

Food Poisoning Traveling Home

Lessons Shared



On January 25, 2018, Texas A&M Forest Service (TFS) resources were requested to the Prairie Grove Fire in Cooke County, Texas. While traveling back from the fire, a transport driver suffered an acute, violent case of food poisoning. This caused the driver to excessively vomit and lose consciousness (*vasovagal syncope*) while attempting to stop the transport.

Narrative

On the morning of January 25, 2018, TFS resources were preparing for elevated fire conditions across North Texas. A local crew, two dozer operators (Casey & Fred) and a Type 3 Incident Commander (Chris) started their morning at 8:00 with an operational briefing. Following the briefing, Casey and Fred took a pickup to retrieve an all-terrain vehicle (ATV) for the day's operations. On the way to pick up the ATV, Fred mentioned to Casey of having a "rumbling stomach", but nothing he thought seemed out of the ordinary. He purchased some chewable antacids to relieve the stomach discomfort.

The crew departed the office at 10:00 with two bobtail transports hauling two type 4 tractor plows and a pickup hauling the ATV. The crew arrived in Sherman, TX to preposition for forecasted fire danger. After arrival, they had lunch at a nearby steak house. Fred had no stomach discomfort following the meal. They arrived at the staging area around 12:00. The crew was dispatched to the Prairie Grove Fire (Type 4 Fire) at 12:45. They arrived on scene of the fire at 13:45 and began constructing dozer line along the fire's perimeter. Fred continued to feel fine throughout operations. The fire was contained at 137 acres and the crew was released to their home unit at 19:28. Prior to travel, the crew along with other local resources were given cold hamburgers that had been delivered by a volunteer organization. Fred only ate half a burger since they were cold.

Casey led the resources while traveling, followed by Fred and Chris. At approximately 21:05, Fred informed Chris over the radio that he was feeling sick and he needed to pull over. Fred then proceeded to pull the transport onto the paved shoulder. He had slowed the transport to approximately 20 miles per hour when he lost consciousness. The transport veered right, running off the pavement and through the bar ditch. Chris radioed Fred to ask if something was wrong, but there was no response. The transport continued through the ditch striking several cedar trees before



Path of the transport moving off the road, through the ditch, and into the cedar trees.

finally coming to a stop. Chris left his pickup and made his way to the transport. Chris saw Fred was slumped over the steering wheel. Having known Fred for several years, Chris's first thought was "He's dead, how am I going to tell his family?"



The transport in the cedar trees before being towed. The dozer was unloaded before towing.

Chris immediately called 911 and then Casey, a licensed paramedic, saying he needed help. Casey exited the transport and ran back to the accident location (approximately 100 yards). Casey opened the door of the transport and found a "scary sight". Fred was slumped forward against the seat belt, unconscious and covered in vomit. Casey then attempted to wake Fred. Fred began to regain consciousness and in a panic, attempted to shut the transport off and set the brakes. Casey and Chris assisted Fred out of the transport and onto the ground. Casey continued to treat and assess Fred until medical resources arrived. Fred did complain of being chilly as he was on the ground and covered in vomit.

An ambulance arrived on scene at approximately 21:35. Fred was transported by ground to the hospital. Chris kept emergency contact information for Fred and Casey and called Fred's family to inform them of the situation. Chris also informed the Agency Administrator and Dispatch of the incident. Following the ambulance departure, Chris coordinated the recovery of the tractor plow and towing of the damaged transport with Casey. The remaining crew returned to their home unit at approximately 00:30.

Fred was checked into the hospital at 22:30 and was met there by his family. Several tests were performed and it was determined that he had suffered an acute case of food poisoning. The sudden onset of severe projectile vomiting caused his blood pressure to drop rapidly (*vasovagal syncope*) allowing him to lose consciousness. A separate drug and alcohol test was performed. This is standard procedure for TFS after any accident when the driver has a commercial driver's license (CDL). Both tests were negative. Fred was released from the hospital at 2:30 with no other injuries. He returned to work the following Monday.



The damaged transport. A limb penetrated into the engine compartment causing damage

Lessons Learned

- **What steps are you taking to prevent food poisoning from occurring to you or your resources?**

All individuals involved and the FLA team agree that food poisoning can occur to anyone at any time. No other members of the crew or local resources that ate the cold hamburgers had similar symptoms or illness. This was a unique case where Fred suffered a severe case while driving on a roadway. Fortunately there were no additional injuries to the driver or other civilians. The dozer was secured on the transport and did not receive any damage.

- **What medical resources are available to us while on incident? What about while traveling to and from the incident? Do you have a fireline emergency medical technician (EMT) available on your crew?**

Chris acted quickly and decisively during the entire incident. He sized up the situation and called 911. Chris also utilized Casey's skill set (certified paramedic) to treat Fred. If you find yourself in a situation where a resource is injured or ill, remember the Patient Assessment on pg. 100 of the IRPG and potential use of the 9 Line (pg. 108-109). TFS does have a Fire EMT program. It is encouraged that if your agency does have a fireline EMT program, to know who those individuals are that can provide support if needed.

- **Why is documentation and taking notes during an incident important?**

Chris took notes when the incident occurred all the way through when they arrived back at the home unit. Accurate notes and a timeline can be important for initial patient assessment and treatment.

- **Do you know what your agency's procedures/protocol are for an accident or an injury? What if the accident or injury occurs after normal working hours?**

Chris followed his training by documenting and communicating the incident to dispatch and the agency administrator. A drug and alcohol test was performed on Fred which is standard procedure after any accident involving an operator with a CDL.

- **When was the last time you inspected the contents of your first-aid kit? Is the kit adequate for your potential needs? Are items expired? Is your first-aid training up to date?**

Fortunately Fred did not receive additional injuries after impact with the cedar trees. A first-aid kit was on the transport but was not needed. If needed, that resource would have been available.

- **Is your emergency contact information up-to-date?**

Has the information been shared with your supervisor, dispatch, or agency administrator? Chris makes it a habit to know his personnel. Chris keeps an employee emergency contact notebook on him during incidents. Building and maintaining relationships with co-workers is important for many reasons, especially in times of an accident or injury.

Resources

Food Poisoning Prevention

<https://www.cdc.gov/foodsafety/prevention.html>

Food Safety While Hiking, Camping, and Boating

https://www.fsis.usda.gov/wps/portal/fsis/topics/food-safety-education/get-answers/food-safety-fact-sheets/safe-food-handling/food-safety-while-hiking-camping-and-boating/CT_Index

Vasovagal Syncope

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/vasovagal-syncope/symptoms-causes/syc-20350527>