

# Plow driver works nights to keep roads clear

By ALEX WITTWER  
EO Media Group



Tesmond Hurd drives through the thick snow on Interstate 84 at night in a snowplow on Wednesday, Jan. 5, 2022.

LA GRANDE — Tesmond Hurd likens the view he sees each night plowing the roads to a scene from “Star Wars.”

Hurd is part of the maintenance crew with the Oregon Department of Transportation in La Grande. In summer months, he works on road improvement and repair projects such as chip seals.

In winter, he commands a nearly 30-ton piece of machinery rumbling down Interstate 84.

It’s not hard to understand the comparisons between spaceships and the industrialized behemoths ODOT uses to clear roadways.

At highway speeds, snow resembles trailing stars after the Millennium Falcon engages hyperdrive. The plow even has wings — blades attached to the side of the vehicle that extend just shy of 24 feet for clearing snow. As it’s pushed away, the snow forms wakes like those of a naval ship pulling into port. A pair of bright green laser pointers — which keep track of where the wings are — pierce the blanket of night.

Hurd said his job is to drive in the worst weather conditions every night.

On busy nights, when the snow pours unrelentingly down, Hurd will spend the entire evening behind the wheel. His only communication once his shift starts might be through the CB radio, which has a local channel for ODOT operators in the field, and a channel for relaying information to dispatch about road conditions.

The snow was falling fast

— though milder than previous nights.

“When it’s snowing like this, there will be lots of calls for crashes or disabled vehicles,” Hurd said.

Hurd drove past a semi that appeared to be disabled along I-84, and alerts dispatch.

Snowplows are sentries for ODOT capable of calling in disabled vehicles — or unchained semis.

## Unchained

According to the Oregon State Police Capt. Stephanie Bigman, 32 violations and warnings were issued in Oregon between Jan. 1 and Jan. 6 for commercial vehicles that did not carry or use chains when required. A number of those violations occurred along I-84 in Northeastern Oregon,

which had been closed on Jan. 5, at one point, due to unchained semis blocking the route at Cabbage Hill near milepost 224.

The fine for unchained commercial vehicles is \$880 per occurrence, up from \$440. The change occurred in September 2021.

“Commercial trucks not chaining up when required is a major contributing factor for freeway closure that occur in the mountain passes of Eastern Oregon,” Tom Strandberg, public information officer for ODOT, said. “Once a truck starts sliding or jackknifes it can quickly block lanes and close down the freeway. It can then take several hours to get the proper tow service providers to respond to the scene and move the disabled vehicle. Depending on the location and duration of the closure,

it can impact hundreds or thousands of motorists.”

According to an ODOT press release, the estimated cost of delays caused by trucks failing to follow Oregon chain laws is more than \$8 million a year — to the motor carrier industry and other highway users.

“When it comes to chaining, I don’t chain — I don’t want to hurt anybody — I park it,” said Samuri Schaffer, a truck driver of more than 15 years. “I don’t deal with it until they take off the chain laws. There’s so much liability on us.”

Schaffer stated the liabilities for truck drivers can be severe if they are involved in any accident, so he avoids the issue entirely by keeping off the road.

If a truck is involved in a crash where failure to use chains is a factor, there could

be other costs for the motor carrier, according to a press release from ODOT.

## A Sisyphean task

Inside, the cockpit of the snowplow is kept blisteringly warm. It isn’t for comfort — Hurd admits that the temperatures can be incredibly warm inside the snowplow; enough that he sheds jackets and layers, and opens the window. It was below freezing outside, and getting colder.

“It will get way too hot in here,” Hurd said. “I usually crack them about six inches. You can see the snow on the windshield — it will just freeze there, and it will keep building and building until you have to get out and clear the windshield every few miles.”

Already an hour into his shift, the windshield had begun to amass ice on its corners. The windshield wipers squeaked incessantly as they battle the accumulating snow. If not addressed, the windshield will freeze over until just a small circle of visibility remains. At least one secondary headlight was completely encased in ice; the other was encased in snow.

Hurd resigned to leaving the wipers on despite the noise — a chirping metronome for a long night.

It’s a Sisyphean task to keep the roads clear during heavy snowfall. It is only the beginning of winter.

Plow operators are assigned sections of the interstate and state roads to keep clear. Mostly, they handle I-84, but they also are responsible for keeping Island Avenue clear. Sometimes, they pair up when conditions are poor, running tandem

down the freeway and clearing it all in one fell swoop.

“You can only plow so fast, so you just keep making laps and keep plowing and plowing,” Hurd said of plowing during heavy snowfall. “Hopefully you don’t have to close the freeway down.”

When it’s snowing, the plow operators lay down sand; in drier conditions, salt. It’s to help with traction, and improve the roadways. Hurd said that he had seen firsthand the immediate impact sand can have on stuck motorists.

ODOT keeps barns full of both materials for plows to refill. They also fulfill a secondary purpose of increasing the weight of the snowplow, increasing its individual traction capabilities. It is difficult to extricate a snowplow that has been disabled by the snow.

As well, the Observer previously reported on a possible shortage of ODOT snowplow operators. Craig Slipp, the manager for ODOT Region 5 — the area encompassing most of Eastern Oregon — told the Observer that there were 12 open positions for road maintenance positions. Hurd said that his department in La Grande was fully staffed, however.

Hurd said there were a number of reasons why ODOT makes the decision to close the interstate. Recently, unchained semis had closed down the freeway, as did snow drifts formed by heavy winds and fresh snow, creating whiteout conditions on the interstate.

“If we can’t see and we’re running off the road,” Hurd said, “we’ll make the call to close it.”

# Cattle may be seized as investigation continues

By BILL BRADSHAW  
Wallowa County Chieftain

WALLOWA COUNTY — Wallowa County Sheriff Joel Fish said his office continues to investigate possible animal neglect by Dean Oregon Ranches and others in the stranding of cattle in the mountains during recent snowstorms.

“I do not have any specific number of cows that have been gathered or died,” Fish said. “The staff for Dean Oregon Ranches are collecting the cattle. Most of the cattle belong to Dean Oregon Ranches.”

The sheriff said he expects the investigation to take time as his office gathers statements from those involved.

County Commissioner Todd Nash, who is a rancher and often addresses agricultural issues on the board of commissioners, said Fish’s statement of Dec. 31 that the county was “moving toward seizing the Dean Oregon Ranch” was not exactly accurate. Nash said it’s the cattle — not the ranch itself —

that may be seized and it is unknown if the small number of cattle owned by other ranchers would be included.

“We’re looking at seizing the livestock,” Nash said. “We’re in the process of considering that.”

He said there is no timeline in sight, as the proper legal measures — such as Fish’s investigation — must be taken.

“We need to have all our ducks in a row,” the commissioner said.

## Wife speaks up

But Karen Dean, wife of Bob Dean, the owner of the ranch in the Upper Imnaha area where cattle have been freezing for the past few weeks, was defensive of her ailing husband during a telephone interview from her Georgia home.

Dean said his 68-year-old husband underwent surgery in June when his oxygen was cut off and left him with brain damage. Dean placed the responsibility for the cattle’s welfare squarely on the shoulders of the ranch managers, B.J. and Emily Warnock.



Anna Butterfield/Contributed Photo

Calves rescued from the deep snows in the Upper Imnaha get some refreshment Jan. 2, 2022, at the Joseph-area ranch of Mark and Anna Butterfield. They are among many rescued since the end of December.

“He was supposed to bring the cows down in October,” Dean said. “They let the cows go down on their own.”

The Deans also own ranches in Colorado and New Mexico. Dean said one of their wranglers from New Mexico visited the Oregon ranch to see what was happening. She said the wrangler said ranchers

normally round up their cattle, take them to a pen and put them aboard a truck to ship to market.

“He said they don’t do that (in Wallowa County),” Dean said. “They let the cattle find their own way down.”

Dean emphasized that was why they hire local wranglers to do the job.

“My husband doesn’t physically do the cattle work,” she said. “He pays B.J. to wrangle the cows. We’re relying on people who live there that they would do the job.”

Despite the Deans being the owners of the land and livestock, Dean holds the Warnocks responsible.

“They’re responsible,” she said. “We called him every other day to get him to bring those cattle down.”

Dean added that the Warnocks signed releases as property managers for the Deans.

“Those cows were his responsibility,” she said.

But B.J. Warnock disagreed with Karen Dean on the nature of their business relationship.

“Mrs. Dean is not our employer and she is misinformed,” Warnock said in an email. “Typically, in a situation like this, the owner blames the manager, who blames the crew, and so on. We are not going to do that. Unfortunately, I was never officially named or authorized to act as manager, which left me without decision-making

authority to act in critical situations. We did have a main crew of seven people gathering Dean Oregon Ranches cattle. We are very proud of all of their hard work and the fact that they have stuck with the job despite extenuating circumstances.”

## Attorney involved

Chris Gramiccioni, a South Carolina-based attorney for the Deans in their ongoing lawsuits over handling of nursing home evacuations last year at the time of Hurricane Ida, said the Deans and their attorneys were just learning of the situation with the cattle.

“My client is not happy with what happened to those cattle,” he said. “My client had a team of people who were supposed to bring the cattle down from the mountains.”

Gramiccioni, who said the Deans have paid the cost to fly in hay and help rescue the cattle, declined to comment specifically on whether the Deans shared responsibility for the fate of the cows and their calves.

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