

W02 – Breaking news writing

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### **Train derailment sent 36 cars full of coal into the Great Dismal Swamp**

<https://www.dailypress.com/news/dp-nws-train-cleanup-0627-story.html>

Thirty-six railroad cars full of coal went off the tracks early Tuesday and landed in the Great Dismal Swamp, officials said Wednesday.

The 3,600 tons of coal is fine, almost like sand. It went into the water along with some of the cars. It's still being cleaned up.

The derailment occurred about 5 miles west of the intersection of Yadkin and Galberry roads, near the tracks that run parallel to Yadkin Road, said refuge manager Chris Lowie. It's in Chesapeake but not far from the Suffolk border.

"It's literally right in the middle of the swamp," said Lowie.

Norfolk Southern originally told The Virginian-Pilot the accident happened in the Portlock area of Chesapeake. The company finally acknowledged it was "within the boundaries" of the swamp more than 24 hours after the derailment.

In explaining the discrepancy in location, a Norfolk Southern spokesman wrote in an email that "'near Portlock' ... accurately conveyed the closest geographic reference point on the railroad system."

The train derailed around 4:20 a.m. Tuesday. No one was injured, but Amtrak service was canceled for Tuesday and Wednesday. It is expected to be back to normal on Thursday.

The cause of the derailment has not been determined and is under investigation, the spokesman, Tom Werner, wrote.

Lowie said he got a call about six hours after the derailment. A Norfolk Southern representative called to talk about access in cleaning up the remnants of the accident. The railroad's permit allows them use of 50 feet of land on either side of the center of the tracks.

"My first thoughts were, 'Holy cow, what a mess,'" Lowie said. "It was 36 cars all piled up like an accordion, most of them sideways and perpendicular to the tracks. Just debris and coal everywhere."

The cleanup will take several weeks and occur in stages, Werner said in an email.

First, Norfolk Southern will remove the damaged rail and coal from the right-of-way, then from the wildlife refuge. That phase will take two to three weeks. The company will work with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality to restore the 2.3 acres affected by the derailment, Werner wrote.

The Federal Railroad Administration said in a statement that it was aware of the derailment and was "monitoring" the company's response.

Norfolk Southern, one of the four largest U.S. railroad companies, reported 191 derailments last year, it's second-largest number in 10 years. In 2016, it had 192 derailments, according to Federal Railroad Administration data.

The Great Dismal Swamp is a National Wildlife Refuge, so there is concern about the coal going into the water, Lowie said. The refuge is home to endangered wildlife such as long-eared bats and red-cockaded woodpeckers.

Other resident wildlife, such as deer and bears, could be affected, but the most likely to be directly affected are aquatic species, such as frogs, turtles, snakes and amphibians, Lowie said.

"The coal itself is not a hazardous material," he said "But when it does get in the water and there are heavy metals, it can leach out of the coal and into the water."

Coal contains toxins such as arsenic, lead, mercury, nickel, chromium and selenium, said Ann Creasy, who works on Hampton Roads community outreach for the Sierra Club's Virginia Chapter.

"I think there is likely more information to be gained about how these particular toxins affect ecosystems and flora and fauna long term from the water," she said. She said that down the line it poses mutation risks.

"It's a fragile area — that makes the impacts of the toxins there even more concerning," she said.

The sedimentation and the particulates could be a special concern because not only are you dealing with the chemical pollutants, but a massive physical pollutant, she said.

Lowie said the acidic content of the water can draw out the heavy metals in the coal and it can work up the food chain. The water in the swamp has not been sampled to test for coal since the derailment.

Werner said the company has already submitted a preliminary cleanup plan to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

"The coal spill is confined to a relatively small area adjacent to NS' tracks and there is no impact to any major waterway," the company said in a statement, meaning that the spill did not occur in a river or lake.

An environmental company hired by Norfolk Southern is on site along with representatives from the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality. The Environmental Protection Agency is also involved, but has not been on the scene yet.

Lowie said not only are they concerned about the impact to the water, but also the soil and groundwater.

The refuge is going to request monitoring of the surface waters and soil, Lowie said.

"That's really going to determine if it got cleaned up," he said. "That's the true test."

The swamp's soil is largely made up of organic matter, so it's not easily replaced if it's contaminated, he said.

"There is permitting that needs to be done to come into compliance with the incident," he said. "We're working diligently to get that in place so this can get cleaned up as fast as possible."

DEQ said they are in the early stages of the incident and "right now the focus is on restoration of rail service in the corridor and protecting the environment."

"Coal is largely a physical component," said John Giese, the manager of the office of pollution response and emergency preparedness. "If you spill that much coal, it can be a smothering agent."

Two sets of tracks run through the swamp. On Wednesday evening, the bent tracks veering off to the right side were still visible.

Nearly a thousand feet of track was affected by the derailment and repair teams have been working since shortly after the incident to stage materials and equipment in order to repair the damage, Werner said. He added that he expects the line to reopen by Thursday morning or sooner.

First, they'll look at the process of removing the coal, then they will look at mitigating the impacts to the wetlands, he said.

"We do expect there will be disturbance of the wetlands in the process of removing the coal," he said.

Lowie said the train was about 100 cars long and it was at the tail end of the train where the cars fell off.

"We all want it out of there as fast as possible, but there is a process to follow," Lowie said.

Cleanup crews are hoping to haul the coal out the same way it came in, on train cars, by the end of the week, he said.

"We all have a job to do," Lowie said. "Those guys out there on the rail line, their job is to get those lines running as soon as possible ... my job is to protect the refuge and the wildlife habitats."