

## OP-ED



GENE J. PUSKAR Associated Press

A PLUME rises over East Palestine, Ohio, from a fire set by authorities to burn off chemicals.

## Curb plastics, or expect more toxic derailments

A recent train crash released vinyl chloride, a component of PVC. Why are we using so much of it in the first place?

By Rebecca Fuoco, David Rosner and Gerald Markowitz

IMAGES OF DEAD fish floating in murky water and menacing plumes of gray smoke are haunting the nation's front pages. Interviews with distressed residents are interspersed with exasperated talking heads on our television screens. A month after the train derailment disaster in East Palestine, Ohio, America continues to witness to the community's suffering.

Though any fiery train wreck is hazardous, this one was particularly catastrophic given the chemicals onboard. Chief among them was cancer-causing vinyl chloride gas, which officials intentionally released into the surrounding air to avoid an explosion. Residents were evacuated during this operation, but long-term pollution and exposure concerns remain. Just last week the Environmental Protection Agency ordered the railway to test the air for dioxins, which can also cause cancer and linger in the environment long after vinyl chloride and other plastic chemicals are burned.

Soon the camera crews will pack up and public attention will shift to the next big story. But for East Palestine, the story is just beginning, and the following chapters are likely to be grim. We know because the same chemical

contaminated — and eventually destroyed — several towns in Louisiana decades ago.

Morrisonville, La., was founded after the Civil War by freedmen and blossomed into a vibrant, predominantly African American community. But in 1958, chemical giant Dow built a vinyl chloride plant near the river, displacing the town's sugar and cotton fields. Demand for PVC plastic — the main product manufactured with vinyl chloride — grew, and the plant further encroached on the community. As one resident put it to the *Times-Picayune* at the time, the plant was right “on top of us.” Blaring sirens warning of toxic releases soon became a part of daily life. During these events, residents were told to close windows and doors and huddle inside to avoid breathing in too much of the toxic fumes.

When environmental groups and the EPA started noticing increased diseases and dying fish in the 1980s, Dow made modest offers to buy residents out of their homes, often barely enough to buy or rent a new home. When residents refused, they faced pressure. If they didn't take the offer, the company suggested, their property would soon become worthless because of the

pollution. By the early 1990s, the town was entirely abandoned, save for a graveyard.

Reveilletown, La., was another bustling community built by formerly enslaved people and destroyed by the PVC plastics industry. A major manufacturer, Georgia Gulf, eventually overtook the town, spewing vinyl chloride and its byproducts into the air and water. The company razed the community, dispersing the residents far from one another — severing their common bonds, church memberships and any political cohesion they might otherwise have had. The residents of the town organized a candlelight vigil in 1989 in which “Black and white environmentalists mourned the death” of the community, according to former resident Janice Dickerson.

A similar fate befell Mossville, La. Vinyl chloride producers polluted the town and a decade ago began buying out residents when the toxic consequences were borne out.

Vinyl chloride production not only laid waste to these towns, but it also contributed to the surrounding region becoming known as “Cancer Alley.” The water, air and land in this area have become the sewers of America's plastic and chemical industries.

Seven of the 10 U.S. census tracts with the highest cancer risks from air toxics are in this area, according to a 2014 EPA analysis. The same analysis found that residents of one town are 50 times more likely than the average American to develop cancer from air pollution.

The vinyl chloride emissions in East Palestine originated from a train carrying the chemical, rather than a plant's smokestacks. As a result, most public scrutiny has focused on the Norfolk Southern Railway corporation and transportation agencies instead of the chemical industry. (A second Norfolk Southern train derailed in Ohio on Saturday, though officials say this crash involved no hazardous materials.) Improved railroad and chemical transport safety is undeniably crucial for preventing this type of disaster in the future.

However, it's also important to look at the bigger picture. The East Palestine train was carrying this dangerous chemical in the first place because of a booming plastics industry that's expanding to Ohio and other parts of Appalachia. What happened in Louisiana will happen elsewhere too unless swift action is taken.

PVC is ubiquitous, used in products as wide-ranging as toys and pipes. But it's also very replaceable. Materials experts say that alternatives including glass, ceramics, linoleum and polyesters are feasible substitutes in most cases. That's why it would be a common-sense move for the government to restrict all nonessential uses of PVC, giving way to a phaseout of vinyl chloride production.

PVC has already been banned in most food packaging in Canada and South Korea, and legislation to ban it has been floated in California. However, more comprehensive action is needed on PVC — and on the larger plastics crisis. Two months before the derailment, the United Nations kicked off negotiations for a global treaty to limit the production and use of plastic. The Ohio disaster is a stark reminder of plastic's human costs and should energize calls to make this treaty as strong as possible.

Until then, vinyl chloride and plastics plants will continue to poison air and send toxic trains barreling across America's railroads. What's at stake is the health of nearby residents, their communities and the environment. History has shown that this dirty industry risks turning even the liveliest small communities into ghost towns.

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## The pitch clock — you're gonna love it

By Scott Jennings

I AM A CONSERVATIVE. Radical policy changes to longstanding institutions are naturally worrisome to me.

And so it was as a skeptic that I made my semi-frequent sojourn to Jupiter, Fla., to assess my beloved St. Louis Cardinals as they embarked on another spring training. I was leery not because of the team — no, the Redbirds are in fine shape, and I implore you to learn the name Jordan Walker — but, rather, because of the game's new rules under which the Cardinals and their Major League brethren will labor this season.

Chief among them is a pitch clock, which enforces that a pitcher must begin his motion toward the plate within 15 seconds of the ball being returned to him, 20 seconds with at least one runner on base, or 30 seconds between batters. Failure to throw a pitch before time runs out results in an automatic ball.

Likewise, if a batter fails to square up in the batter's box before 8 seconds remain on the pitch clock, he is assessed a strike.

In either case, a trip to the plate can be fundamentally altered if you violate the rules.

Major League Baseball has been contemplating a pitch clock for years, as game times pushed to three hours and beyond. To a baseball purist like me, the idea was anathema at first. The national pastime was just about the only major sport that existed with no clock (even the PGA punishes golfers for slow play these days) because baseball wasn't meant to be rushed but, rather, to be savored.

But after immersing myself in the new world order for a week, I must admit: I love it.

I watched six games, all under three hours. The shortest was



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ST. LOUIS CARDINALS starting pitcher Jack Flaherty had to adhere to new rules Monday against the Houston Astros.

2 hours and 25 minutes, and the longest was 2 hours and 59 minutes. And this was spring training, where lineup and pitching changes are far more plentiful than in regular season tilts.

No more screwing around on the mound. No more stepping in and out of the box to adjust gloves and body armor. No more pacing about in the latter innings for relief pitchers who heretofore treated each pitch like a State of the Union address, whether the game was 1-1 or 12-0.

They just played ball, and at a pace that reminded you of the baseball of your youth. Although I bet there are more than a few stadium operations directors out there calculating how many fewer \$7 hot dogs they'll sell this season.

I kept my eyes on the clock frequently, although it became less important to me as the week wore on. I saw a handful of infractions, but not many. This will ultimately function like the play clock in football, which is rarely violated but potentially consequential when it is. On most pitches, you get a sense of

whether the pitcher will make it within the first couple of seconds of his receiving the ball. The clock created a rhythm that was easy to feel as the game went on.

Parents will love the new rules. I have four children — 13, 9, 7 and 5. Ever take four little kids to a baseball game? Three hours-plus seemed like a trip to Mars and back as we shuttled between the concession stands, merry-go-rounds and playground equipment. Was there even a game going on somewhere?

But kids can handle something short of three hours, and you don't feel like you spent \$300 on tickets to see half a game.

I like the play clock so much I've started daydreaming about other parts of my life that could use it. Put one over the creamer station at the coffee shop. Put one in airplanes to get dilly-dallying passengers into their seats. Put one in our minivan to get my kids out of the car in a timely fashion.

The other new rule that's significant is a ban on “the shift.” In recent years, Major League teams have been overloading one

side of the diamond with several fielders, playing the odds that a particular batter would pull the ball. The game's beautifully symmetric field and corresponding defense had turned into a computer-driven, lopsided mess.

Forcing teams to keep two infield players on either side of second base with everyone on the dirt when a pitch is thrown should increase the league's overall batting average, which fell to .243 last season, the worst in 54 years. More hard-hit grounders will become hits, which means more base runners and more action. All of this serves the game better than letting computers turn it into an algorithmic eyesore.

The bases are slightly bigger this year, but that's a change you won't notice, and MLB has also limited pick-off attempts with runners on base, which will marginally speed up play as well.

So far, around the league the new rules have produced the intended results — the overall batting average is up. Scoring is up. And game times are down around 22 minutes.

The game itself — with its steady pace and perfectly conceived symmetry newly restored — is actually enhanced for casual and hard-core fans.

Add the new rules to the National League's recent adoption of the designated hitter (which puts more runs on the board and increases the lifespan of some of the game's veteran hitters) and you've got the makings of a baseball renaissance.

Just don't get me started on the ghost runner at second base in extra innings.

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## How Fox News treats viewers as snowflakes

The TV network has tried to protect its brand as a safe space for the MAGA audience.

JONAH GOLDBERG

IF YOU SEARCH for “safe space” on the Foxnews.com website you'll get over 46,000 results. All of them aren't about those woke snowflakes who need trigger warnings and cry rooms. But a lot of them are.

For instance, in 2017, shortly after the inauguration of Donald Trump, Tucker Carlson grilled a college professor about a student who came into her classroom crying about the election. “As the adult shouldn't you say, ‘You know, it was an election, and it was democratic, and nobody got cancer, nobody died, and maybe you should toughen up a little?’”

Would that Carlson and the rest of Fox's leadership had a similar attitude toward their own audience, whose average age is 56.

“A little more than a week after television networks called the 2020 presidential election for Joseph R. Biden Jr.,” the *New York Times*'s Peter Baker reported, “top executives and anchors at Fox News held an after-action meeting to figure out how they had messed up.”

The primary mess-up was the network's decision to call Arizona for Joe Biden at 11:20 p.m. on election night. The call infuriated the Trump campaign and viewers alike.

Save for Washington managing editor Bill Sammon, who also served on the “Decision Desk” that made the call, attendees at the meeting believed the Arizona announcement hurt Fox's “brand” — not because they got it wrong, or even because they got it right. It hurt the brand because it hurt people's feelings.

That's it. Calling Arizona had no real-world effect. Arizona's polls — and polls everywhere except for solidly Democratic Hawaii — were closed. It was a bit like telling a fan who recorded the Super Bowl that his team lost before he had a chance to finish watching the game. It was mean, but no one wanted to tell the audience to “toughen up.”

Of course, Trump himself was angry for another reason. He'd encouraged his voters to vote on election day so he could claim to be ahead that night and declare victory before mail-in votes were counted the next day. He thought he could then win in the courts or Congress. As Stephen K. Bannon admitted *before* the election, this was always the plan. But the Arizona call made it harder to claim he was ever beating Biden.

It's unclear whether some Fox opinion hosts were complicit or simply useful idiots in this scheme. But there's no evidence the executives were in on any of that. Their overriding concern was simply not to hurt the feelings of the viewers and thereby lose them to upstart pro-Trump rivals One America News Network and Newsmax, which were all too happy to be safe spaces for election fraud lies.

At the meeting, Martha MacCallum, who co-anchored election coverage with Bret Baier, said of the Arizona call, “There's just obviously been a tremendous amount of backlash, which is, I think, more than any of us anticipated.” A “loud faction of our viewership” saw the call as an affront, she said.

“We are still getting bombarded,” Baier said. “It became really hurtful.” Both MacCallum and Baier argued for a “layer” of decision-making that would take into account the “implications.”

Thanks to revelations from Dominion Voting System's defamation lawsuit against Fox (where I was a contributor for over a decade), we know that Fox leadership believed that protecting Fox's brand as a safe space was more important than reporting the news — specifically claims that the election was “rigged.” Indeed, even expressing the opinion that Trump's claims were nonsense was frowned upon.

Sammon resisted retracting the call, to the consternation of Fox Chief Executive Suzanne Scott. In an email to a colleague, she complained that Sammon failed to understand “the impact to the brand and the arrogance in calling AZ” and it was his job “to protect the brand.” Sammon believed his job was to, well, do his job as a journalist. He and Chris Stirewalt, the political editor (and my colleague at the Dispatch), were forced out because they violated the audience's safe space.

In 2018, Fox revealed a new slogan, “Real News. Real Honest Opinion.” In the promotional ad, Carlson says, “Fox is the one place where dissent is allowed.”

But when Jacqui Heinrich, a Fox reporter, fact-checked a Trump tweet claiming the election was stolen, Carlson, who privately acknowledged that his honest opinion conflicted with what viewers were being told, texted colleagues: “Please get her fired.” He added: “It needs to stop immediately, like tonight. It's measurably hurting the company. The stock price is down. Not a joke.”

Humor, of course, is in the eye of the beholder, but it's hard not to chuckle at all the mockery of “safe spaces” now.

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