

Rapid Lesson Sharing

Event Type: Vehicle Rollover
in Dust-Caused “White Out”

Date: Aug. 7, 2015

Location: Three Sisters Fire;
Northern Idaho



See the “Lessons” section on next page for observations—in hindsight—on what this driver did right, and how such an unintended outcome might be prevented in the future.

NARRATIVE

Three firefighters are traveling in a crew cab pickup truck in a westerly direction along a dusty and dry dirt road with some gravel and narrow conditions. Their vehicle is the third in a column of vehicles leaving the Three Sisters Fire during a shift change. There are approximately ten more vehicles traveling behind them.

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At this time, the vehicle is near the right side of the road on a section of road that is narrower than the road has been up to this point. Additionally, the road bank along this stretch is nearly vertical and the edge of the road here is soft and lacks stability.

As the vehicle’s tires run along the edge of the right shoulder, the soft material gives way. The vehicle rolls off

the road, ending up on its top. Its airbags deploy. A portion of the vehicle comes to rest on the posts of a barbed wire fence at the base of the bank. Thankfully, there are no injuries.

Firefighters Must Break Window to Exit Vehicle

The firefighters in the rolled vehicle immediately try to contact their supervisor on the vehicle’s radio. But because the rollover damaged the antenna, they are unable to do so.

One of the firefighters has a glass breaker and uses it to break the glass in one of the side windows. The firefighters are able to remove their seatbelts and get out of the vehicle quickly through this broken window.

Their rationale for immediately exiting the vehicle is based on their concern for a potential fire or explosion. Once out of the vehicle, they contact their supervisor on a hand-held radio.

LESSONS

- ✓ The driver kept ample distance between his vehicle and the vehicle in front of him to ensure his ability to avoid hitting the other vehicle—in case there was a need for emergency braking. Even more spacing may have prevented or minimized the “dusting out” effect.
- ✓ The driver traveled at a slower speed and did not slam on the brakes, but tapped them, which likely prevented the rollover from being more severe.
- ✓ The driver continued to travel forward through the dust. According to the National Weather Service, you should do the following when driving through a dust storm: *“If you can't pull off the roadway, proceed at a speed suitable for visibility, turn on lights and sound horn occasionally. Use the painted center line to help guide you. Look for a safe place to pull off the roadway. Never stop on the traveled portion of the roadway.”* In this incident, there was no place to pull over or a center line for guidance.
- ✓ In hindsight, the road could have been wetted down later in the day to improve dust abatement.
- ✓ In hindsight, even though the vehicles were released incrementally at the end of the shift to minimize dust, they likely “bunched up” as they were in route. Even longer intervals between vehicle releases should be considered.
- ✓ In hindsight, we can also consider placing more emphasis on dust hazards when they exist in safety briefings and job hazard analysis. This may be especially important when roads are: narrow, have soft shoulders, and are highly traveled.
- ✓ Everyone was wearing seatbelts.
- ✓ The crew remained calm and made quick and sound decisions in breaking the glass to get out of the vehicle in the event of fire.
- ✓ The crew quickly sought assistance by immediately notifying their supervisor.



Photo shows damage caused from this vehicle's rollover incident. Notice the deployed air bags.

This RLS was submitted by:
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