

HIGHWAY TRAGEDY

Fatal I-40 crash near Parks linked to prescribed burn smoke

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Pea soup-like smoke from a prescribed burn that limited driver visibility to the length of a front hood is being linked to a series of accidents Wednesday morning on I-40 west of Parks. One person was killed and several more injured after collisions that closed the highway in both directions for five hours.

A Highway Patrol captain at the scene said smoke in the area reduced visibility down to about 20 feet, Department of Public Safety spokesman Bart Graves said. Sherwood Forest Estates Fire Chief Wayne Marx said even his crews had to stick their heads out the window to watch the yellow stripe on the road as they escorted commuters away from the interstate.

"You couldn't see past the end of the hood," Marx said.

According to DPS, two semi trucks and a Chevrolet van were involved in a collision in the eastbound lanes of I-40 at approximately 3:30 a.m. at milepost 173, located between Parks and Williams near Pittman Valley. The driver of the van died at the scene.

DPS has not released the driver's identity or many details about the crash, but Ponderosa Fire District Chief Erin Hudman said it occurred in low-visibility conditions.

"Basically, it was a chain reaction from what we could tell, with the semi, another van and another semi/tractor trailer," she said.

The van was sandwiched between the two semi trucks.

The U.S. Forest Service halted plans for additional prescribed burns due to weather conditions Wednesday and Thursday, but residual smoke from burning that took place Tuesday likely settled along the interstate overnight as temperatures cooled.

One retired meteorologist who lives in the area believes more precautions should have been taken. Parks resident Byron Peterson, who retired from National Weather Service station in Bellemont, said the smoke was already bad on Old Route 66 Tuesday afternoon. Firefighters waved him on, he said, even though there were times when he could not see 10 feet in front of him.

"It was very frightening to say the least," Peterson said.

He said strong southwest winds coming up over Bill Williams Mountain near Williams formed an eddy of swirling air that then dove down over the prescribed burn, keeping the smoke from dissipating.

"I tried to explain that to people at the Forest Service and it was just like talking to a wall," he said.

Cary Asel, who owns Parks in the Pines General Store on Old Route 66 in Parks, was late for work Wednesday morning because the school buses were all running behind schedule due to the highway closure. He finally arrived at about 8:30 a.m. His customers lamented the smoke and the traffic problems it created.

"People that got stuck in the smoke with asthma had a really difficult time," Asel said. "It was so thick, you couldn't see."

Asel said the prescribed burns near Parks were actually worse in 2015 because there were more of them. The smoke gets so bad, he said, that some people have to leave their homes every year until the prescribed burns end.

"When it's that thick, you can keep your windows closed but it still seeps into your house," Asel said.

It was not immediately determined whether the smoke caused or contributed to the fatal wreck, Graves said.

"We're still investigating it. We have not ruled it out," he said.

Highway Troopers responded to five additional collisions on eastbound and westbound I-40 in roughly the same area as the fatal crash Wednesday morning. Two of the crashes resulted in injuries.

The highway was closed for 35 miles between Williams and Flagstaff for about five hours. Traffic was diverted north to Highway 64 and 180, an 80-mile-long alternative route that added about an hour of travel time.

"There was still heavy smoke in the area so as a safety aspect they were waiting for that smoke to clear," said Trooper Jim Carne. "For the people that were stuck in the backup, (the troopers) were slowly escorting them through the smoke-filled zone to get them out of the area."

Fire crews with the Williams Ranger District completed ignitions in the 5,141-acre Parks West area on Tuesday as part of the Green Base Prescribed Fire Project on the Kaibab National Forest. It is one of many prescribed burns designed by forest officials to reduce the risk of uncharacteristically severe wildfires.

The U.S. Forest Service had warned that smoke would be "very visible" from I-40, Highway 64, Red Lake, Spring Valley and the Kendrick Mountain area.

Smoke from a prescribed burn conducted by the Kaibab National Forest was present along I-40 in the area where the freeway was closed,

"The Forest Service is aware of the motor vehicle accidents today on Interstate 40 near Parks, Arizona that involved one fatality," said Brady Smith, a U.S. Forest Service spokesman. "We extend our condolences to the family of that individual. The Arizona Department of Public Safety is investigating the accidents along with Forest Service law enforcement personnel."

Department of Transportation spokesperson Ryan Harding said there were four overhead electronic signs on I-40 and Interstate 17 cautioning drivers about the possibility of smoke in the area since Oct. 10 and added a fifth on I-17 near McGuireville Tuesday.

"When an ADOT employee noted that one of the Forest Service's message boards was obscured by smoke, he called for an additional ADOT message board and it was set up at 5 a.m. at (westbound I-40 at milepost 178) saying 'Heavy Smoke Ahead,'" Harding said.

The Forest Service also placed portable message boards along I-40. The smoke warning signs will remain up through Friday.

Smith said he was unaware of any missteps by forest officials.