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ALERT FEATURED TOP STORY BREAKING EDITOR'S PICK

Deadly fog: Multiple crashes on I-5 in Linn County

Maddie Pfeifer , Alex Powers

Oct 19, 2022



The scene from Bond Butte overpass of a multi-car crash on I-5 South on Wednesday morning, Oct. 19.

Kylie Graham, Mid-Valley Media

Maddie Pfeifer , Alex Powers

Editor's note: This story is developing. Check back for updates, photo and video from the scene.

At least one person is dead Wednesday, Oct. 19 following multiple foggy-morning crashes on southbound Interstate-5 that had a domino effect, causing more accidents throughout the day and backing traffic all the way to Albany.

In all, Oregon Department of Transportation reported 65 vehicles collided in what is likely one of the worst pile-up crashes in state history. More crashed Wednesday afternoon in two separate crashes in the backup from Highway 228, where the southbound lanes were closed.

In one of those subsequent crashes, a truck reportedly caught fire and exploded after a tractor-trailer collided with another, ODOT spokesperson Angela Beers-Seydel said.

“A semi hit another semi. Explosions were reported,” Beers-Seydel said. ODOT had to pull resources from far and wide. “We have responders from the coast, from the mountains.”

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The department is used to reports of two- or three-vehicle accidents on a regular basis, Beers-Seydel said. Wednesday's pileup was altogether different.

“This is not something we see very often, certainly not outside of a winter storm,” she said.

The freeway was initially closed at milepost 216 near the OR 228 Halsey-Brownsville exit following the crashes, an ODOT news release said. Traffic was being detoured to OR 99E.



Scenes from a multi-car crash on I5 south on Wednesday, Oct. 19.

Kylie Graham, Mid-Valley Media

The freeway was likely to be closed all day, Oregon State Police Capt. Stephanie Bigman said by email. The northbound left lane of Interstate-5 was temporarily closed at milepost 211 so southbound drivers could turn around into the northbound lanes, according to ODOT.

By 4:30 p.m., ODOT announced one lane had opened, and by around 5:10 p.m., ODOT said Interstate 5 southbound was open south of OR 228.

At 6:30 p.m., a new update announced that southbound I-5 remains closed south of Albany at the OR 34 interchange, milepost 228. Traffic is being detoured to 99E.

Southbound traffic can reenter I-5 near Halsey at the OR 228 interchange, milepost 216. Northbound traffic remains open, but travelers should expect delays.

The precipitating incident involved 15 to 20 commercial motor vehicles and 45 passenger vehicles, with the crashes spanning a 1-mile stretch of the freeway, according to Oregon State Police.

Fog was considered the preliminary cause.

Travelers should drive with caution, use alternate routes and look for emergency responders, according to Oregon State Police.

First-hand accounts

Tsendjav Jargal was behind the wheel of a lime-green Peterbilt car carrier when a vehicle in front of him abruptly braked.

“He stopped. No flashing lights,” Jargal said.

And that was that. Jargal held a palm vertically in front of his face.

The fog that settled over I-5 Wednesday morning may as well have been a wall. “Couldn’t see at all,” he said.



Slow-motion footage from the aftermath of a chain-reaction crash Wednesday morning, Oct. 19, that killed at least one, injured more and involved 65 vehicles.

Alex Powers

Traffic was moving about 45 mph, Jargal said. He said he whipped the commercial tractor’s steering wheel but couldn’t avoid a vehicle slamming to a halt in front of his.

Garrett Moore was hooking the smashed Peterbilt behind a massive wrecker truck. He said Corvallis-based Bob's Auto Repair & Towing took a call from the truck's owner.

Moore had no idea what he was driving into until he saw myriad ODOT and state police vehicles lining the roadway, he said.

Meanwhile Jargal wasn't sure how he was getting home to California, he said.

He was quiet for a moment, then mentioned his children, the youngest 6 years old, he said.

"I have a big family," he said. "Three kids."

A tow truck operated by Charles Varner, a driver with Albany-based AA Towing, was saddled with a construction contractor's van and was pulling a smashed Chevrolet Silverado 3500 behind it.

Varner said he was hard-pressed to remember the last collision that ensnared dozens of cars on I-5.

It could have a 1988 incident, when 24 cars collided south of Albany, he said. Smoke blowing over the freeway diminished visibility and was blamed in a chain-reaction crash that killed seven and injured 38. (Beers-Seydel confirmed this pileup had been considered the state's worst for I-5.)

"It's been a long time. I was a little grasshopper when that happened," Varner said.

The aftermath

The Department of Environmental Quality and HAZMAT teams responded to six of the commercial motor vehicles that were leaking fluids onto the roadway, an OSP news release said.

School buses from Eugene arrived at the scene to aid in relocating around 30 to 40 stranded motorists to Pioneer Villa at exit 216, according to OSP.

Samaritan Health Services Public Information Officer Mark Ylen said Good Samaritan Regional Medical Center in Corvallis received at least three patients involved in the crashes and Samaritan Lebanon Community Hospital received at least one.

In an update sent around 3 p.m., ODOT said Interstate-5 southbound was closed from milepost 228 (the OR 34 Corvallis-Lebanon exit) to milepost 211 due to multiple, multi-vehicle crashes on top of cleanup of the earlier crashes.

Less than an hour later, a different ODOT update said a jackknifed semi-truck had closed down the southbound freeway south of U.S. 20 in Albany. Traffic was being detoured at U.S. 20. There were multiple crashes on I-5 between Albany and Harrisburg throughout the day, including in the backups from earlier crashes.

"Obviously, these types of incidents are very rare, thank goodness," ODOT's Beers-Seydel said.

Beers-Seydel didn't yet know how many people were killed or injured in the three crashes Wednesday. She also couldn't say how many police and fire departments responded to the crashes.

But the response was massive.

"This involves all of our response teams from multiple jurisdictions, multiple cities. We've got everyone out there," she said.

The crash Wednesday morning involved more vehicles than the crash in 1988. Seydel-Beers said she was waiting on staff to pull department data to confirm whether any I-5 crashes had involved more vehicles.

"That's the one that comes to mind," she said. "I don't know that this is the worst. I have to wait for the data."

A weather warning

About an hour before the crash, at around 6:55 a.m. Wednesday, the National Weather Service issued a dense fog advisory for areas in the mid-Willamette valley including Corvallis, Albany and Lebanon. Other affected cities affected included Springfield and Eugene.

The advisory was in effect until noon, according to NWS, and visibility was one-quarter to one half-mile in dense fog below 3,000 feet.

Impacts include hazardous driving conditions, the advisory said, and drivers should slow down, use headlights and leave plenty of distance between themselves and other cars.

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The heavy fog comes ahead of expected cool and wet weather throughout the area. A Monday, Oct. 17 National Weather Service special weather statement said the rainy season is expected to start Friday or Saturday, bringing an end to the “extended unseasonably dry and hot weather.”

The statement said roads may become slippery with the wet weather, and clogged drains or gutters may overflow.

A **smoke air quality advisory** is also still in effect in Linn and Benton counties. The advisory is in effect until 6 p.m. Thursday, according to NWS. Community members should limit outdoor activities and keep children indoors if it’s noticeably smoky.

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