

Haight Creek Fire Water Tender Rollover

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The Haight Creek Fire water tender rollover.

Incredibly Winding and Narrow

Early in the morning of July 19, a water tender operator got the call for a work assignment on the Haight Creek Fire. When she departed with the tender that she was assigned, she noted that it was full of water.

As the operator got closer to the ICP, she observed that the highway was becoming “incredibly winding and narrow.” She, therefore, used extra caution.

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As she rounded a curve, she saw an oncoming log truck that was partially over the centerline. She gently nudged the steering wheel to move the tender as close to the edge of the road as possible—but its dual back wheels caught soft dirt along the ditch line.

The tender fishtailed uncontrollably and then rolled one and a half times on the highway, coming to rest on the passenger side. As soon as the tender stopped rolling, the operator climbed out of the cab and checked herself for serious injuries. Finding none, she assessed the scene.

The tender was blocking both lanes of traffic. The operator's next thought was getting help. There was no one else there. The operator's fire radio, as well as the tender's hazard markers, were buried in the cab beneath her cooler, tent, and fire gear.

About 30 minutes later, a log truck pulled up. The log truck driver visually checked the tender driver for injuries and asked if she was OK. The tender operator replied that she had bruises on her shoulders and legs. The log truck driver called her company dispatch on the radio, gave them the location, and had them call 911.

Dispatch Hears of a "Rollover"

At 1038, the dispatcher on duty for the Haight Creek Fire heard a call on the local 911 scanner that a water tender had rolled over on the highway a few miles from the fire and there were no serious injuries involved. When the dispatcher heard the location, she thought the tender might be assisting on the Haight Creek Fire. The dispatcher notified the IC and asked him if the tender was an assigned resource.

The IC sent an engine to investigate. Radio comms were spotty when the engine was reporting back. Next, Air Attack relayed the message to dispatch that the water tender had been traveling to check-in on the Haight Creek Fire when the accident occurred and no one was injured. The dispatcher notified the District Forester and the Unit Forester, then tracked the incident until the engine notified her that the scene was clear.

Log Truck Drivers Assist

After the 911 call was placed, the first log truck driver to arrive helped secure the safety of the scene by positioning her truck and triangular hazard markers to block traffic from both directions. Another log truck arrived and traffic began to back up in both directions.

The second log truck driver used their tow chain to right the tender and move it into its original lane so traffic could pass. The first log truck driver to arrive on scene remained with the tender driver until a tow truck arrived.



Haight Creek Fire personnel assist with water tender rollover.

Lessons

The weight of the water in the tender likely complicated the operator's effort to avoid the oncoming log truck and may have contributed to the rollover.

Effects of Load on Vehicle Handling

When a water tender is full, its center of gravity is higher off the ground than when it is empty—therefore, it handles differently. This difference is increased at highway speeds. The water tender operator was in her fourth year of driving tenders on wildland fires. However, this was the first time she was assigned a tender that was full of water before driving to the incident. The weight of the water in the tender likely complicated the operator's effort to avoid the oncoming log truck and may have contributed to the rollover.

. . . by listening to the local 911 scanner and using her extensive knowledge of the local area, the fire dispatcher on duty quickly alerted the IC about the rollover and helped get an assigned engine sent to investigate it.

It is important to note that depending on the size of a fire and whether it is in the initial attack or extended attack phase, water tenders could be expected to arrive full and ready to deliver water—or it could be acceptable to arrive empty. When reporting to an incident, tender operators need to be ready for either scenario.

Secure Gear Inside Your Vehicle

The operator feels fortunate that she was not injured or blocked from escaping the cab by her heavy cooler, fire gear and fire tent that tumbled in the cab during the roll. “I was lucky the truck came to rest with the driver’s side up,” she explained. “In the future, I’ll make sure that my gear in the cab is secured.”

Seatbelt Use

The operator had bruises to her legs and shoulders, but avoided serious injury. This is attributed to proper seatbelt use.

Resourceful Dispatching

This water tender was not yet an assigned resource on the Haight Creek Fire when the rollover occurred. However, by listening to the local 911 scanner and using her extensive knowledge of the local area, the fire dispatcher on duty quickly alerted the IC about the rollover and helped get an assigned engine sent to investigate it.

Scene Safety and Communications

The first log truck driver to arrive played a key safety role on this incident. She blocked traffic in both directions. This action may have helped prevent additional accidents—there was short sight distance along the highway where the rollover occurred. This log truck driver also helped to make the 911 call by using her company’s repeater-based radio in an area with no cell coverage and poor CB radio reception.

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