners.

GAO reviewed laws and regulations and surveyed (1) emergency planners representing 25 counties and 17 states with the highest volumes of hazardous materials rail shipments and (2) all seven Class I railroads and four smaller railroads selected because they operate in the counties where GAO surveyed local emergency planners.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DOT develop a process for regularly collecting information from state emergency-planning agencies about their distribution of railroad-provided hazardous materials shipping information to local emergency planning entities. DOT concurred with our recommendation.

View [GAO-17-91](#). For more information, contact Susan Fleming at (202) 512-2834 or [flemings@gao.gov](mailto:flemings@gao.gov).

November 2016

## HAZARDOUS MATERIALS RAIL SHIPMENTS

### Emergency Responders Receive Support, but DOT Could Improve Oversight of Information Sharing

#### What GAO Found

Emergency planners from most of the 25 selected counties in 17 states that GAO surveyed reported that training for responders and information about rail shipments of hazardous materials affect preparedness. Emergency planners from almost all of the selected counties reported that a majority of the emergency response personnel, such as fire fighters, who arrive first at an accident receive basic training that would enable them to take initial protective actions, including recognizing hazardous materials and calling for assistance in the event of a rail accident involving crude oil and other hazardous materials. Emergency planners from most counties reported that training related to rail hazardous materials was useful in preparing for accidents. Emergency planners reported that some factors present obstacles to responders' receiving training, such as neglecting one's professional duties to take time off for training. Emergency planners from most counties reported that railroads in their jurisdictions have provided them with information about hazardous material shipments and that this information is useful in preparing for potential accidents.

All seven of the largest railroads (called Class I railroads) and some of the four smaller railroads that GAO surveyed reported providing training and information about hazardous materials to local emergency responders and planners in recent years. The Class I railroads reported training through a variety of means, including locally delivered training exercises or off-site at industry-recognized training centers. In addition, railroads reported providing information about hazardous material shipments to state and local emergency planners in part due to a May 2014 Department of Transportation (DOT) Emergency Order requiring notification of state emergency-planning agencies about shipments of crude oil from North Dakota and Montana where the Bakken shale deposit is located. This information was intended to reach local emergency responders so that they could better prepare for rail accidents involving crude oil.

The Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA) and the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) within DOT have taken multiple actions to support emergency preparedness for rail incidents involving hazardous materials; some actions focused specifically on trains carrying Bakken crude oil. For example, PHMSA developed a web-based training curriculum on how to prepare for hazardous materials incidents, and FRA determined whether railroads provided information about Bakken crude-oil shipments to states. However, PHMSA learned that some states did not provide the information about Bakken crude oil shipments to local emergency planners, as called for in the Emergency Order. Recently enacted legislation expands FRA's oversight of railroads' actions moving forward; for example, railroads will be required to notify states of large shipments of other hazardous materials. However, FRA and PHMSA have not taken steps to understand whether the shipment information railroads are required to share with states is consistently disseminated to local emergency planners. Therefore, the extent to which DOT's information-sharing requirements have the potential to improve local preparedness for rail accidents involving hazardous materials is unclear.