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INLAND: Caltrans work crews pulled after San Diego death



Mark Zaleski/The Press-Enterprise

"Sometimes it feels like drivers don't care," says Emma Griffith, front left, about close calls that she and other Caltrans road maintenance staff endure. Next to her is Brandon Parker. Behind them are fellow workers in Riverside.

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Emma Griffith gets frustrated at fast freeway drivers in a different way than most Southern Californians. She worries they'll kill her while she's doing her job cleaning roads for Caltrans.

"It's not funny," Griffith said Monday, hours after crews across California were yanked from their duties Monday morning when a Caltrans worker was killed in San Diego.

"I am a person out there on the road," she said at the Riverside maintenance yard. "Sometimes it feels like drivers don't care."

Caltrans officials statewide offered a simpler message: Either California drivers slow down or maintenance work will. Crews were sent to their maintenance stations Monday, and might also sit out part of today, officials said.

Maintenance worker Richard Gonzalez, 52, died shortly before 9 a.m. Monday after a vehicle struck him while he was picking up litter along an Interstate 15 connector ramp to eastbound Highway 94 in San Diego, according to Caltrans officials.

Gonzalez's death is the third in Southern California in the past seven weeks.

Stephen Palmer Sr. was struck May 4 by a trolley and killed in National City, near San Diego. Jaime Obeso was killed by an errant vehicle while working on Interstate 8 in Imperial County on June 7.

Monday's death led to a statewide halt of work so crews that maintain freeways could discuss safety. The focus was to come up with ways to avoid disasters, something local road crews said are becoming too common on Inland roads.

"There have been a number of close calls," said Ray Wolfe, Caltrans' district director for Riverside and San Bernardino counties. "The next close call might not be a close call."

Workers recounted numerous stories in the past year of inattentive drivers plowing through a rows of cones, almost hitting workers on the shoulder of Highway 60; of professional truck drivers knocking the side mirrors off Caltrans pickups; and of drivers ignoring closed exit ramps, barreling over construction cones, and getting off the freeway while workers are cleaning the road.

TRAFFIC HAS CHANGED

Griffith, who for 16 years has cleaned and repaired Southern California highways, thinks drivers vent their frustrations out on crews.

"It's just a lack of respect from the public," she said.

What worried workers the most at a maintenance crew meeting in Riverside on Monday was drivers using cellphones, texting, and just not paying attention while they drive too fast.

"Traffic has totally changed nowadays," said James Flores, 43. "People are doing all kinds of crazy stuff."

Drivers distracted by cellphones, changing music or a host of other activities can miss warnings and slam into crews working on the freeway. Workers standing on the freeway are especially at risk, officials said. Slow-moving equipment like street sweepers are helpless to move out of the way when cars and trucks traveling 70 mph get too close.

The incidents are becoming more frequent, crew members said.

"People more and more are in a hurry," said Flores, a 15-year Caltrans veteran.

Crews often rely on orange cones, CHP patrol cars and trucks with attenuators -- accordion-like devices that can absorb some crash impacts -- to protect them.

But they also have to rely on each other.

"My crew knows that if you hear me blasting the horn, just get out of the way," Flores said.

SLOW FOR SAFETY

The order by Caltrans Director Malcolm Dougherty to pull California road crews is a rarity.

District maintenance teams review safety about every 10 days, but rarely tell crews to come in. Changeable message signs that normally alert drivers to traffic jams were warning them to watch out for workers.

"That's never happened like this," said Caltrans spokeswoman Terri Kasinga.

The goal, officials said, is to warn drivers to increase safety. The alternative, many said, is that more resources will be pooled to protect workers, decreasing the amount of manpower and equipment that can be used to clean roads. If CHP officers are needed at every job site, the number of job sites will be reduced, based on the availability of patrol officers.

The state's budget is also jeopardizing how many miles of freeway can be maintained, officials said. Caltrans is preparing to shutter vehicles as part of a cost saving plan, including some safety-related vehicles.

"We're in the process of defending the equipment that the governor's plan is taking away," Wolfe said.

More cones and warning vehicles for each job -- with fewer trucks to use -- means not as many crews can be working at one time. Fewer crews means fewer miles of freeway are cleaned.

"We are not going to put you in a situation that is not safe," Wolfe told Riverside-based workers. "If that means we have to sit here for the next two weeks, that's what we'll do. That's not the plan, but we cannot lose anybody."

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