



By Jan Rahn
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An early winter storm raged through the area last Thursday night stranding motorists, causing a semi tractor-trailer to roll over with a load of cattle, and dumping over 10 inches in some areas, accompanied by strong winds.

The driver of the semi, 54-year-old David Sowers of St. Francis, Kan., was not injured when the truck rolled into the south ditch at mile marker 32 four miles east of Madrid. The accident was the result of ice and the road's soft shoulders, which caused the truck to slide toward the steep south ditch and tip over once the wheels got sucked into the mud.

Responding to the scene were Perkins County law enforcement and the Madrid, Elsie and Grant volunteer fire departments. Personnel on scene sawed open the truck's roof to release some of the cattle that could not be removed from the rear of the semi.

Sowers, who was buckled in, was driving 35 fattened cows to slaughter in Lexington when the accident occurred. He was unhurt, but three of the cows died that night from injuries sustained when the truck rolled over and they got trapped under the weight of the other animals. Two injured cows survived but had to be put down the next day.

Sowers said he could feel the truck start to slide on the black ice and with the crosswinds contributing, he couldn't pull it back, then the wheels hit the soft shoulder and sucked it toward the ditch.

The experienced trucker of 10 years said he and two other semis behind him were all heading to Lexington on Highway 23 because I-80 was closed west of Ogallala.

Once the cattle were freed from the truck, they were placed in a portable-panel holding pen to ride out the storm and await further transport. They remained there until Friday afternoon when the cleanup process began.

Fire departments on the scene for nearly five hours Thursday night included Madrid with eight personnel and two pieces of equipment, Elsie with nine personnel and four trucks, and Grant with nine personnel and three vehicles, along with some good samaritans who helped.

Both Madrid and Elsie personnel had responded to a similar incident two years ago near Grafton when 10 cattle were lost, said Madrid's assistant chief, Keith Yost.

"This (last Thursday) was not your normal call in the middle of a blizzard," said Yost.



For approximately four hours on Friday, law enforcement and Madrid Volunteer Fire Department personnel assisted with the cleanup process. The surviving cattle were loaded onto another truck and continued the route to their demise in Lexington.

Personnel had to do more cutting on the trailer to get the dead animals out, said Yost.

Sinner's Paint and Body Shop of Wauneta removed the tractor-trailer from the ditch the same afternoon and towed it away.

The truck's driver said he is extremely grateful for the help of law enforcement and the fire departments for their assistance.

"It was just unbelievable," he said, "I was really impressed. I don't think everybody is like that—they're a top notch outfit." He was also greatly impressed that law enforcement and three personnel from Madrid's department came out the next day to assist in cutting open the truck some more to remove the dead cattle.

"The guys were awesome," said Sowers.

Other Storm Incidents

The Perkins County Sheriff's Office responded to 11 calls that involved vehicles/motorists between the hours of 5:30 p.m. Thursday night and 7:30 p.m Friday.

According to Sheriff Jim Brueggeman, 10 of the calls involved vehicles that were stuck or had slid off the road—three along Highway 23, four along Highway 61 and three stuck in Grant. The 11th call was the semi loaded with cattle that rolled over in the ditch.

At about midnight Thursday, Grant Volunteer Fire Department personnel pulled out a pickup in the ditch approximately six miles north of Grant along Highway 61 that had gone in the ditch with a camper attached.

A semi-truck that happened along had already pulled out the camper. However, due to slick roads and low visibility, the camper ended up blocking the truck's path and the driver could not get around it to pull out the pickup. Therefore, the sheriff's office and fire department were dispatched to assist.

The pickup was eventually pulled out of the deep snow in the ditch and reattached to the camper, then the pickup and camper with plates from a southern state proceeded north toward Ogallala.

Snowfall Amounts

The month of October 2009 is the second coldest month on record as the result of three major snowstorms hitting the area—the first on Oct. 9-10, the second on Oct. 22, and the third system on Oct. 29-30.

According to the National Weather Service, the latest storm that pounded the Perkins County region brought 10.5 inches of snow to the Grant area, 10 inches in Madrid, seven inches northwest of Madrid and just over eight-and-a-half three miles south of Grant.

Snowfall amounts had not been reported in the Venango, Elsie or Wallace area.