

Updated: Many ‘unknowns’ remain after I-80 wreck a week ago

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Editor's Note

The original version of this story was published on August 23. An update was added on August 31.

Update - August 31, 2016:

Just more than a week after an Interstate 80 wreck took the lives of two semitrailer truck drivers and a passenger, authorities say some questions about the wreck may never be answered.

“There’s a lot of unknowns in this one,” said Nebraska State Trooper J.J. Connelly, who reconstructed the accident scene.

What road officials do know is that when Hieu Trung Le of San Jose, California, the driver of an eastbound semi carrying produce, crossed the median into westbound traffic on the evening of Aug. 21, he took a “hard left,” Connelly said.

Witnesses interviewed after the accident said there weren’t many cars near Le when he left his lane, Connelly said.

“There appears to be some kind of distraction, but what kind, we don’t know,” he said. He added that criminality, or Le deliberately leaving his lane, is out of the question, making the case a civil case. For that reason, law enforcement won’t look into Le’s background.

After Le, 56, crossed the median, he hit a semi driven by Zurabi Mdzeluri, 37, of Brooklyn, New York, head-on. The crash and subsequent flames killed both of them, as well as Le’s passenger, Duy Trong Dao of Sacramento, California.

Because all three involved in the collision died, “there’s no one to talk to,” Connelly said. He added that much of the possible evidence burned.

Collision kills three - Originally published August 23, 2016

After two semitrailer trucks collided Sunday evening on Interstate 80 near Hershey, emergency responders found two victims in the burning wreckage. But they didn’t know to search for a third — buried in the accident’s rubble — until after a phone call to one of the trucking companies.

An eastbound semi crossed the median about 6:30 p.m. and struck a westbound semi. One truck blocked the westbound lanes. The other rested in the ditch. Both were engulfed in flames.

Responders confirmed two deaths at 7:56 p.m. Just before 8:33 p.m. — 36 minutes later — they announced that there was a third.

State Trooper Justin Buhlke said responders would have found the third victim in ensuing investigation. Given the flames, “the fire department has to do their jobs,” he said. “There was a lot going on.”

Authorities at such scenes often call the trucking companies involved to find out the trucks’ freight and obtain documentation for inspections, Buhlke said. For similar reasons, he added, truck drivers are supposed to document all passengers.

The eastbound semitrailer truck was hauling lettuce, while the westbound semi was carrying cars, the State Patrol said.

The eastbound semi also sideswiped a passenger vehicle, but no one in that vehicle was injured.

The driver of the eastbound semi, Hieu Trung Le, 56, of San Jose, California, and his passenger, Duy Trong Dao, 31, of Sacramento, California, died. The driver of the westbound semi, Zurabi Mdzaluri, 37, of Brooklyn, New York, was also killed. It was unclear in which order authorities found the crash victims.

The crash closed westbound I-80 between North Platte and Sutherland for about six hours. Traffic was rerouted at North Platte’s Newberry Access, which officials said both helped avoid the town’s main-street road construction and provided easy access to Highway 30.

Part of the debris was removed from the scene on Sunday. On Monday morning, State Patrol and Nebraska Department of Roads workers cleaned up the rest of the wreckage.

The remnants of Mdzaluri’s trailer began smoldering, so members of the Hershey Volunteer Fire Department cooled down the debris.

Investigation of the crash continues.