

Van Crash Kills Eight Oregon Firefighters

KGW.com and AP Staff
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Video: TV Reports | Mayor & Fire Chief Talk

A van full of firefighters on their way home from a wildfire collided with a tractor-trailer and exploded in flames Sunday, killing all eight inside and injuring the two people in the truck.

The firefighters, all men under the age of 23, were returning to Oregon from an Idaho wildfire late Sunday morning, when the van crashed on a remote eastern Oregon highway about 15 miles west of the town of Vale, Malheur County Sheriff Andy Bentz said.

The van apparently tried to pass another truck on a curve and crossed the double-yellow line before it collided head-on with the truck, Undersheriff Brian Wolfe said.

The occupants of the Swift Co. tractor-trailer were able to free themselves and were taken to an Ontario hospital with dislocations and burns, Wolfe said. Their names and conditions were not available Sunday night, but Wolfe said their injuries were not life-threatening.

It took more than seven hours for the highway to reopen, once authorities recovered the bodies and highway crews shoveled ash and debris onto trucks.

The wreckage of the van and the semi were almost indistinguishable. The charred frame of the van was torn in two. The cab of the semi was demolished but the diesel exhaust stack remained erect.

The firefighters worked for First Strike Environmental, a Roseburg-based contract firefighting company. Their names were not expected to be released until Monday because authorities were still trying to reach their relatives.

"That's when our community is going to be in for a bigger shock," Roseburg Mayor Larry Rich said Monday on NBC's Today Show. "So many of our residents will know at least one or two of those individuals...."

"I just know that when the names come out, it's going to be a very difficult time."

First Strike spokeswoman Leslie Habetler said six of the men were from Douglas County, the southwestern Oregon county that includes Roseburg, and two were from the Portland area.

"I would like to express my deepest sympathy to the Douglas County community and especially to the families and friends of the eight firefighters who lost their lives in today's tragic traffic accident," said Oregon Gov. Ted Kulongoski. "I know that I speak for all Oregonians when I say that my thoughts and prayers go out to families of these brave young firefighters."

The van had been traveling with a First Strike van and a truck. Both those vehicles were about six miles ahead and did not see the crash, Habetler said. The vehicles came back to discover the crash after they lost radio contact with the van and saw smoke rising behind them.

First Strike's Web page said it has been in business for more than 15 years, deals with a wide variety of emergency environmental situations in the West and keeps about 200 firefighters on call during forest fire season.

The crash is being investigated by the Malheur County Sheriff's Office and the Oregon State Police, Wolfe said.

Fire coordinators said the van was coming back from a wildfire in the Boise National Forest about 25 miles northeast of the town of Cascade, Idaho. Wildfires have erupted in many parts of the northern Rockies and Pacific Northwest this summer, but recent rains have helped firefighters gain ground on many of the blazes.

The men were on their way home after completing a 14-day work contract, Habetler said. Most of the men had two or three years of firefighting experience, she said, though there were a few new crew members.

"We are now in the height of this year's fire season, with fires threatening forests and communities across the west - and in this difficult time, we depend upon the courage and selfless dedication of brave young men and women like the firefighters we lost today," Gov. Kulongoski added. "Their commitment to protecting their fellow citizens makes them true heroes, and their loss will be felt deeply across Oregon."

Before Sunday, 19 firefighters assigned to wildfires had died on duty this year, according to Tracey Powers, spokeswoman for the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise. Nine died in motor vehicle or aviation accidents, three died in fires, six died of illnesses and one died when a tree fell on his tent.

In June 2002, five firefighters in an Oregon-based contract crew were killed when their van overturned and rolled four times on a freeway near Parachute, Colorado on the way to the 137,000-acre Hayman fire near Denver. Six others were injured in that crash. The firefighters were part of a La Grande-based contract crew, Grayback Forestry.

About a month later, three Oregon firefighters died when the engine truck they were riding in rolled off a steep, dirt Forest Service road in the Klamath National Forest and tumbled about 800 feet into a ravine.

In 1994, nine Oregon firefighters were among the 14 killed when fast-moving flames overtook them on Storm King Mountain in western Colorado.