

Forecast: Smoky days ahead

Get some tips for staying safe during the expected haze

When you work in Oregon, sooner or later you're going to drive down a road where, for whatever reason, you just can't see.

Maybe it's nasty fog, blinding snow, blowing dust, an uncontrolled field burn, or — more frequent these days — wildfire smoke.

We get all those things in Oregon and they're all dangerous. They all can quickly shut down our ability to safely drive down the highway or even walk in the neighborhood. And they can all go from being a nuisance to being causing serious injury or worse.

Dealing with wildfire smoke when driving

Wildfire smoke is perhaps the scariest threat. With darkening skies, it often brings fabulous sunsets — and the cruel reminder that somewhere fire is destroying part of our state, country, or even continent.

And the smoke reminds us that we need to take precautions when we're on the job, out on the road.

If you're out driving, the safest option is to get off the roads in dangerously smoky conditions. But if you encounter heavy smoke, here are some steps you can take to help stay safe:

- **Slow down, but keep a steady pace and stay alert.** Slow driving gives you more time to respond to unexpected conditions.
- **Use headlights on low beam.** Light from high beams will reflect back, causing glare, making it more difficult to see ahead.
- **Keep plenty of space between you and other vehicles.** Visibility, of course, decreases in smoke, so maintain a safe stopping distance between you and the vehicle ahead.
- **Don't tailgate.** Remember that everyone else on the road is in the same fix you're in. They're counting on you to help guide the way.
- **Be alert for slow or stopped vehicles** and other obstacles.
- **Be prepared to pull over and stop, but never stop in a travel lane.** If you choose to pull off the road, pull as far as you can to the right and turn on your hazard lights.



If you encounter heavy smoke when you're driving, there are steps you can take to help stay safe.

A history, and a future, of smoke

We may see more dangerous days with wildfire smoke. But we've seen similar hazards before. On I-84 in central Oregon, eastbound travelers occasionally see a warning sign that reads, "Blowing Dust Area Next 40 Miles."

Dangerous dust, ash or smoke is nothing new. From 1985 through 2020, 35 people died on Oregon roads in conditions of heavy smoke, dust, or ash, our stats show. And in 2020 alone, a year of heavy wildfires, the state saw 364 crashes in blinding conditions.

A bad day came on Aug. 3, 1988, when smoke from a field burn suddenly drifted over I-5 and caused a pileup at milepost 229, south of Albany. In the end, 20 cars crashed in the blinding smoke and seven people died.

Remember to stay alert and put away the distractions. We each play a critical role in keeping our roads safe, no matter what the conditions.

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