Fatal pileup closes I-4 in Polk County

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POLK CITY - Thick fog mixed with smoke along a stretch of Interstate 4 in Polk County early this morning, and the ensuing wreck turned the highway into a fiery war zone that claimed at least four lives.

All lanes of I-4 remain closed between the Polk Parkway and U.S. 27 -- roughly the area from Polk City to the Osceola County line, and officials say it's unlikely the highway will reopen any time soon. At least 70 vehicles were involved in the massive pile-up crash.

It was around 4:30 a.m. when the chain reaction began. Victims described climbing out of their damaged cars, only to be surrounded by more crashes happening all around them.

"I couldn't see it because of the fog. I just kept hearing impact after impact after impact," motorist Jim Palmer recalled, pounding his fists together for emphasis. "People getting out of their cars -- begging for help, moaning, crying. And there was just no way to help them. I couldn't see my hand at the end of my arm."

Six vehicles caught fire, spewing thick black smoke that rose high above the white blanket of fog that hugged the ground.

In all, 38 people were injured and four people died in the wreck, which consisted of 10 smaller crashes. Several other motorists were trapped and had to wait hours for emergency crews who themselves were slowed by the hazardous fog.

When the fog finally began lifting around 9 a.m., the extent of the carnage became startlingly clear.

"It's very bad. It may be by the grace of God that there's only three fatalities when you see the totality of what we're dealing with," observed Polk County Sheriff Grady Judd.

Judd explained that one of his deputies was among the first victims of the crashes after being called to the scene based on a report of fog, fire, and wrecks. Within seconds of stopping, another vehicle slammed into the Carlton Turner's cruiser.

Despite minor injuries, Turner was able to help other victims get out of harm's way. It was just the beginning of a long ordeal that took a heavy toll on even the toughest first responders.

"He said, 'Sheriff, I did all I could do,' " Judd continued, relaying Turner's words. "But I watched a man burn to death today. And I heard others hollering and screaming and crying. I can't begin to explain to you how difficult this scene was. I can't begin to explain to you the trauma that occurred.' But he did all that he could."

Drivers are being asked to avoid the area. Take Highway 60 or U.S. 92 if you have to head between Tampa and Orlando.

"Forget the interstate today," Judd added. "Don't try, don't think about the interstate today. It is an incredible investigative scene and it's going to take a long time to work through this."
For accident victims who would like to find out how to get access to their cars, call the Highway Patrol at (863) 499-2300

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