

# City of Alexandria, Virginia

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## MEMORANDUM

**DATE:** SEPTEMBER 7, 2012

**TO:** THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

**FROM:** RASHAD M. YOUNG, CITY MANAGER 

**SUBJECT:** NORFOLK SOUTHERN ETHANOL TRANS-LOADING FACILITY  
INCIDENT ON SEPTEMBER 4, 2012

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As you know, on September 4, 2012, there was an accidental ethanol spill that occurred at the Norfolk Southern Ethanol Trans-loading Facility (the "Facility") during a transfer event from a rail car to a tanker trailer. Because of the sensitivity and obvious public safety considerations involved with the Facility's proximity to residential, commercial, and school facilities, we want City Council and the community to have all the information and facts about this event and our response to it.

As you are aware, the City has no regulatory ability with respect to Norfolk Southern's operations and its Facility. They are under no legal obligation to notify us after a spill occurs although their incident management plan has a procedure in place that directs them to do so. In this case, once the spill occurred the staff at the Facility took immediate action to shut down the transfer pump and lay out booms and absorbent pads to contain the spill. Much of the spill was also caught in spill pans, so the exact amount of ethanol that reached the ground is unknown.

As the timeline below indicates, the Alexandria Fire Department (AFD) Special Operations Battalion Chief was notified via email from the Virginia Department of Emergency Management (VDEM) about the spill. He then notified the AFD Environmental Investigations Unit (EIU) and subsequently requested that the on duty Fire Marshal and Hazardous Materials Team respond. Norfolk Southern also directly notified the City by calling the non-emergency number at our Department of Emergency Communication (DEC), approximately an hour after the spill occurred. However, at the time we initially communicated the incident to City Council and the community on the evening of September 4, my office was unaware that a call had been placed to DEC.

The chronology of events is as follows:

**1710 hours** – Norfolk Southern staff notified their internal dispatchers that a spill occurred, who in turn contacted the National Response Center (NRC). In addition, Norfolk Southern sent a

report to NRC that stated the spill had occurred at 1645 hours. The NRC, in turn, notified the Virginia Department of Emergency Management (VDEM).

**1721 hours** – The Region 7 (VDEM) State Hazardous Materials Officer sent the NRC report via email to Alexandria Fire Department (AFD) Battalion Chief Cross who, in turn, sent out a notification e-mail to the AFD Environmental Investigations Unit (EIU).

**1740 hours** – The City’s Department of Emergency Communications received a “courtesy call” from Norfolk Southern Railway. The DEC call taker was notified of the ethanol spill and the call taker advised the caller that he would notify the AFD. The Norfolk Southern representative also advised the DEC call taker that the spill was not an emergency and that Norfolk Southern had already notified the NRC. After the call, the DEC call taker notified Fire Captain Jay Fair who was working at DEC at the time and advised him of the call.

**1746 hours** – Battalion Chief Cross sent an email notice of the spill to the EIU Notification Group.

**1747 hours** – Battalion Chief Cross called Fire Captain Casalena to ask him to take the Hazardous Materials Team to investigate the spill 1) to ensure that it had been contained and to determine if any flammable vapors had developed, and 2) to ensure that those vapors had been suppressed. Even though the report from the NRC had indicated that the spill was contained, Battalion Chief Cross wanted the AFD Hazardous Materials Team to verify the safety of the site.

**1753 hours** – Fire Marshal units proceeded to the incident location to investigate.

**1800 hours** – Battalion Chief Cross called DEC and spoke with Supervisor Ponce and advised her that he wanted DEC to dispatch a Fire Marshal to the Norfolk Southern Facility. Engine 209, HAZMAT 209, and Special Hazards 209 were dispatched. The call was entered into DEC’s Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD) system as an Investigation.

**1807 hours** – Fire Marshal units were officially dispatched at this time and arrived on the scene at 1808 and 1817 hours. Upon arriving on the scene, Fire Marshals determined that all of the ethanol that had spilled on the ground had evaporated. The only ethanol that remained to be cleaned up was that which had been absorbed by the booms and pads deployed by Norfolk Southern. While units from Station 209 were responding, one of our Fire Marshals advised that the spill had been contained and the Hazardous Materials Team was not needed at the scene. Their response was cancelled at 1818 hours.

**1900 hours** - A Norfolk Southern clean-up contractor arrived on scene at approximately 1900 hours to remove the booms and pads and to clean the ground where the spill occurred.

**1912 hours** – City Manager’s Office was advised of the spill.

**2135 hours** – Email was sent to City Council regarding the spill. Subsequent to Council notice, information was posted to City website and sent notification to community leaders in Cameron Station and Summers Grove.

While the Alexandria Fire Department initiated a response to the Facility to investigate the incident and to ensure that there were no public safety hazards to the community or the Facility once we received notification that the spill had occurred, there are several issues on which we intend to follow up.

- The first and most significant is to revisit the incident management protocols of the Facility and encourage Norfolk Southern to contact DEC immediately after a spill or any accidental ethanol release occurs.
- Second, we want to establish a more appropriate communication protocol with VDEM in its notification to the City on any critical incident that occurs in Alexandria. VDEM communicated this incident to us via an email to one of our Battalion Chiefs. While we are thankful that we received our initial notification of this incident from them, we think a more certain and reliable notification would be to communicate any critical incident to our Emergency Management Division within the AFD or directly to DEC as they have 24/7 coverage. The Battalion Chief who initiated our response to the Facility was on annual leave but just happened to have checked his email and became aware of the incident. We also want to improve our internal notification protocols so that the City Manager's Office and senior staff receive timelier incident notifications than what occurred in this instance and improve our timeliness in getting accurate and factual information to communicate to City Council and the public.
- Finally, representatives from Norfolk Southern and RSI Logistics (the Norfolk Southern subcontractor that operates the Facility) were present at the Local Emergency Planning Committee (LEPC) meeting on September 5, 2012, and gave a brief summary of the incident and explained the actions taken. According to Norfolk Southern protocols, this incident was considered a non-emergency and the actions taken resulted in immediate mitigation of the incident. We are working to schedule a meeting with Norfolk Southern and RSI representatives to discuss response notification procedures and encourage a meeting with the impacted communities to discuss the same.

Should you have any additional questions, please contact me.

cc: Michele Evans, Deputy City Manager  
Adam Thiel, Fire Chief  
JoAnne Munroe, Director, DEC  
Tony Castrilli, Director, Office of Communications and Public Information