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I-90 reopens after crippling E. Wash. dust storm

By [KOMO Staff \(mailto:WebTeam@komo4news.com\)](mailto:WebTeam@komo4news.com) | Published: Oct 4, 2009 at 8:30 AM PST (2009-10-4T16:30:58Z) | Last Updated: Oct 5, 2009 at 8:22 AM PST (2009-10-5T16:22:20Z)

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Near-zero visibility conditions prevailed across hundreds of square miles of Eastern Washington. (Photo courtesy of KXLY-TV, Spokane)

MOSES LAKE, Wash. - At least 11 people were injured in crashes during a severe dust storm that forced the closure of a stretch of Interstate 90 nearly all day Sunday.

The highway reopened at about 7:30 p.m. - 18 hours after it was closed.

During the height of the storm on Sunday morning and afternoon, local emergency officials in Grant and Adams counties warned motorists to stay off all roadways in the affected area.

State Transportation Department officials closed a section of I-90 between Moses Lake and Ritzville at 1:30 a.m. "due to blowing dust and near-zero visibility."

Nearly 18 hours later, a "blowing wind advisory" issued by the National Weather Service expired, and the highway was reopened to traffic.

The storm caused "whiteout conditions" in some areas and "numerous multi-vehicle accidents with injuries," the Grant County Department of Emergency Management said in a special statement issued at about noon.

As of 3 p.m., 11 people had been hospitalized due to injuries suffered in storm-related crashes in Grant County alone.

Troopers at the scene said motorists were being routed around the storm via a 40-mile detour throughout the day Sunday if they need to get through the area.

At the beginning of the storm, many motorists were trapped in their vehicles, but most were later cleared, according to reports from the scene.

One accident, involving two semis and three passenger vehicles, happened around 2 a.m. Sunday between Ritzville and Moses Lake, injuring eight people.

Washington State Patrol Sgt. Mike Rupert said Sunday afternoon that visibility in the worst of the dust storm was about five feet and when it lets up, visibility is still only about 10 feet.

"I've never experienced anything like that," he said. "It was thick enough where the patrol car that was parked 10 feet from me - the only thing I could just barely make out was its emergency lights on the light bar ... and sometimes you couldn't even make that out."

"And that's sitting still. Driving in it? There's just no way you could drive in it."

One motorist who passed through the area before the freeway closure described a terrifying ride as vehicles nearly collided in the blinding dust, and a semi truck nearly crashed into a car that the truck driver did not see.

Soon afterward, troopers arrived in full gear, closed the freeway and ordered drivers to remain in their vehicles.

The dust storm was caused by high winds roaring through a section of Eastern Washington.

Multiple sites reported gusts near 40 miles per hour Sunday morning and afternoon, according to the National Weather Service.

But by 7 p.m., winds had died down to about 15 to 25 mph, and were expected to diminish even further after dark.

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