

My name is Dan Latham and I oversee public outreach for ODOT projects in southwest Oregon, including the I-5 Azalea to Glendale paving and safety project. The folks at Ask-ODOT forwarded your message to me.

We removed the trees along the median of Interstate 5 north of Glendale (milepost 81-86) as part of a long-term effort to improve safety by establishing clear zones along the sides of our highways.

Nationwide, there are about [3,500 fatalities a year](#) related to vehicles veering off the roadway and striking a tree. Over the last ten years for which we have data (2012-2021), there were 159 crashes along I-5 between Azalea and Glendale in which a vehicle departed a travel lane and struck a fixed object. Of the crashes in this area that involved trees, two resulted in fatalities and three in serious injuries.

The Federal Highway Administration recommends the [creation of clear zones](#) along highways. Removing roadside obstacles can help reduce the number of roadway departure crashes that result in serious injuries or fatalities. Clear zones can be created either by removing obstacles and cutting trees, or by installing guardrail in front of those obstacles. We are in the process of doing both. The tree-clearing is part of an upcoming paving project this summer, and that project will include installing new guardrail at various locations.

Clear zones offer other benefits. This area of I-5 is relatively high in elevation (more than 1,440 feet). There's a fair amount of snow and ice on the road, and trees along the median cast shadows on the road surface. Creating a clear zone along the highway allows more sunlight to reach the road surface, melting snow and ice more quickly and helping the asphalt dry faster. Clear zones offer better visibility, allowing drivers to see roadside animals before they run into the travel lanes. Clear zones help reduce the number of trees that fall into the roadway (as happened in 2021, when [a tree fell onto an ODOT truck](#) south of Glendale.)

Although the FHWA has advocated for clear zones [since at least the 1980s](#), establishing them is a slow and gradual process. We often wait until there is a nearby construction project and we consider whether removing roadside obstacles would offer a safety benefit. Since we had been planning to resurface the section of I-5 between Glendale and Azalea, we decided to address the roadside trees as part of the paving project. Over the next few weeks, contractors will remove the logs from the median, grind the stumps down to ground level, and apply grass seeding.

We understand your disappointment. I have never met an ODOT employee who doesn't appreciate the natural beauty of our state, and we were sad to see the trees go, too. But safety is important, and we have an obligation to help prevent crashes, injuries and fatalities.

Regards,

Dan Latham

ODOT Public Information Officer

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Links:

ODOT NEWS RELEASE: [Reminder -- I-5 slowdowns near Glendale begin Monday morning](#)

FHWA (2006): [Highway Safety and Trees: The Delicate Balance](#)

FHWA (2008): [Vegetation control for safety](#)