

## SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA: Caltrans says safety relies on a drivers

Two recent close calls that could have cost the lives of several crew members prompt re-issuing of driver warnings



STAN LIM/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

A work crew made up of people on probation clean up the shoulder of Highway 60, just east of Country Village Road in Jurupa Valley recently. Caltrans staff had two close calls not long ago in which its vans were hit by inattentive drivers. In past years, there have been fatalities.

1 of 4



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Even when he's not driving — just standing on Southern California freeways — Caltrans maintenance worker Maurice Coggins has his eyes on the road.

"You never feel safe out here," Coggins said as traffic whizzed by along Highway 60 near Interstate 15. "It's (post-traumatic stress disorder)."

He and other Caltrans workers — and probationers assigned to clean up freeways — know that one inattentive driver can put them at risk anytime and anyplace on area roads.

That's why following two close calls in recent weeks, local Caltrans officials are again warning drivers to slow down, move over a lane if they can, and pay attention to work zones.

"Just be aware that we have individuals that are working adjacent to the pavement in a lot of these areas and be careful," said Steve Pusey, assistant director for maintenance in Caltrans District 8, which covers Riverside and San Bernardino counties.

Caltrans has spent years urging drivers to slow down in construction areas and legislators even changed state law to require drivers to shift one lane away from emergency and Caltrans vehicles, if safe.

Still, Pusey said, Caltrans crews remain under threat. An errant driver Feb. 1 plowed into the back of a maintenance van with a trailer carrying a portable toilet, parked along westbound Interstate 10 in Montclair. Fifteen workers were inside the van at the time. No one was seriously hurt in the crash, but nine people were taken to the hospital with minor injuries.

Four days later, a car sideswiped another van and trailer as a maintenance crew was cleaning along westbound Highway 60 in Rubidoux. No one was hurt, officials said, because workers were not near the vehicles when the collision occurred. Caltrans workers often park vehicles between traffic and the crew.

"The van is a barrier vehicle," said Michael Graczyk, a Caltrans maintenance supervisor. "If anything crashes into the vehicle."

Crews are given safety talks on at least a weekly basis, and follow a set of procedures designed to keep them safer. Caltrans staff discourage workers from congregating in front of or behind the trucks during breaks, said Jim Willitts, 48, a probationer from Riverside. Workers also work facing traffic when possible, and know to stop if they hear screeching tires or any odd noises.

View [Recent Caltrans maintenance incidents](#) in a larger map

“You don’t know what is going to happen,” Willitts said, “You have to always be on your toes.”

Officials want drivers to feel the same way and pay attention to the presence of workers. Coggins said that’s why bright work zones are clearly labeled and workers wear bright-orange vests.

Still, some drivers don’t take heed.

“You see them out here smoking a cigarette or eating some food and drinking a pop or doing something on a cellphone,” Coggins said.

Complaints about inattentive drivers led to a 2009 change that added Caltrans vehicles with flashing orange lights to the state’s “move over” law that requires drivers to avoid close contact with emergency vehicles.

Caltrans, CHP and the state’s Office of Traffic Safety reinforced the law last year following the death of two Caltrans workers, two in San Diego County and one in Imperial County. Crews were also pulled off highways statewide for a safety refresher following the third incident June 20 and highway patrol officers conducted special enforcements of the move-over law at some construction areas.

One month later, Barry Steele, 52, of Beaumont, was killed while working on the Van Buren overpass project along Highway 91 in Riverside when an alleged drunken driver careened down the unopened entrance ramp hitting him.

When needed, Caltrans also uses on-site CHP troopers to give them added warning and enforcement of limits, Pusey said. And in major construction zones, workers are often protected from traffic by concrete barriers.

“It is all about getting these individuals home at the end of the day to their families,” Pusey said.