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Drivers share fault in I-4 pileup that killed 5 last year

By [Saundra Amrhein](#), Times Staff Writer
In Print: Tuesday, February 3, 2009



[SKIP O\u2019Rourke | Times (2008)]

Five people were killed and 38 were injured in a 70-vehicle pileup on Interstate 4 near Polk City on Jan. 9, 2008.

BRANDON — A state highway investigation into last year's colossal crash on Interstate 4 found that fog and smoke from an out-of-control wildfire contributed to the wrecks, but that careless drivers played a large role in the fatal chain reaction.

Five people were killed, including two from Tampa, in a 70-vehicle pileup on the heavily shrouded highway in Polk County the morning of Jan. 9, 2008. The string of wrecks also injured 38 people and closed a 14-mile stretch of Central Florida's main east-west highway for more than a day.

Concluding its yearlong investigation with a 53-page report, the Highway Patrol called poor visibility an attendant circumstance but noted that many motorists that day reduced speed and made controlled stops.

"Those vehicles that were able to stop were then involved in this crash due to the careless driving of others," the Highway Patrol reported.

Crash victims blamed state employees with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission who had set a 10-acre controlled burn on the Hilochee Wildlife Management Area on Jan. 8 after checking weather reports from the

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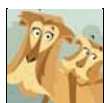
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Escape from Monkey Island



No matter how bad things got for Lex Salisbury, CEO of Tampa's Lowry Park Zoo, no matter how many officials called for his job, no matter how swiftly his zoological empire came undone, it is not fair to blame the monkeys.

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Division of Forestry and the National Weather Service.

Those weather predictions said the humidity in the area would remain above 60 percent.

However, about 45 minutes after the controlled burn started, the humidity plunged below 30 percent, the wind picked up and the fire became a 500-acre wildfire that continued burning into the next day.

The wildfire's smoke mingled with early-morning fog.

An initial investigation by the state Division of Forestry conducted a month after the wrecks found no evidence of criminal violations or gross negligence on the part of state workers who started the fire.

At the time, Agriculture Commissioner Charles Bronson questioned whether the smoke from the fire played any role in the crashes.

But the latest report by the Highway Patrol noted numerous times that "visibility was severely reduced due to fog and smoke in that area." It found that the actions of drivers, including several of those who died, "and the environmental factors due to the fog and smoke all contributed to this crash."

A spokesman with the wildlife commission declined to comment, citing ongoing litigation in the case.

A Bartow attorney representing several clients could not immediately be reached for comment.

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[Last modified: Feb 06, 2009 07:30 AM]



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Thankful for shelter



Gasparilla pirates threaten Tampa

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Comments on this article	
by scott	Feb 03, 2009 09:41 PM
Unbelievable! I drove I-4 Lakeland to Orlando every morning at 5am for a year prior to this accident. THIS ACCIDENT WAS A DIRECT RESULT OF THE BURN, PERIOD! Perplexing how an organization can investigate itself and clear itself of wrongdoing! Shame	
by Daniel	Feb 03, 2009 04:08 PM
It's common sense to close the road or post warning signs. An agency should be prepared to do so everytime a controlled burn (or not controlled) is started. FWC can't control the change in weather, but the accidents could have been easily prevented!	
by Julianna	Feb 03, 2009 12:36 PM
Of course they aren't going to say the state had any part of this. That would be an admission of guilt on their part.	
by Wayne	Feb 03, 2009 09:37 AM
I drive that area people drive crazy high speed and the Highway patrol lets them get away with it. I saw cops on TV and one guy was caught do 90 miles per hour and got a ticket for improper lane change go check out how fast the big truck go.	
by John	Feb 03, 2009 08:58 AM
This is classic. A year goes by, law suits are filed, and now FHP and the state rewrite history in a bogus attempt to avoid accepting responsibility. It is positively shameful.	
by Terry	Feb 03, 2009 08:31 AM
Blamed on the drivers? Puleese! The FHP should have closed the road-the drivers had no way of knowing they were going into a mile-long blanket of soot and fog...but the cops did. That's why the highways up north are closed by the cops in snowstorms.	
by Dave	Feb 03, 2009 08:11 AM

Wonder how much TAX Money was spent to come up with this no-brainer of a conclusion.

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