

State and federal agencies gather in Plumas

Want to coordinate plans in the event of an oil train derailment

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Representatives from local, state and federal agencies filled the Mineral Building at the Plumas County fairgrounds April 22 with one mission — to develop a coordinated effort to respond to a derailed oil train.

“We all want to make sure we get it right when a situation occurs and it will occur,” said Eric Lamoureux, the regional administrator for the state’s Office of Emergency Services.

Lamoureux was one of several representatives from Cal OES, the group that will be organizing events in various locations throughout the state where the dangers of a Baaken oil spill loom.

“This is the first one,” said Thomas Campbell, the deputy chief of Hazmat Fire and Rescue Division for Cal OES. “This came out of the Governor’s report.”

The report “Oil by Rail Safety in California” was released in June of 2014 and addressed the potential for a disaster resulting from a spill or train derailment and made several recommendations, including developing and coordinating plans.

“Who does what? What are our resources?” Campbell asked. “The local government will be quickly overwhelmed.”

Plumas County was well represented in the meeting. Jerry Sipe, the director of the Office of Emergency services, helped coordinated the meeting. He was joined by representatives from the Sheriff’ Department, Public Works, Public Health and Environmental Health. There were several local representatives of the Forest Service as well.

Kevin Goss, the chairman of the Plumas Board of Supervisors, thanked everyone for coming and said he was “glad to see this happening.” The timing for the exercise was good, since there had been a train derailment in his district just two days prior.

“We need to have this exercise in Plumas County,” he said.

Joining the Plumas officials, were several representatives from Butte County. As the train tracks meander down the Feather River Canyon, they travel through both Butte and Plumas counties, and if oil were to spill, it could jeopardize Lake Oroville, a major contributor to the state’s water supply.

State and federal agencies in attendance included Cal Fire, the Office of Emergency Services, the Environmental Protection Agency (state and federal), the California Highway Patrol, the Department of Fish and Wildlife, the Department of Water Resources, the Public Utilities Commission, the Forest Service and others.

Pacific Gas & Electric and railroad representatives spoke for the private sector.

The group spent the morning discussing roles, plans and gaps in planning, while the afternoon was devoted to responding to a hypothetical incident — a train derailment that resulted in burning railroad cars and an oil spill into the Feather River.

During a follow-up interview, Sipe said that what became clear from the morning’s discussion is that there are “multiple planning efforts on parallel paths,” but there needs to be more coordination.

Following the mock exercise, Sipe said that in an actual emergency, local law enforcement would be coordinating the response for the first two to four hours until outside help could arrive.

And that response would depend on the nature and scope of the event. If a fire were to erupt, Cal Fire and the Forest Service would quickly become involved. If oil spilled into the river or was threatening to, then

a host of other agencies would respond.

Why the effort

Train derailments have always been a threat in Plumas County and the state, but new cargo has put a spotlight on the danger.

Baaken oil, a product obtained through fracking, behaves more like gasoline than other types of oil and is considered more volatile. In July of 2013, a derailment in Lac-Megantic, Quebec, caused 63 cars to explode, leveling half the downtown area and killing 47.

Of the two railroad lines traveling through Plumas County — Burlington Northern Santa Fe and Union Pacific — only the former is transporting Baaken oil.

The railroads do not share specific route information for safety reasons, but Sipe said that BNSF is the only railroad that is shipping reportable quantities of 1,000,000 gallons at a time (roughly 32 tank cars in a single train).