

One Foggy Mess

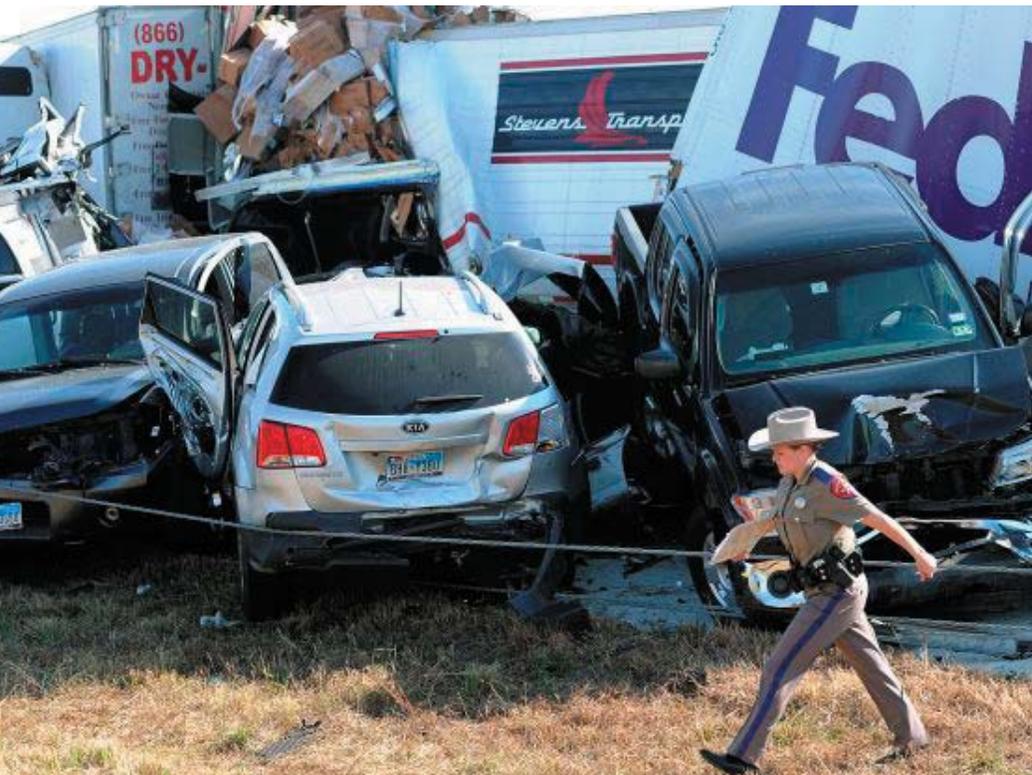
Huge crash brings responders from across Southeast Texas

At 8:15 am on Thanksgiving Day 2012 LaBelle Volunteer Fire Department received a call to respond to a crash involving eight to ten vehicles on nearby Interstate 10. At about the same time, Christus St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Beaumont was notified by Acadian Ambulance Service of a six-car wreck on I-10 between Fannett and Beaumont. These reports were just the beginning of a long day for first responders and Beaumont-area hospitals, as they worked to help the victims of several multiple-car crashes on I-10.

The busy travel day—families and friends on the way to Thanksgiving celebrations and long-haul truck drivers making deliveries for Black Friday shopping events—combined with a persistent and heavy fog to cause a chain-reaction of rear-end accidents. Meteorologists estimate visibility was only one-eighth of a mile when the crashes occurred. Southeast Texas Air Rescue and Acadian's Air Med One both launched only to be turned back when they encountered the heavy fog.

As the first units arrived on scene, the fog was so thick they couldn't see what they were dealing with. They soon realized, however, that the incident was much bigger than the six or ten vehicles originally reported and covered a wider response area. Calls went back and forth between first responders and hospitals, "It's a 10-vehicle pileup, no it's 20; wait, it's 45 to 50." The multiple accidents, over a two-mile stretch of both the eastbound and westbound lanes of I-10, were a challenge for the responders: cars were piled along the roadway, and 18-wheel trailers had crashed and spilled cargo across the interstate. Crews that arrived first were forced to park away from the scenes and walk with stretchers and medical kits to reach the patients. At least one tanker truck was involved in the accidents, and hazardous material spills complicated the response.

When the fog cleared, the mess became apparent. Top, a Texas State Trooper walks along the perimeter of one of the 18 separate wreck scenes involving 140 vehicles. The vehicles included cars, 18-wheel trucks and at least one hazmat spill.





Two patients died and 65 were transported to hospitals in the Thanksgiving Day wreck on I-10 near Winnie.

The fog was so heavy that vehicles just kept crashing into the existing wreckage; responders were working three separate, large-scale scenes when mutual aid calls went out and regional response plans were activated. A trailer outfitted specifically for multi-casualty events, operated by Acadian Ambulance and stocked by the East Texas Gulf Coast Regional Trauma Advisory Council (RAC-R), was used at the scene to restock EMS units on site. Responders requested mutual aid from SETRAC (RAC-Q), including their AMBUS (a bus equipped and

licensed as an ambulance), which was staffed by Atascocita VFD. SETRAC also activated the regional ambulance operations (AMOPS) plan and an ambulance strike team composed of people from Harris County Emergency Corps, Lumberton EMS, Baystar EMS and Baytown EMS was deployed.

Many Good Samaritans helped that day, too, mostly off-duty nurses and physicians. Uninjured people involved in the crashes often helped first responders as they sorted through the wreckage, comforting the injured and doing whatever they were asked to

do to help. Other travelers volunteered their services to the medics on scene and spent the next several hours assisting them with triage, with moving patients and with keeping the patients calm. As more resources arrived, by-standers continued to help in whatever ways they could—holding up sheets to shield patients, sharing water and playing with scared children to distract them.

The coordination among the various first responder groups was also an important part of the day's events. Mike Burney, Acadian's vice president of operations for Southeast Texas and Houston said, "The cooperation and teamwork that day were impressive. Though the scene had the potential to be chaotic, the responders were calm and focused. We were proud to be part of the team and to work side by side with our fellow first responders."

Hospitals from Winnie to Port Arthur to Houston were the next part of the response. Christus St. Elizabeth's in Beaumont took several patients, including two who had been extricated and were critically injured. Baptist Hospital of Southeast Texas, also in Beaumont, took other patients, including some who were transferred to Hermann Memorial Hospital in Houston. The AMBUS transported injured patients to the Medical Center of Southeast Texas in Port Arthur, and some less-critical patients were treated at Winnie Community Hospital, the facility closest to the scene.

Despite the difficulties of the scene—Interstate-10 was shut down in both directions for several hours, 140 vehicles were involved in 18 separate incidents, 65 patients were transported, including two deaths—it was evident that the systems in place to manage multi-casualty incidents—mutual aid agreements, regional ambulance operations and the new AMBUS—worked exactly as they were envisioned.

By Barbara Perkins