At Least 3 Dead in Fla. 50-Car Pileup

LAKELAND, Fla. — About 50 cars crashed on a highway blanketed by fog and smoke from a brush fire Wednesday, and authorities said at least three people were killed.

A stretch of nearly 15 miles of Interstate 4 between Tampa and Orlando was closed by several accidents, including the 50-car pileup. Aerial footage showed the soupy mix of fog and smoke covering the landscape for miles and giving the sky an eerie golden color.

The poor visibility forced rescuers to walk along the closed interstate checking individual vehicles for injured motorists, Florida Highway Patrol Trooper Larry Coggins said. The conditions cleared in late morning, showing mangled, charred trucks and cars pinned underneath some tractor trailers.

Workers were still trying to rescue one man pinned beneath an overturned truck.

Polk County Sheriff Grady Judd did not say how many people were injured.

Numerous tractor trailers overturned on the roadway, including a tanker. At least six of them burned completely.

"Everything came to a halt," Robert Ellison, who was driving east on the highway about 6 a.m., told The T and WFLA-TV. "You can't see your hand in front of your face."

One of the first accident victims was a sheriff's deputy, Judd said. The deputy told Judd that conditions or worsened suddenly. "It was clear, it was a little foggy, then it was total darkness," Judd recounted the de

The sheriff said the deputy was shaken up, but helped move people to safety as vehicles continued to crash sounds of metal grinding and gnashing in the darkness.

The Florida Highway Patrol is investigating the crash and the role of smoke from the fire that started as a
and grew out of control.

Judd said he was "exceptionally concerned" about the decision to start a fire during dry conditions and da
freeze likely added more tinder. State officials are still investigating how the fire got out of control.

Since Tuesday, the fire has charred 400 acres. It is burning roughly half a mile from the highway and is 9l
contained, Division of Forestry spokeswoman Chris Kintner said.

She said forestry workers notified the highway patrol that smoke from the blaze could mix with fog. Warni
also placed on the interstate, but Kintner said she didn't know if the signs were lit.

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