

# **Snow, Fog and Whiteout Conditions**

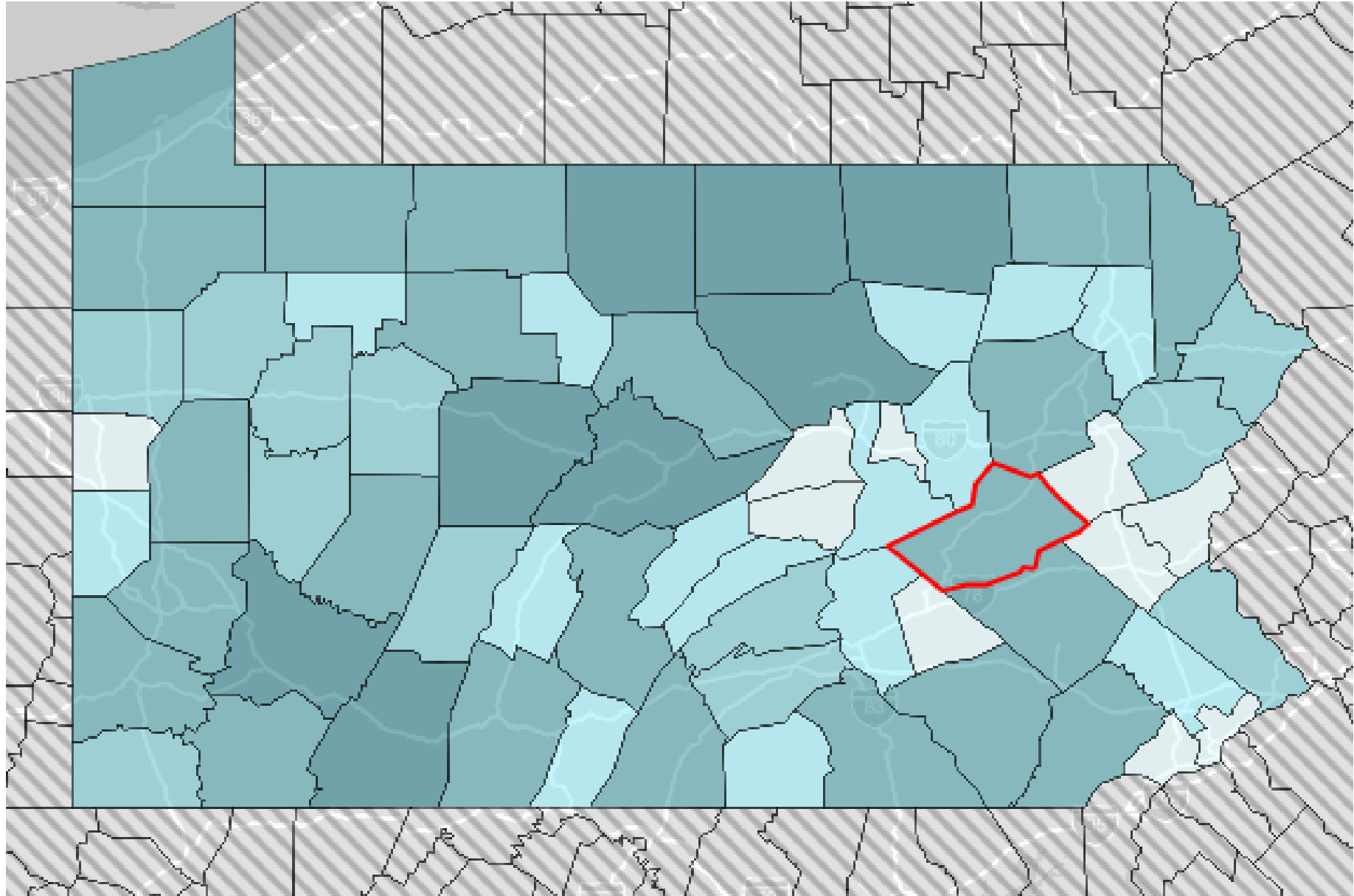
## **Disaster on I-81**

**On March 28, 2022, an unexpected snow squall turned several miles of Interstate 81 in Schuylkill County Pennsylvania into a scene of carnage.**



# **DISCLAIMER**

**This presentation was put together without consultation of any official Schuylkill 911 records. The information is from personal observations and initial actions taken by several EMA career and volunteer staff members and information posted to social media and local sources.**



# About Schuylkill County

**Area:** 778 Square Miles

**Population:** Approximately 143,000

**Cities:** Pottsville – County seat – Population 14,324

**Boroughs:** 30 - Populations from 91 to 7,107

**Townships:** 36 - Populations from 250 to 4,300

# Schuylkill Emergency Services

## Law Enforcement:

PA State Police – Stations – Schuylkill Haven and Frackville

Local PD: 24-7-365 – 7 covering 8 municipalities

Local PD: Part-time – 27 covering 34 municipalities

## Fire: 99

~~100~~ volunteer stations with approx. 2,300 rostered individuals

## EMS:

17 Independent, non-profit orgs., providing BLS w/ 4 also ALS  
working out of 19 stations

# Schuylkill County

## **911 Communications Center:**

Staffing is normally, 4 dispatchers and a supervisory personnel

## **EMA:**

Coordinator, Deputy, Planner, Admin Manager and Admin Ass't.

## **Coroner:**

Elected Coroner, part-time on-call deputy coroners

**South Central Task Force – 9 county regional group**

# State & Federal Agencies

**P.E.M.A.** H.Q. in Harrisburg

Incident reporting via WEB EOC

**PA DEP** North East Regional Office

Emergency response, water quality, waste, AST, UST

**Penn DOT** District 5 in Allentown – area covers 6 counties

Maintenance District 5-6 in Schuylkill

County Manager, Assistant Managers

**Nation Weather Service – State College**

# Major Roadways

## **I-81 MM 97 to 139 - 42 miles in length**

Variable Message Board at MM 97 NB and MM 139 SB

3 Cameras (visible in TCC) and 2 weather stations

LE Coverage for I-81 split between PSP stations in Frackville & Jonestown, Lebanon County

**SR 61** – primary link between I-78 & I-81

**US 209 & SR 309**

**Any detour of traffic from I-81 creates major traffic issues throughout the county**



# Media

## **Television:**

There are three different media markets within the county & no stations within Schuylkill. All have on-line presence.

## **Broadcast Radio:**

Two A.M. and one F.M. - all with limited reach, 2 are on the web

## **Newspaper:**

One daily with active on-line presence

## **On-line sources:**

Several local on-line news operations

## **Social Media – Facebook:**

Schuylkill Office of Emergency Management & LEPC

# From inside 911

Based on the 1<sup>st</sup> call received at 10:34 A.M., a dispatch was made for Fire Districts 52-2 and 43 and Minersville EMS for a MVA on I-81 at 116 MM NB.

## **10:39 A.M. Exit 116 I-81 N.B.**

A tractor trailer with a dash cam was traveling north on I-81 at 10:36 A.M. around 115MM. With the poor road conditions and diminishing visibility, he slowed to 35 MPH & slowed further when approaching MM / Exit 116 where he encountered several minor accidents.

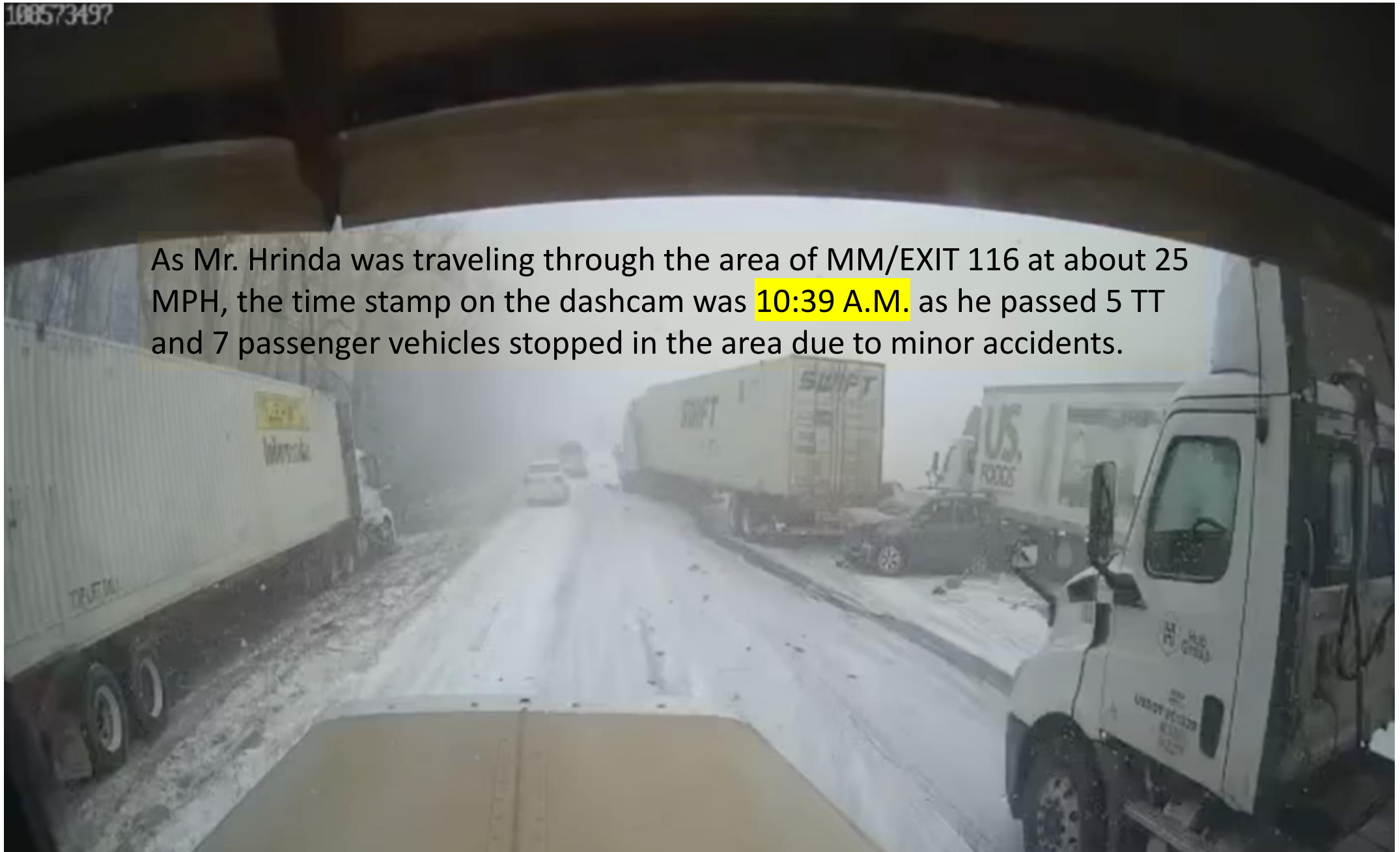
**The video is no longer posted or available for viewing.**

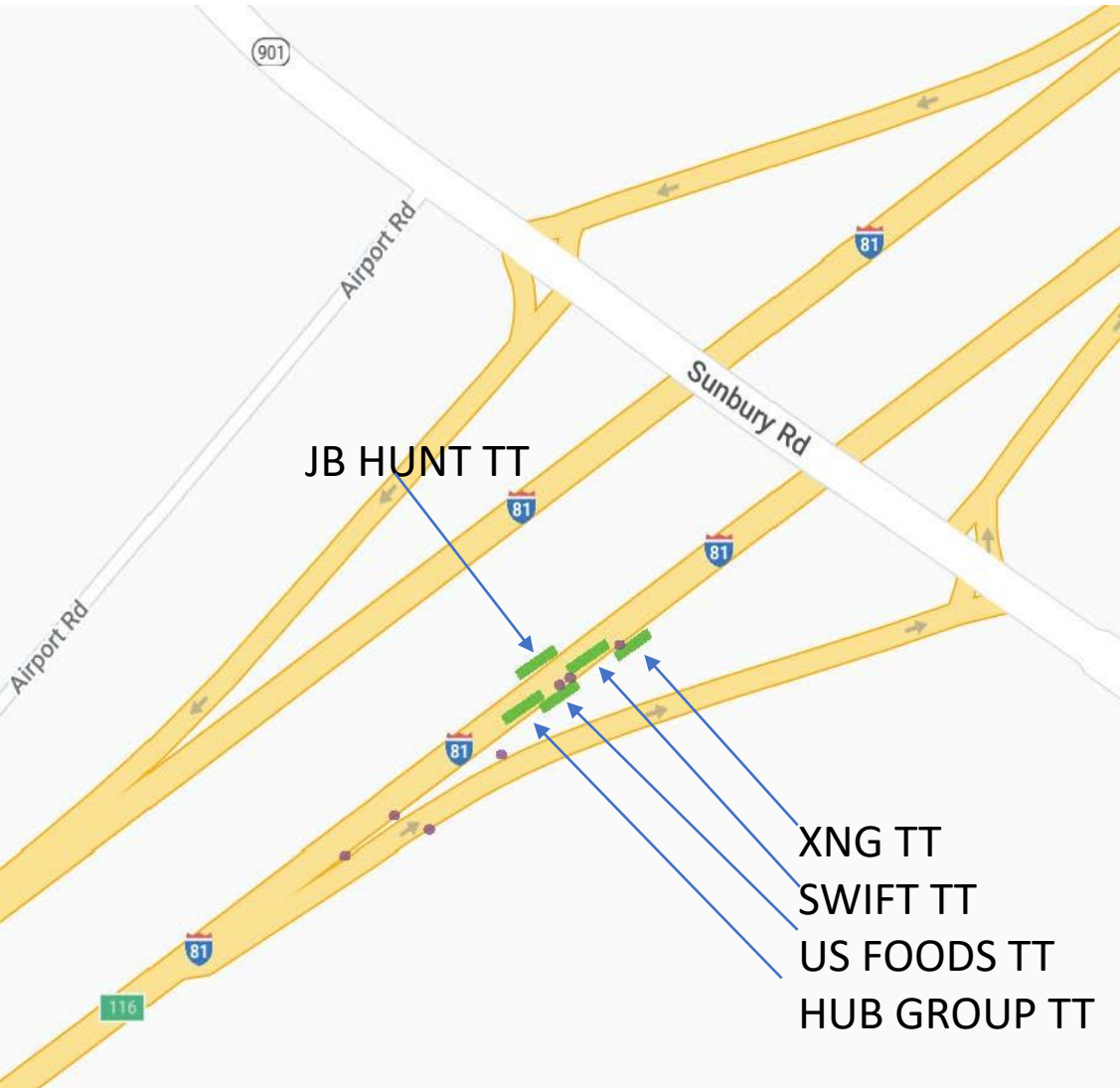
Pennsylvania-based owner-operator [Johnny Hrinda](#) shared the dash cam video on March 29, along with a message about safe driving. He says that the video was captured on March 28, 2022, on northbound I-81 at mile marker 114 in Pennsylvania. Hrinda said:

Yesterday morning was the start of a beautiful morning, sunny blue skies, I just got done delivering my load and heading back to Montgomery New York, so I decided to take **interstate 81 north**, about the **114 mile marker I see a snow squall ahead of me about 1 mi**, if anyone has ever driven through a snow squall they know how dangerous they can be, **so I start slowing down, less than 2 minutes later it's right on top of me my visibility has gone from 1 mi to about 500 ft** in almost a blink of an eye, by this time I got **my truck slowed down to about 30 mph**, and it just gets worse visibility was almost nothing, we have all seen those YouTube videos of car and truck pile ups, some of us have even seen the after effects, even a few of us have experienced them firsthand and they are one of the most unpredictable and dangerous things to experience, my dash cam video here you will have the rare opportunity to see what it's like inside of a tractor trailer going through one of these things as the pile up is happening, at the end of it there was over 70 vehicles involved and several deaths, what's truly sad about it all a lot of it **could have been avoided if people did what I did and just slow down** because contrary to belief you cannot drive 60 miles an hour on snow whether you have four-wheel drive or not I hope my video will show people by taking your time and slowing down you can avoid 99% of accidents out there

108573497

As Mr. Hrinda was traveling through the area of MM/EXIT 116 at about 25 MPH, the time stamp on the dashcam was **10:39 A.M.** as he passed 5 TT and 7 passenger vehicles stopped in the area due to minor accidents.





- XNG TT
- SWIFT TT
- US FOODS TT
- HUB GROUP TT

# Potential disaster

Another near miss, shown from a T/T dash cam, was posted You Tube in the days after the accident. It showed a man diving out of the way of the approaching vehicle. What many had not noticed was that the vehicle that T/T struck was carrying 160 cylinders of Acetylene.







# 911 calls continued

In the minutes after the video shown on the T/T dash cam, vehicles continued to travel at normal highway speeds and crashed as they approached the stopped vehicles near Exit 116. Calls to 911 increased substantially.

Videos have been widely circulating on You Tube and media outlets. Some showed near misses and a growing fire in the tangle of vehicles.





- It was immediately apparent that the situation on I-81 was an MCI.
- 911 staffing was augmented by management and two trainees.
- Calls to local and regional medical centers determined the number and class of patients they could handle.
- Air-Med was contacted to determine which could fly in the current weather conditions.
- The initial alarm assignment was increased to include more rescue assets and additional EMS units.

# EMA Actions

- PA DOT County Manager advised of accident and road conditions.
- Requested changes to VMB & 511PA.com to initiate detour notifications.
- Contacted D.C. at High Ridge I.P. & requested they hold all vehicles until the situation is brought under control.
- Contacted Schuylkill Transportation System and requested buses. 2 immediate and 3 additional as available.

- Advised Industrial Development Authority & asked for assistance with maintaining roadway through High Ridge.
- Assign staff and volunteers to ISV for deployment to scene.
- Initial post to FACEBOOK on the Schuylkill OEM page at 10:49 A.M.
- Handled all media inquiries that were coming into the office or 911 center. (DEMC)
- Requested Wegman's D.C. open a triage center / temporary shelter.



**Schuylkill County Office of Emergency Management & LEPC**

Published by John W Blickley · March 28 · 🌐

10:58



SR 901 in Cass Township shut down due to snow squall avoid the area.

[See Insights](#)


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**Schuylkill County Office of Emergency Management & LEPC**

Published by John W Blickley · March 28 · 🌐

10:49



I-81 North at Mile marker 116 between Hegins and Minersville exits Multiple Vehicle accident due to snow squall. Avoid the area.

[See Insights](#)

[Boost post](#)

- As Wegman's sent their EMT to the scene, an ambulance was sent to evaluate and care for walking wounded.
- Local ARC staff requested to Wegman's.
- Notified the school district transportation managers of the accident and potential traffic issues.
- Contacted ARC, regional staff
- Schuylkill United Way offered assistance with cost for sheltering evacuees overnight
- Notify Schuylkill County Airport of possible air-med arrivals



Rescue units augmented the 1<sup>st</sup> due response:

Minersville Fire-Rescue

Goodwill – Frackville

Donaldson Fire Co

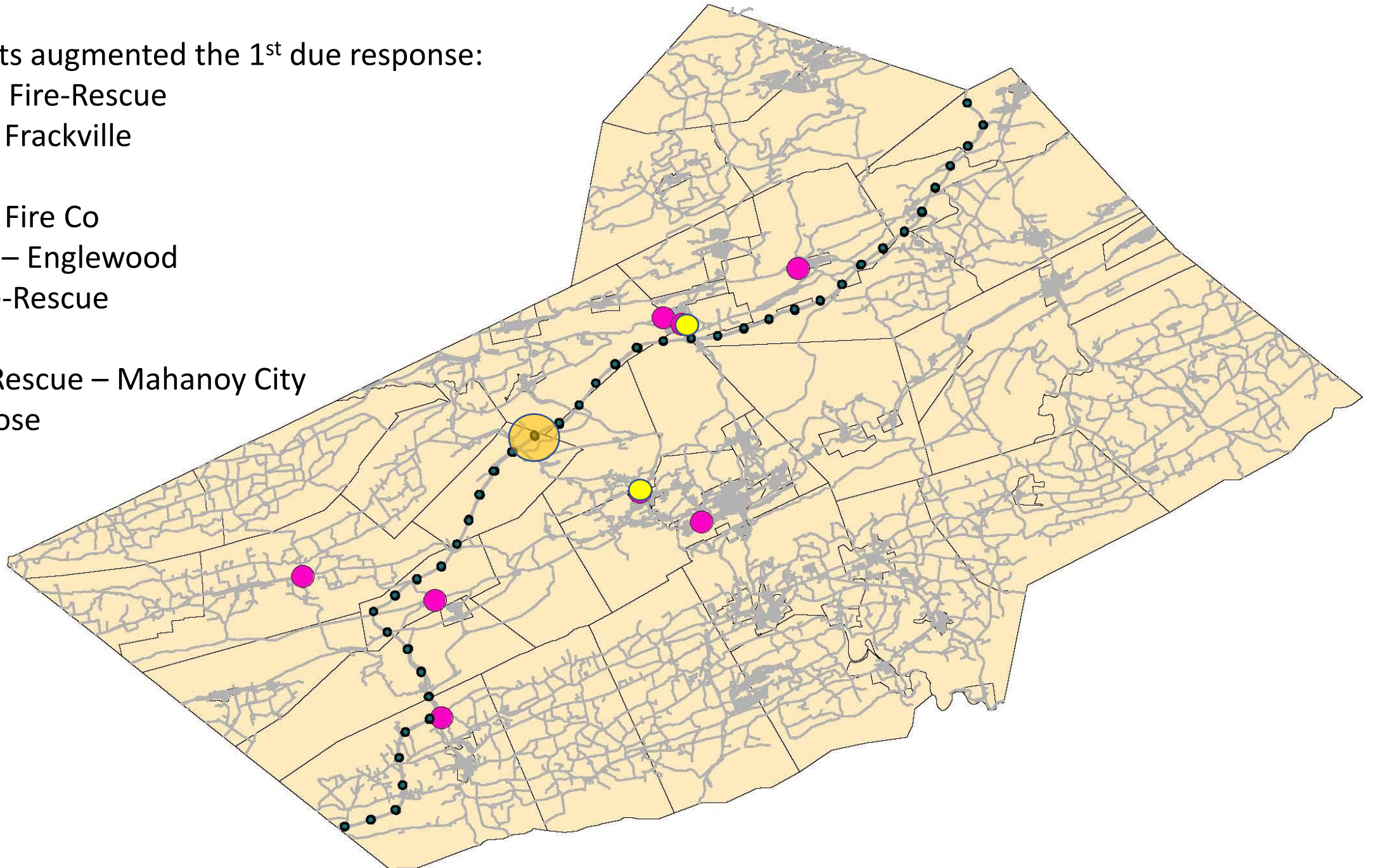
Friendship – Englewood

Hegins Fire-Rescue

Ravine FC

West End Rescue – Mahanoy City

Yorkville Hose





# Poor road conditions hindered response

Under normal conditions, the two closest rescue stations would have had travel times of about 9 minutes. Goodwill of Frackville, approached via I-81 S.B. at normal highway speeds until reaching the 119 MM S.B. At this point they slowed and deployed the automatic snow chains and continued into the scene, arriving at 10:52 A.M.

# Poor road conditions cause detour

Minersville Fire Rescue traveled SR 901 until encountering the last 8/10 miles of roadway snow-covered and blocked by commercial vehicles. They had to detour to Valley Road to Gordon Mountain Rd then to High Ridge Industrial Park to reach the scene. This caused a delay in arrival due to a detour of 7 miles.

# Eng. 43-10 arrived at 10:52

18 minutes after initial 911 call.



# Fire & Rescue Operations

Intense fire with hydrocarbons

Water supply issues – TTF initiated

Haz Mat exposure – acetylene, CNG, Propane

Firefighting foam (AFFF) supply

Extrication of victims

Primary & secondary searches

Marking of vehicles checked

Difficult access due to crash / fire intensity

Maneuvering equipment thru debris

Public / victims were still in the immediate area during operations

# Fire Suppression Efforts

260,000 Gallons of Water used.







XNG TT carrying 4 cylinders of Compressed Natural Gas (Methane) UN 1971



160 cylinders of  
acetylene UN 1001





MC331 Tanker  
UNODORIZED PROPANE  
UN 1075





# Fire Actions

- Firefighting operations continued well into the night in below freezing temperatures.
- ISV staff made additional assignments to keep fresh personnel available as units were demobilized.
- Active fire operations were complete between 22:00 & 23:00. A fire watch was established and maintained until Tuesday afternoon at 15:30 hours when the acetylene truck was removed.
- Assisted Schuylkill County Coroner staff with recovery of victims.

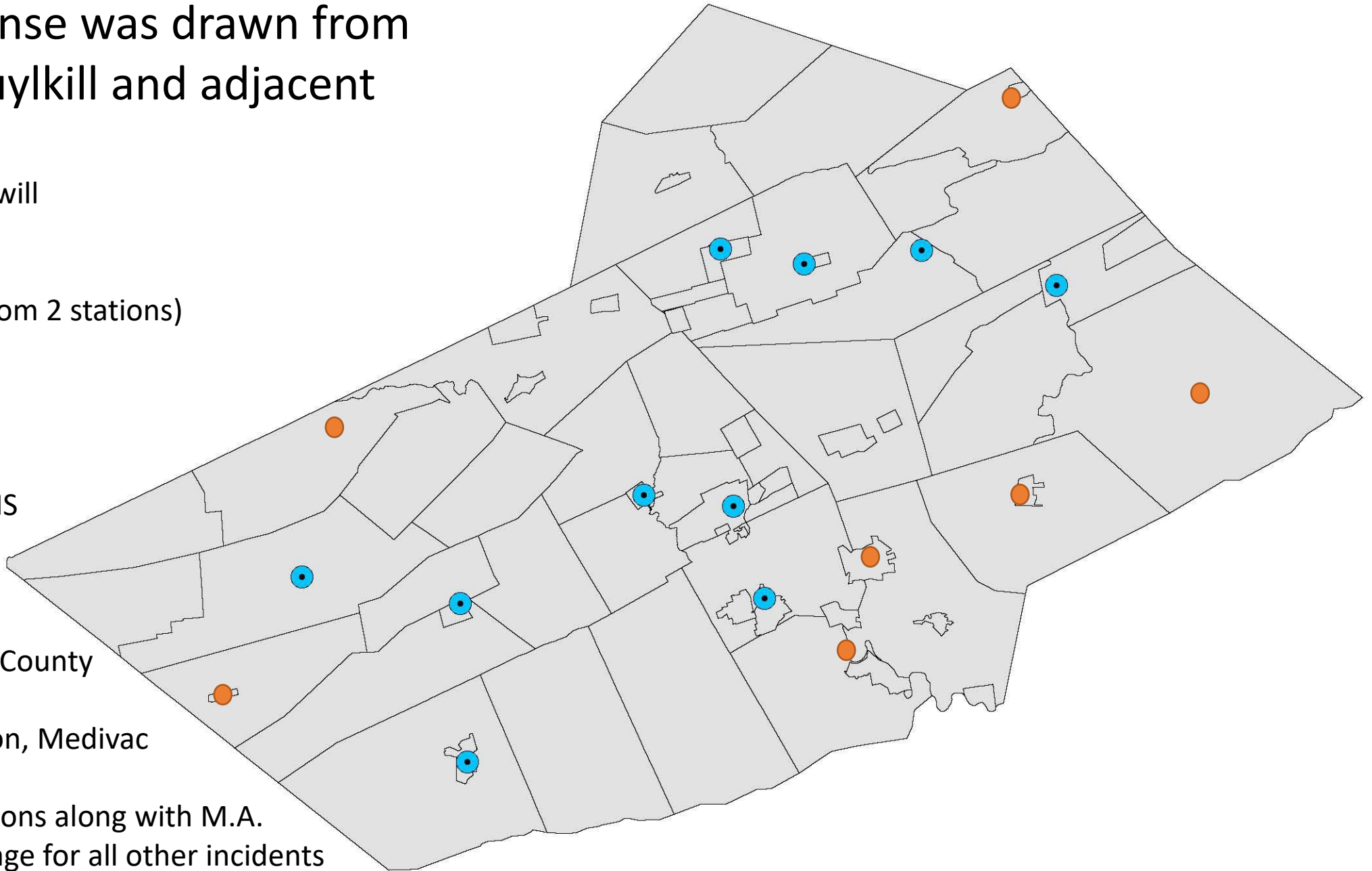
# EMS Response was drawn from across Schuylkill and adjacent counties:

Minersville Goodwill  
Pine Grove  
Hegins EMS  
Schuylkill EMS (from 2 stations)  
Shenandoah EMS  
Tamaqua EMS  
Tremont EMS  
Ryan Twp EMS  
Mahanoy City EMS  
Wegman's QRS

Lebanon County  
Northumberland County

Life Flight, Life Lion, Medivac

● Seven EMS stations along with M.A. provided coverage for all other incidents



# EMS Actions

- Triage / Treatment / Transport
- Worked side by side with F/R during extrications
- 29 Patients transported from the scene
  - 26 by ground
  - 3 by helicopter
- 8 Patients transported from the triage center at Wegman's

- 15:19 hours – All patients were at treatment facilities
- Medical Command Terminated
- 4.75 hours after initial 911 call, all injured victims were extricated, triaged, treated and transported to medical facilities. Additionally, approximately 80 other individuals were evaluated by EMS at the Wegman's site.

# PSP Timeline & Actions

- 10:35 PSP Frackville received a 911 transfer call from Schuylkill County. A Trooper was on I-81 in the area of MM 111 monitoring traffic as snow squalls began moving through the area. He was dispatched to the crash at 10:36.
- 10:40 PSP advised PennDOT to activate the early warning sign boards. State agency to state agency
- 10:43 PSP received information from Schuylkill Co. 911 indicating numerous injuries including an unconscious female trapped inside a vehicle.

- 10:44 Various vehicles were now reported to be on fire with multiple persons injured and trapped inside vehicles.
- 10:45 PennDOT was requested to close I-81 NB at MM 111
- 10:47 as the Trooper was responding to the area of the initial crashes he crashed into a vehicle disabled from a previous crash.
- 10:52 first fire units arrived on scene. Requests were made to PSP Jonestown & Schuylkill Haven for additional Troopers to respond.
- 10:58 Crash Reported I-81 SB MM 116, Jack knifed Tractor Trailer Blocking SB I-81 (Total of 3 Crashes occurred on SB)

- 11:02 PSP verified first fatality, required notifications then made for CARS, MCSAP, FSU units.
- 11:36 Incident Command Post was established on I-81 at Rt. 901, Joint Command Post PSP, Schuylkill Co. EMA.
- 12:01 PSP was advised that the fuse links of the acetylene tanks will result in a catastrophic explosion if the trailer reaches 200 degrees.



- CARS – Collision Accident and Reconstruction Specialist
- MCSAP - Federal Motor Carrier Safety Assistance Program
- FSU - Forensic Services Unit

- 12:40 I-81 closed at MM 107 Long term Detour established.
- 12:50 Media Staging Area established at SR901 and I-81 NB off ramp.
- Total of 11 vehicles including 7 Commercial Vehicles engulfed in flames.
- North Bound 11 Separate Crashes, 106 Involved Vehicles, 116 People, 65 Reported Injuries, 6 Fatalities, 29 Injured Persons Transported, 3 Flown.
- South Bound 3 Separate Crashes, 3 Involved vehicles (two Jack knifed CMVs), 3 People, Zero reported injuries.



2018 Ford F-150  
Unit #7

2020 Freightliner  
Cascadia  
Online Transport  
LLC  
Unit #10

2012 Mack  
Hazleton Scrap  
Recycling Inc.  
Unit #11

2007 Freightliner  
DMJ Express Corp.  
Unit #6

2021 Subaru  
Forester  
Unit #4

2020 BMW X5  
Unit #9

2021 Freightliner  
Cascadia  
Transco Leasing Inc.  
Unit #8

2018 Freightliner  
HUB Group  
Unit #1

2016 Toyota Sienna  
Unit #3

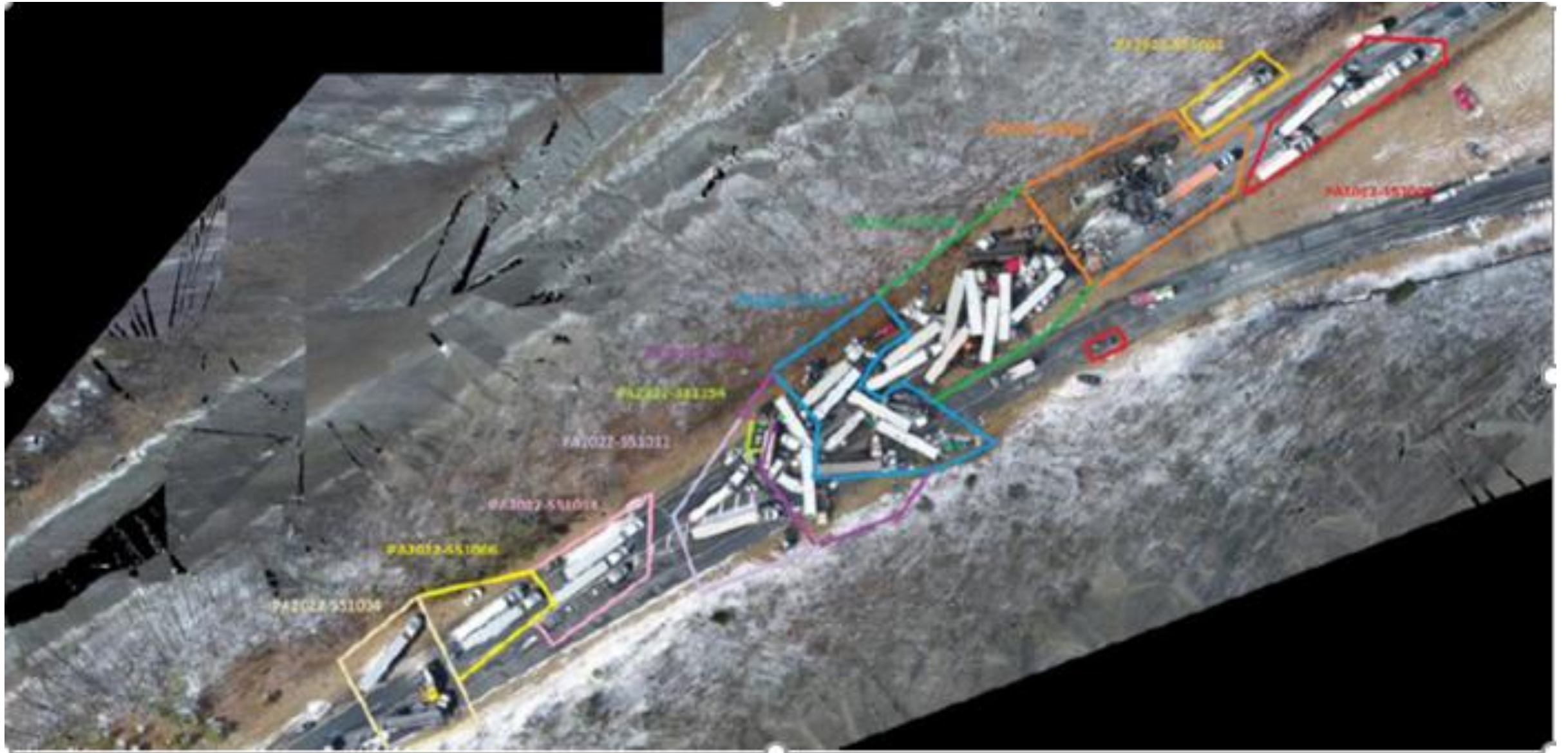
2008 International  
Triple R Trucking  
Unit #2

2020 Mack  
ABF Freight  
Unit #5





# 11 Different Crashes



# LE Actions

- Pennsylvania State Police – Frackville Station had lead
- Troopers conducted additional secondary searches in the adjacent wooded area
- PSP Public Information Officer handled media briefings
- Maintained order with the wrecker / recovery operators
- Tracked all vehicles moved from the scene by tow operators
- PSP conducted investigation, handled inquiries and made notifications

# ARC / PSP / SUW Actions

- The unhurt personnel were transported by STS bus from the scene to Wegmans then to the Goodwill Fire and Ambulance in Minersville, where ARC and PA State Police continued data collection and determined shelter needs or reunification points.
- 20:18 all persons placed for overnight shelter or retrieved.

# DOT Actions

- Assess condition of the roadway.
- Maintained detour information and signage during more than a 40 hours shutdown of the northbound interstate.
- Devise a plan to reopen the highway in a safe and expedient manner
- Once the wreckage was cleared, about 800 feet of roadway was milled shoulder to shoulder to remove the oil / debris laden macadam.

# DEP Actions

- Assess environmental impact to ground and potential impact of run-off from leaks and FF operations.
- Recommended notification to area water suppliers to monitor intakes.
- Provided a firm to conduct sampling of soil.



# Community

- ARC – local volunteers
- Schuylkill United Way – financial support & outreach to Enterprise Rental
- Wegman's – opened doors for the initial shelter & triage; additionally, provided food at reunification center
- Local businesses – supporting the first responders throughout the incident
- Schuylkill Transportation System

# Good Points of the Operation

- The cooperation between F/R and EMS
- UTV proved valuable in moving equipment and patients through harsh conditions
- Battery operated rescue tools
- Deployment of the ISV with an incident support team
- Cooperation and communication across the board
- Schuylkill Transportation System – integrated into the county radio system. ....public works next???

- Cradle Point with dual modem replaced a satellite system for internet access
- Contributing to success:
  - LEPC organizational changes over the last several years
  - On-going interaction and communications with state agencies
- Notification to critical infrastructure that could potentially be impacted
- CISM sessions held in the hours and days after the incident
- The transition of incident command roles as the incident progressed went smoothly

# Contributing Factors

- The relationships we establish and maintain across disciplines and within the wider community
- Frank discussion of capabilities and limitation during blue sky days, yields realistic expectations on grey sky days
- Take the time to meet newly appointed leaders
- Ensure leaders in other disciplines know our staff
- Hot Wash, AAR, Improvement Plans

# What needs improvement

- EBH-DCORT -> Emergency Behavioral Health / Disaster Crisis Outreach and Referral Teams
- People travel with animals - deploy County Animal Response Team (CART)
- Job Johnnies!!
- Technology to provide warning of hazardous conditions
- “Canteen Vehicle” & rehab resources

# Where we need to do better

- Establish a single phone line for family inquiries
- Provide all victims / survivors with a single POC #
- Initial Patient tracking
- Develop more contacts for transportation operations
- Revisit I-81 Detour Route Plan
- Revise or develop new incident specific checklists
- Improve information on available resources
  - Foam, containment material, specialize equipment, LDH
  - Adding - Surplus TOG, HD washing machines



# Conclusion

- Tragic loss of 6 lives and dozens of injuries.
- 106 vehicles damaged and towed from scene.
- 41 hour operations involving fire, EMS, LE, EMA, ARC, DEP, DOT, HCN, tow operators and community partners.
- Within hours – law firms has converged on the area to offer “services” to victims.
- The operation went well; however, in the fist minutes of the incident, CNG, acetylene or propane could have turned the situation into a disaster of much greater magnitude.

# Question?



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*Coordinator*

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