

# Tow truck drivers urge motorists to slow down

By KRISTIAN FODEN-VENCIL

Oregon Public Broadcasting

Back in January, 42-year-old David Rios was relaxing at his mom's house when he got a call from his dispatcher at Chappelle's Towing in Vancouver, Washington.

There was a family with a flat tire on the shoulder of Interstate 5. Rios remembers: "Four kids, one adult ... on the freeway in a 2016 Cadillac Escalade. She did not know how to change a tire."

He was about to put her SUV on his flatbed to take it off the freeway and change the tire somewhere safe when a passing vehicle plowed into him.

"I'm pinned between two cars. I don't know what's happening," Rios said. "But I'm feeling the hottest burning sensation. In my mind, it's not real, it felt like a movie. And I'm being pushed across the ground."

These days, his buddies are reluctant to ask what happened. They don't want to pry. He says he can't get the memories out of his head. They come in flashes: It's loud. He's angry about being hit, confused because he can't seem to stand up and exasperated that cars continue rushing by.

Someone takes a belt and ties it around what's left of his leg.

Today, he doesn't handle loud noises well.

"It's the boom," he said, "the impact."

But Rios wants to tell his story, because he wants drivers to slow down and pay attention when they pass a tow truck.

Five months later, state police are still investigating the crash, and Rios is adjusting to life with a prosthetic leg, relearning how to do basic things like driving and playing with his son. "Mentally, physically, emotionally, ... I'm dealing with it," he said.



Photos by Kristian Foden-Vencil/Oregon Public Broadcasting

Former tow truck driver David Rios lost his leg in January after a car hit him while he was working on Interstate 5.

The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that the risk of dying as a tow truck driver is 15 times higher than in other dangerous private industry jobs, such as welding and construction. And most states, including Oregon and Washington, require drivers to move over and slow down when they see a tow truck. But many people don't, despite the threat of a \$140 ticket.

"You get some people that are just in a hurry, texting and driving, not paying attention. Putting make-up on," said driver Dan Carroll, who also works for Chappelle's Towing.

Tow truck drivers say they deal with death and injury on a regular basis, whether it's the motorists they're dealing with, a pedestrian or someone in the tight-knit driver community. It's an ever-present fact made more tangible by



Rios is learning how to walk on a new prosthetic leg.

the location of their offices, usually on the side of a highway with traffic speeding by at 60, 70, 80 miles an hour.

On a recent ride-along, Oregon Public Broadcasting parked on the side of Washington State Route 14 with Carroll to see how motorists react. A quick and unscientific count showed that less than half the drivers moved over during 20 minutes at

the side of the road. Carroll thinks that's because drivers just don't regard him as an emergency worker.

"I've gotten into arguments with friends. They don't think so, they say no because we're not police, paramedics or fire trucks, I'm assuming maybe because we don't have blue lights," he said.

"But there are times when

we get called first, before police or anyone else, and we get to the scene first. So I would consider us first responders."

Legally, tow truck drivers are not considered first responders. But they are "emergency" responders — meaning they're allowed to drive along the hard shoulder to get to an accident, and drivers must slow down and move over as they pass.

Carroll likes helping people. He earned \$70,000 last year. But the job is hard and dangerous, and it comes with a 12-hour day, five days a week, plus the expectation that he'll jump out of bed anytime someone needs towing off the freeway nearby.

Carroll takes precautions, like wearing a safety vest and lighting flares when he pulls over. He's cautious about using the flashing lights on his truck.

"People driving by go,

'Oh, pretty lights!' And they swerve into it," he said.

Vancouver's tow truck drivers have been particularly hit hard over the last six months. In addition to Rios losing a leg, driver Arthur Anderson and two others were killed in April near Castle Rock. In December, Chris Amedio, of Garza's Auto Repair, caught a passing car striking the side of his truck on an in-cab video.

"I just got hit!" he screams on the tape.

He's OK now, but thinks he could have died if he hadn't jumped at the last moment.

"Towing fatalities are at the top of the list followed by firefighters, police officers and EMTs," said Kelly Just, with AAA Washington.

She's working with the Washington State Patrol and the Washington Department of Transportation on a new educational campaign called "Slow Down, Move Over." She thinks the COVID-19 pandemic has made driving more dangerous with more speeding and distracted drivers.

"It's the emptier roads," she said. "Nobody was driving, so people thought, let's see how fast we can go."

Back in the tow truck, Carroll works quickly to pick-up an illegally parked car at an apartment complex. His head stays on a swivel as he keeps an eye out for the owner. He thinks this part of the job, enforcing parking rules and laws, is one reason people don't slow down for tow trucks.

"We have a love hate relationship with the customers," he said. "They hate us until they need us."

Carroll's buddy, Rios, is learning to walk again on his prosthetic leg. He doesn't think he'll ever be able to work as a tow-truck driver again. But he hopes maybe he'll be able to find work warning new recruits about safety.

## Northwest hops continue to add acres

By GEORGE PLAVERN

Capital Press

YAKIMA, Wash. — To say 2020 was a precarious year for Northwest hop growers would be a massive understatement.

Pandemic closures hammered bars and restaurants, causing an overall decline in the U.S. beer market. Then came severe weather during the hop harvest, with high winds desiccating ripe cones and blowing down trellises.

Thick smoke from large wildfires also filled the skies, sending plants into early dormancy and reducing late-season yields.

Despite the challenges, total hop acreage is up 4% in 2021 across Washington state, Idaho and Oregon, and industry representatives are cautiously optimistic about a speedy recovery.

"We're starting to see things picking back up," said Jaki Brophy, communications director for Hop Growers of America, a trade association based in Yakima. "We're certainly not back to where we were before quite yet, but it does look like things are starting to recover well."

According to a U.S. Department of Agriculture report issued June 10, Washington has 60,735 acres of hops strung for harvest, an increase of 2,094 acres over last year. Idaho has 9,784 acres of hops this year, up 516, and Oregon has 7,571 acres, up 467.

The total of 60,735 acres is a record high, though Brophy said some of those additions are the result of pre-pandemic planning, and not new business.

"A lot of this is based on past demand," she said. "The sentiment and estimate at this point is the increases aren't necessarily from recent contracts, but fulfilling ones that were previously established."

Michelle Palacios, administrator of the Oregon Hops Commission, said acreage



Coleman Agriculture/Capital Press

Rows of hops grow in Oregon's Willamette Valley.

is up in 2021 based on baby hops that were strung last year but did not produce a crop.

Unlike Washington and Idaho, it takes Oregon growers two years to harvest new hop plants based on the climate. Those acres are not included in the USDA's annual report.

Palacios said more growers in Oregon are transitioning their acreage from alpha hop varieties such as Nugget to more aroma varieties like Citra and Centennial, driven by increased demand among craft brewers.

"Our (increased) acres was absolutely anticipated because of this variety transition that we're going through," Palacios said. "These acres were in the ground in 2020, but we just didn't get to harvest them."

Craft brewing has been the primary catalyst for the growth in hop acres, Brophy said. Brewers use more hops per glass in beers such as pale ales that are rising in popularity worldwide.

But 2020 was undeniably difficult for the industry as on-site beer consumption fell due to COVID-19. That disproportionately affected craft brewing. While the overall beer market was down 3% last year, craft beer volume was down 9%.

Bart Watson, chief economist for the Brewers Association, which represents craft

breweries, said their members rely more heavily on draft and on-site consumption than larger beer companies such as Anheuser-Busch or Molson Coors.

As more people drank beer at home during the pandemic, Watson said craft brewers faced a tougher adjustment.

"Generally, that tradeoff is bad for craft breweries," he said.

The beer industry's struggles rippled back up the supply chain to hop farms. About 98% of the U.S. crop comes from the Pacific Northwest. While hop acreage was up in 2020 over 2019, production fell to 104.8 million pounds, according to Hop Growers of America.

Brophy said the reason was twofold. First, growers did idle some acres to account for the pandemic's disruption of bars and restaurants. Mother Nature was the other culprit, with wind and smoke reducing Washington's yield by 12.56%, and Idaho's by 8.8%.

"People are estimating in the hops industry that it was probably down about 10%, give or take," Brophy said.

For all the chaos of 2020, this year has brought some early encouragement. The economy is gradually reopening as more people are vaccinated against COVID-19, which Watson said will only help craft brewing to regain its footing.

## ASTORIA SCANDINAVIAN MIDSUMMER FESTIVAL!



There's no stopping an Oregon tradition like the Astoria Scandinavian Midsummer Festival. We celebrate the long days that summer solstice brings us every June. And while we are not meeting at the Fairgrounds this year, we will be enjoying our 54th Midsummer Celebration. Join us!

Tuesday, June 15th

- Reader's Theater—**From the attic of Suomi Hall: Love & Politics** produced by the Astor Street Opry, funded by the Clatsop Cultural Coalition <http://youtu.be/a-eG7mgyYdl>. Begins at 5:00 PM June 15 and runs through June 30.

Friday, June 18th

- 7:00 PM The 2021 Court presentations "What My National Heritage Means to Me" and **Crowning of Miss Scandinavia 2021**. The coronation will be livestreamed on our Facebook page.

Saturday, June 19th

- 11:00 AM—**OPTOG Parade**, The 2021 Court, dancers and members of the Nordic community will welcome friends and visitors travelling to and through Astoria clad in their colorful native folk dress along Marine Drive near the Columbia River Maritime Museum between 16th and 20th Streets. Honoring this year's **Grand Marshal, Loran Mathews!**
- 12:00 Noon—Join us for the **Flag Raising** at the future NORDIC HERITAGE PARK location on Marine Drive between 14th and 16th Streets downtown.
- 12:30 PM-3:00 PM—**A Nordic Scavenger Hunt** starts at the NORDIC HERITAGE PARK where participants will pick up their materials. Come one, come all, join in on the fun!

Sunday, June 20th

- 11:00 AM—**Scandinavian Church Service** at the Bethany Free Lutheran Church with hymns and readings in Nordic languages. Join in person or watch the service by livestream at [www.bethanyfree.com](http://www.bethanyfree.com).

Visit [www.AstoriaScanFest.org](http://www.AstoriaScanFest.org) for a full list of all the activities happening this weekend!

(MARK YOUR CALENDARS JUNE 17, 18 and 19, 2022 FOR THE 55th ANNUAL SCANDINAVIAN MIDSUMMER FESTIVAL AT THE CLATSOP COUNTY FAIRGROUNDS!)

