

Wintry weather settles in area

Written by Elizabeth Barrett
Thursday, 13 January 2011 15:03 -



16 semis, other vehicles pile up on slick, snow-covered I-80.

Freak weather conditions along a stretch of Interstate 80 Sunday afternoon transformed the road into a bumper car rink.

A little before noon, light precipitation changed into heavy snow that created visibility problems and icy buildup between Cozad and Gothenburg that caused semi-tractor trailers and cars to slide into each other and into ditches and the median, according to Gothenburg fire chief Mark Ballmer.

Ballmer said 12 semis were involved in the major accident about eight miles east of town with four others caught in a chain reaction as traffic tried to slow.

A dispatcher for the Nebraska State Patrol Company D in North Platte said both east- and westbound traffic was stopped for four hours.

“Semis were sliding off the road, jackknifing and cars were coming in too,” she said. “It was a miracle no one was seriously injured.”

The Gothenburg Volunteer Fire Department and others transported about 17 stranded drivers and passengers whose vehicles were not moveable to local motels and the fire station to await rides.

Ballmer said one motorist was taken to Gothenburg Memorial Hospital for treatment.

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The dispatcher said both lanes were closed until 9:14 p.m. Sunday night. After about four hours following the accident, motorists—whose cars were not damaged—were diverted from I-80 at Gothenburg and Cozad where they could continue their journey on Highway 30.

Ambulances were dispatched, she said, for people to warm up in if their vehicle heaters were damaged.

Dawson County Sheriff Gary Reiber said his office responded to eight accidents along the interstate from 10:23 a.m. Sunday to 2:20 a.m. Monday in a six-mile area from about five miles east of Gothenburg to two miles east of Cozad.

During Sunday's pile-up, the dispatcher said weather conditions changed dramatically in about 10 minutes. She noted that plows and sanders had been working earlier that morning on the portion of road where most of the accidents occurred.

Because conditions can change rapidly, she said motorists should always check the weather before traveling in the winter.

While on the road, motorists can call 511 on their cell phones for weather reports. A website, www.safetravelsua.com also provides such information.

If storms are forecasted, she suggested filling up vehicles before traveling and dressing for cold weather or keeping warm clothes in vehicles along with emergency kits.

Sunday's storm is a good example of the importance of being prepared as the dispatcher said rescue and law enforcement deal with injuries and road blockages first after an accident.

“We can't get to you right away if you're not hurt, and if you're not dressed appropriately, it could

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cause hypothermia," she said.

Unless people have to travel during a storm, she suggested they stay home.

Union Pacific Railroad officials remind motorists to use caution when

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