

# Wyoming DOT warns drivers of snowplow dangers, policies

JEREMY PELZER Caper Star-Tribune | Posted: Tuesday, January 5, 2010 12:00 am

CHEYENNE — Every winter, the Wyoming Department of Transportation's 250-odd snowplows are deployed to clear the state's roadways of snow and ice.

And every winter, they're catalysts for traffic collisions and accidents — and already one death in 2010.

So far this season, WYDOT snowplows are being hit by motorists at a rate of about one per storm, estimated Don Bridges, WYDOT's maintenance supervisor.

That's better than the winter of 2007-08, when 23 WYDOT snowplows were hit by other drivers, said WYDOT spokesman Doug McGee.

The latest accident involving a WYDOT snowplow cost 24-year-old John Alden his life.

On Sunday morning, the Wheatland resident was killed on U.S. Highway 287 south of Laramie when a driver in front of him apparently tried to pass a southbound snowplow, according to a Wyoming Highway Patrol accident report.

When that driver, 57-year-old Nancy Thomas of Englewood, Colo., crossed into the northbound lane, her car collided with a northbound truck. That impact sent the truck veering into the southbound lane, broadsiding Alden's BMW, the report said.

Alden's passenger, Amber McKee of Torrington, was sent to Ivinson Memorial Hospital in Laramie, the report said. Thomas, who was treated and released from the hospital Sunday, received a citation, accused of reckless driving.

It's not hard to see why snowplows are so accident-prone: They usually travel slower than other traffic and often kick up a cloud of snow around them that can make it difficult for other drivers to see.

"Sometimes you can't even see the plow, even though they've got these incredibly strong strobe lights on," McGee said. "And some drivers will drive into that cloud of snow thinking it's a ground blizzard or something."

In blizzards, many motorists try to move behind snowplows to stay safe, Bridges said. But, in better weather, drivers often impatiently tailgate right behind plows, he said.

"After a couple of times (being hit) or whatever, the plow drivers actually wind up looking out their mirror more than they do out the front to see who's going to hit them," Bridges said.

"You're always watching behind you because that's so much a problem — especially on the higher-speed highways."

It can be dangerous for frustrated drivers to drive around snowplows, especially as passing opportunities can be few and far between, thanks to Wyoming's hilly and mountainous terrain.

Impatient drivers, Bridges said, should keep in mind that the snowplow in front of them will eventually turn off the road, even though it might seem like an eternity.

Under WYDOT policy, snowplow drivers who see traffic backing up behind them must pull over to let the trailing vehicles pass.

Plus, in normal conditions, each WYDOT snowplow is responsible for clearing only 20 miles of interstate highway or 40 miles of state highway at a time, Bridges said.

And that's only if they don't run out of snow to plow before then, McGee said.

"You almost never run into a situation where the one plow pulls off only to find the next plow going," McGee said.

Another safety tip, Bridges suggested, is to turn off cruise control when nearing a snowplow or driving in wintry weather.

"I mean, it sounds funny to have to tell you that," he said, "but the number of people that have run into us or run off the road due to conditions — a lot of times they have their cruise control on."

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