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From the Los Angeles Times

At least 3 dead in I-5 crash; freeway closed

Ten others are injured in the fiery multi-vehicle pileup. Vital north-south route will be closed at least until Tuesday.

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October 14, 2007

The fiery Interstate 5 truck crash that killed at least three people south of Santa Clarita has severed the state's main north-south transportation artery for an indefinite period, authorities said Saturday.

Officials guessed that southbound lanes could reopen as early as Tuesday but were unwilling to speculate about the northbound lanes.

The chain-reaction crash and fire that closed the freeway, which carries 225,000 vehicles a day, occurred Friday night in a southbound tunnel used primarily by trucks. The tunnel passes under the main freeway, which is supported by the tunnel's concrete roof.

Fire burned throughout the day Saturday, and explosions rocked the tunnel. Molten trucks that had been reduced to hulks blocked it. Chunks of debris and cargo, including produce, littered the road. A woman waited anxiously to learn if her trucker husband had been trapped inside.

Heat was so intense that firefighters and other officials could not explore the tunnel beyond its mouths. They did not yet know the cause of the crash, how much damage was done to the tunnel walls and roof, or how long it would take for traffic to flow again on the eight-lane freeway overhead.

Coroner's official Ed Winter said the three bodies that were recovered had not been identified. "We are methodically going through the wreckage vehicle by vehicle" looking for other bodies, he said.

Interstate 5 is of vital commercial importance, but detours and disruptions along its 1,381-mile length from the Mexican border to Canada have become increasingly common. Many have been attributed to steadily increasing traffic and a steady deterioration of roadways.

Fire, police and Caltrans officials spent the day trying to assess damage to the concrete but were hampered by a continuing blaze in the tunnel's center, and heavy smoke and high concentrations of carbon dioxide, particularly on the tunnel's north, or uphill, end. They could not get very far past the mouths of the tunnel.

Los Angeles County Deputy Fire Chief John Tripp said he expected it would be this evening before firefighters were able to fully explore the 550-foot-long underpass just north of the I-5's intersection with the 14 Freeway.

He said they had found no indications that hazardous materials were involved in the blaze but that the flames inside the two-lane underpass were so intense that vehicles had burned to their cores and chunks of concrete had exploded off the tunnel's sides, exposing rebar.

"It has impacted the structural stability of the tunnel," Tripp said, but authorities were unsure to what extent.

California Department of Transportation Director Will Kempton, who was on the scene, said he did not believe structural damage was severe but that engineers could not make a complete assessment until firefighters finished clearing the wreckage.

"I don't think the structure will have to be replaced," he said.

Caltrans spokesman Mark DeSio said that, from vantage points near the mouths of the tunnel, inspectors had not seen evidence that the tunnel was sagging, which would have indicated severe damage.

Kempton guessed that at least the southbound lanes of I-5 would be open Tuesday morning. Meanwhile, he said, he has ordered temporary shoring for the tunnel to guard against a collapse while engineers do their full assessment.

"Safety is our main concern," he said. He urged the public to "please be patient."

Rescue workers were just beginning the job of clearing debris Saturday afternoon, using tow trucks and bulldozers near the tunnel's mouths.

Caltrans officials urged motorists to avoid the area if possible and noted that detours were in place.

CHP officials said that as of early evening Saturday, northbound traffic was being diverted onto California 14, exiting at San Fernando Road, proceeding west and making a left at Sierra Highway and continuing south until the Old Road, continuing on the Old Road to Calgrove Boulevard and the I-5 onramp.

Southbound traffic was exiting I-5 at Calgrove Boulevard and proceeding to the Old Road, which becomes San Fernando Road past Sierra Highway. Traffic was to turn right onto Sepulveda Boulevard, proceed to Roxford Street and almost immediately turn onto southbound I-5.

Investigators said they did not yet know the cause of the pileup, which involved at least five big-rig trucks and multiple passenger cars on the rain-slick roadway just before 11 p.m. Friday. They said they had not yet interviewed survivors.

But one of those who made it out, trucker Tony Brazil, told Channel 4 News that he drove his rig into the tunnel and saw "an accident in front of me. I came to a stop and they [other vehicles] just kept hitting me."

Brazil said he ran.

Miguel Granados, a trucker who was being treated at Providence Holy Cross Medical Center in Mission Hills, gave a similar account, telling a relative that he drove his truck into the tunnel just after the initial accident and that his vehicle was followed by others. His brother-in-law, Oscar Gonzalez, said Granados was being treated for smoke inhalation.

Officials reported that between 10 and 20 people fled the tunnel, and 10 were taken to area hospitals with injuries described as minor to moderate, including second-degree burns.

Victoria Cibrian held a vigil near the crash site Saturday, hoping that her missing husband was among those who escaped. The Los Angeles woman, accompanied by her 12-year-old daughter, waited patiently for word on the fate of her trucker husband, Ricardo, who she feared may have been trapped inside. Cibrian said a colleague of her husband's called her Saturday morning to tell her that her husband was involved in the crash.

"I couldn't wait at home anymore, so I came here," she said.

The tunnel was built in the 1970s, a Caltrans official said.

Truckers familiar with it described it as one of the most dangerous spots on I-5.

Arthur Johnson Jr., 45, a trucker from Buckeye, Ariz., confirmed that the tunnel's curves could cause problems.

"There's kind of a blind spot, so if you boogie around the bend too fast and there's somebody stopped in the tunnel, it'll be 'boom-boom-boom.' I bet that's what happened."

But CHP Assistant Chief Warren Stanley said he could recall no other major accidents there in 25 years.

Traffic was backed up much of Saturday. Law enforcement officials used helicopters to fly over the problems and avoid delays.

But Florence Hagenbaugh, 58, was stuck on the ground. She said she left Saugus, just north of the closure, at 10:15 a.m. to visit a family member at Providence Holy Cross, just south of the crash.

According to Mapquest, it should be a 20-minute trip. It took Hagenbaugh more than two hours.

"It's just bumper-to-bumper every which way you try to go," she said. "I was using secret back roads I thought only I knew, and everybody was on them. I'm just sorry for those people in the tunnel."

Alicia and Greg Nelson left Inglewood with their 3-year-old and 9-month-old at 12:30 p.m. so the children could attend their cousin's 7th-birthday party in Palmdale. The trip usually takes an hour. They arrived after 3 p.m.

"We were so late that my daughter didn't get a pony ride, but there was still some cake left," Alicia Nelson said.

Their troubles weren't over. Greg Nelson, a firefighter, wanted to be back Saturday night for a firefighter's ball, but by 7:30 p.m. they'd made it back only as far as San Fernando and were doubtful they'd be able to get to the party.

"It's messed us up pretty bad," she said.

Cars heading north on the interstate were being diverted onto the 14 Freeway. But the detour was causing confusion.

The San Fernando Road offramp was the first place motorists could pull off the freeway after the diversion, and at 7 p.m. it was a gathering spot for perplexed drivers trying to decide whether to go on.

Javier Palomera, 40, of Thousand Oaks had set off with three family members for a vacation in Seattle. Once they got onto I-5, they traveled just five miles in 45 minutes. Then they got routed onto the 14.

Palomera and his passengers sat in their car at the San Fernando offramp for 20 minutes trying to decide what to do. "We don't know how to get to Washington" except on I-5, he said.

Martha Herrera, 42, left her Pasadena home at 3 p.m. and headed to a Toyota dealership in Newhall but couldn't make it by the time the person she needed to see there left at 5 p.m. But she was able to get her car to a Newhall Mobil Mart, where she was dealing with an overheating radiator at 8 p.m.

"I don't even know how I am going to get back," she said, although she remained in good humor.

Martik Tatevossian, a clerk at the Mobil Mart on San Fernando Road, also had a problem. He said the station was serving so many diverted motorists that it ran out of gas at noon.

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