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Report of the Week

Black ice gives no warning
1/15/09

Report Number: 08-139

Report Date: 03/11/2008 1148

Synopsis

Crew ditches engine in icy conditions

Demographics

Department type: Combination, Mostly paid

Job or rank: Captain

Department shift: 24 hours on - 48 hours off

Age: 43 - 51

Years of fire service experience: 17 - 20

Region: FEMA Region V

Service Area: Suburban

Event Information

Event type: Vehicle event: responding to, returning from, routine driving, etc.

Event date and time: 02/23/2008 0230

Hours into the shift:

Event participation: Involved in the event

Weather at time of event: Cloudy and Dry

Do you think this will happen again?

What do you believe caused the event?

- Weather
- Communication

What do you believe is the loss potential?

- Property damage
- Minor injury
- Life threatening injury
- Lost time injury

Event Description

Our engine was dispatched as a first responder to a vehicle accident involving a pickup truck and a utility pole. There had been numerous incidents earlier in the evening for vehicle accidents involving icy roadways but the road surfaces now appeared to be dry and salt covered. As we responded, I asked the driver how the road conditions were and he said that they were fine. In fact, the roads actually looked dry although white from salt that had been applied much earlier. As we traveled over a bridge, I once again asked the driver about the road surface over the bridge and he once again said that they were fine. Receiving a dispatch for a traffic accident at 0230 on a Friday night made me think that this was just another DUI driver that had not made it home. As we turned onto the road where the incident was, we observed a police cruiser that had stopped at the top of the hill. It was assumed that the cruiser was awaiting our entry into

the street to block the road behind us so we proceeded down the slight grade. After traveling about 200 yards, the driver began to brake for a 90 degree bend in the road and the truck began to slide. At that point, the road did not appear to be icy but we were definitely sliding and gaining speed. I instructed the driver to ease off of the brakes to regain steering so we could make the bend and when we rounded to corner, we began down an even steeper grade. The driver touched the brakes and the truck was once again sliding and gaining speed. In the road ahead of us was the original accident that wound up in the center of the roadway. There wasn't much time to react, but I decided to have the driver try and ditch the truck off of the left side of the road rather than impact the original scene. As our truck encountered the front yard, the front wheels sunk into the yard and the rear wheels continued down the slope and turned us around backwards into an embankment and a fire hydrant before shooting us back into the roadway straight at the pick up truck once more. We were out of options to ditch to the left and out of time so it was decided to try and run off the right side of the road into the tree line. I would estimate our speed at this point to be less than 10 MPH, but we were definitely sliding out of control. The impact with the trees was very abrupt but successfully stopped the event with just a few minor bumps. The crew was able to exit the vehicle and attend to the original accident victims as well as alert other responding units to avoid the hill. As it turns out, the pickup truck occupants had already left their vehicle and went to a nearby house for help.

Lessons Learned

This was my own first personal experience with black ice. Conditions earlier in the evening were hazardous and this thought certainly was present with us as we began our response. At no time did we ever suspect that the roads were bad, as they appeared to be dry. Perhaps the best lesson learned here is that there should have been some communication between the police and fire units. The cruiser that was stopped on the scene had done so because they had encountered the slippery slope but did not communicate the information to the fire department. It is imperative that first arriving units relay road conditions to the incoming units to prevent further incidents. Another lesson that was learned in fact occurred from a previous accident within our department that involved similar conditions. In that incident, another truck had left the roadway and ran into a yard, which prevented what could have been serious injuries to both firefighters and civilians. Having knowledge of that incident likely assisted me with the decision to ditch the truck during our own event. We truly are a profession that learns from others mistakes and or experiences.

Discussion Questions

Twenty tons of apparatus suddenly going into a slide is one feat apparatus drivers prefer not to experience. One second you are proceeding northbound in the northbound lane and the next you are facing west, but still proceeding north. Preparation in the form of knowing your area (topography, geography, weather) is one key to avoid the situation. Staying in tune with the situation is another key. Remember that during this period of weather, subtle changes in temperature, humidity and wind wreak havoc with the road conditions. All road surfaces should be suspect and other information should be considered clues to the situation (responses to multiple collisions, deteriorating weather, local traffic reports). Once you have reviewed the entire content of [#08-139](#) and the related reports, consider the following:

1. Have you ever driven into an “unexpected” road condition that caused you to lose control of the apparatus? What did you do to compensate/correct?
2. What steps do you take (driver and officer) to prepare for changes in weather/road conditions that occur during the winter months?
3. When did you last drive in a period of inclement weather?
4. If you have not driven on icy roads, do you know someone who has that you can seek out for advice and instruction?
5. Does your driver training program, either initial or recertification, include a practical skills session on an approved skid pad?

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[08-148 \(Photos on](#)

Note: The questions posed by the reviewers are designed to generate discussion and thought in the name of promoting firefighter safety. They are not intended to pass judgment on the actions and performance of individuals in the reports.