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2,000 gallons of jet fuel spill north of Horseshoe Bend

Officials think 'little, if any' fuel reached river

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People heading north from the Treasure Valley to play in the rivers and mountains this weekend may want to try different routes to McCall and Banks as crews clean up a jet-fuel spill on Idaho 55 near the Payette River.

The road between Horseshoe Bend and Banks was closed to through traffic all day Wednesday, but one lane opened late Wednesday night. It is expected to stay open through the weekend. Drivers who don't opt for an alternate route should expect flaggers, pilot cars and delays.

Emergency crews are working to remove soil soaked with 2,000 gallons of fuel from a 5,700-gallon tank. A truck hauling two tanker trailers lost one trailer, which crashed and spilled fuel on the side of the road away from the river Wednesday morning near Gardena. The fuel remains a fire hazard and, had it reached the river, could have killed fish and contaminated Horseshoe Bend's drinking water supply.

The road was closed for two miles north of milepost 72 near the parking lot at Beehive Bend, a popular boater takeout.

Alternate routes to popular rafting and recreation communities such as Banks, Cascade and McCall will require drivers to add an hour or more to their trips as they take highway detours or slow, winding dirt roads through Placerville.

Officials had expected the highway would remain closed until Friday and possibly through the weekend. But Idaho National Guard Lt. Col. Tim Marsano said crews were able to get one lane open around 10 p.m. When the highway will reopen fully depends on how quickly the soil can be removed, whether the fuel soaked soil under the highway and whether the roadbed will have to be torn up.

Emergency crews' highest priority is removing the fuel-soaked soil to ensure that no fuel seeps into the river, Marsano said. The state's military division and Homeland Security Bureau coordinated the disaster response Wednesday.

"The main concern is keeping seepage out of the main Payette ... it's a major spill," Marsano said after inspecting the scene. "It appears only a little bit of fuel got on the pavement, and that has been soaked up with



Darin Oswald / The Idaho Statesman

A tanker truck carrying jet fuel overturned on Idaho 55 before 8 a.m. Wednesday, spilling 2,000 gallons just north of Beehive Bend of the Payette River near Gardena. Seen from the air looking south, the tanker's contents spilled on the highway; officials say most if not all the fuel stopped short of the river.

Heading north? Consider these options

Idaho 55 is restricted to one lane with a pilot car leading traffic through the fuel spill area. Other routes will take you around this delay, but they're still going to add miles and minutes to your trip.

TO MCCALL

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sand."

Workers brought in a backhoe late Wednesday afternoon to begin digging out the contaminated dirt and determine how deep the fuel seepage goes. If crews need to dig up the road to remove the contaminated dirt, it will add time to the closure, Marsano said.

Expect detours traveling between Boise and McCall

However extensive it turns out to be, the cleanup will take several days, forcing travelers to face construction delays on 55 or find alternatives to the major north/south route connecting the Treasure Valley with popular recreation sites north of Banks.

Paved alternatives include Idaho 21 and the Banks to Lowman Road. Shorter detours will take motorists on winding dirt-and-gravel roads, such as Harris Creek and Alder Creek roads between Horseshoe Bend and Garden Valley. Both roads are narrow, with switchbacks and 35 mph speed limits. Boise County sheriff's officials urge motorists to be cautious.

The Payette River is a popular floating destination. Popular boating put-ins and takeouts are expected to be accessible, although it was unclear Wednesday night exactly which ones people will be able to drive to. Rafting companies along the river plan to stay open during the road closure and use imaginative ways to take clients upriver.

"We are just trying to keep a smile on our faces ... it's no one's fault and it could be worse," said Debbi Long, co-owner of Cascade Raft and Kayak, which is remaining open because its headquarters is just south of the closed section. She said it's "creepy not to see cars whizzing down Idaho 55."

Long said Cascade Raft and Kayak will transport customers up the Payette via the dirt roads.

"There's a bit of a sneak route we can take, but it won't take a large vehicle," Long said. "We'll have to get creative."

Idaho 55 is heavily traveled during the weekends, so any closure or restriction would be felt by recreation businesses that depend on the summer season. Traffic spikes on summer weekends, according to state numbers: 2,000 cars travel Idaho 55 between 1 and 10 p.m. on a typical summer Wednesday. That number nearly triples on a typical summer Sunday.

"The economic impact will depend on how quickly crews can get it fixed up," Long said. "We only have a limited number of weekends in the summer."

Luckily fuel missed culvert that leads into river

The soaked soil must be removed so fuel doesn't contaminate the groundwater or the nearby Payette, said Ron Lane, a regional manager for the Department of Environmental Quality. Horseshoe Bend also draws its drinking water from the river, he noted.

Idaho 16 to Emmett and Idaho 52 to Payette. Follow U.S. 95 through Weiser to New Meadows, then take Idaho 55 to McCall. It's 45 minutes longer than the two-hour Idaho 55 trip, but it's all paved road.

TO BANKS

From East Boise: Take Idaho 21 to Idaho City, then Centerville Road. At Placerville, take Alder Creek Road north to Garden Valley. Open to vehicles with trailers, but be prepared for steep, narrow, 35 mph gravel roads. Plan on an extra hour.

From Meridian, Eagle or West Boise: Take Idaho 55 to Horseshoe Bend; take Harris Creek Road to Placerville. Expect gravel and a bumpy extra hour or more.

Gravel-free route from Boise: Take Idaho 21 to Lowman, then Banks to Lowman Road to Banks. This is a winding, scenic, 100 mile-plus route — but it's all paved.



Photo by Lt. Col. Tim Marsano

Employees from Brico Corp. measure fuel (top of far left tanker) as it's pumped from a ruptured tanker (far right) that spilled 2,000 gallons of jet fuel after overturning on Idaho 55 early Wednesday. The highway parallels the Payette River (far left). Little, if any, fuel reached the river, according to a Boise County Sheriff's officer.

"It has the potential to migrate through the soil to surface or groundwater," Lane said.

Representatives from the DEQ, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the state's Southwest Regional Hazardous Materials team, the Horseshoe Bend Fire Department, Boise County's sheriff and Disaster Service, the Bureau of Land Management and the Idaho Bureau of Homeland Security responded to the accident Wednesday.

The accident occurred around 7:30 a.m. Wednesday. A truck owned by Brico of Idaho hauling two tanker trailers was heading north to McCall, carrying 10,000 gallons of jet fuel to the airport.

The driver of the truck, David J. Parker, noticed the rear trailer was moving erratically when the truck veered off to the east side of the road, away from the river. The rear trailer detached, flipped onto its side, then came to rest right-side-up, according to Idaho State Police reports. One of the tanker's three internal compartments was punctured, and another suffered a small leak.

The driver was uninjured, and there was no damage to the first tank unit.

When the rear tanker-trailer detached, it flipped over and its momentum carried it away from a culvert that would have provided a direct route for the fuel into the Payette River, Marsano said.

"It was fortunate that it went up the road where the fuel was absorbed into the ground," he said.

Emergency crews were able to dike the spill and keep it from getting to the river. Crews put sand on the roadway to absorb fuel. Brico sent a second fuel truck to siphon the remaining 3,700 gallons from the damaged tanker, and an industrial-sized tow truck hauled the empty tanker away Wednesday afternoon.

The accident is under investigation by ISP's commercial vehicle section and officials haven't determined the cause, ISP spokesman Rick Ohnsman said.

