

Push to clear big-rig wrecks in 90 minutes headed to I-95

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FORT LAUDERDALE — A team of tow truck operators tasked with clearing highway crashes in 90 minutes or less will set up shop on Interstate 95 in July.

The state Department of Transportation has earmarked money for the specialized service in next year's budget but still has to select a company and work out details on a contract, Gaetano "Guy" Francese, the DOT's district freeway operations manager, said Wednesday.

Known as Rapid Incident Scene Clearance, the program was started on Florida's Turnpike in 2004. It's only used for major wrecks involving big rigs and hazardous fuel spills that close the highway or will block lanes for an extended period.

The towers earn bonuses for meeting the 90-minute target and pay penalties if they don't. So far, the turnpike program has had a success rate of 95 percent, said John Easterling, the turnpike's traffic operations engineer. "Every minute the roadway is closed can lead to five minutes of delays," Easterling said. "What does it mean when we're closed? We're not collecting revenue."

South Florida's quick clearance techniques were on display Wednesday at Intertraffic North America 2007, a nationwide conference on traffic management and work zone safety at the Greater Fort Lauderdale-Broward County Convention Center.

Traffic managers simulated a wreck involving two cars and a dump truck on I-95. The truck overturned on its side, spilling a load of rock and leaking fuel on the highway.

Ten years ago, the crash would have shut down the road for five hours. Today, the highway can be reopened in an hour or less.

"We're going to get you home quick. We're going to get you home safe," said Mike Scheidt, a recovery specialist for Kauff's Towing, a member of the turnpike's Open Roads Recovery Team.

The quick clearance program is an offshoot of the "open roads" policy that was adopted by the DOT and Florida Highway Patrol in 2002. Cutting the time that the highway is shut down can save millions in lost time and productivity for motorists stuck in long backups. The value of the savings ranges from \$15 an hour for the average commuter to \$70 an hour for commercial vehicles, transportation officials say.

It also decreases secondary crashes and reduces the number of law enforcement officers and tow truck operators injured or killed while working a crash. On the turnpike, the duration of serious crashes has been cut about 30 minutes.

"The quicker we open the roads up, the better for everyone," FHP Lt. Pat Santangelo said.

When the quick clearance program begins next year, the 44-mile stretch of I-95 in Palm Beach County will be divided into three zones, with a towing team assigned to cover each area. "That way, we'll have a much better response," the DOT's Francese said.

Not all crashes can be cleared in 90 minutes. Fatal wrecks can take longer because investigators need more time to gather evidence.

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