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FSP driver Enrique Nava checks on an accident victim on the Glendale (2) Freeway. Nava has patrolled the Glendale and Ventura (134) freeways for six years. Photo by Jimmy Stroup

Rising Gas Prices Add New Wrinkle for 'Freeway Angels'

- Enrique Nava, Metro Freeway Service Patrol driver, cruises San Gabriel Valley freeways to keep highways flowing and drivers safer.

By JIMMY STROUP

(May 29, 2008) Metro Freeway Service Patrol driver Enrique Nava faces a new wrinkle in his work. The recent escalation of gas prices has caused some people to try to use FSP as a rolling gas station.

Nava says he recently had to report a woman who he'd found four times trying to get free gasoline. "There are a lot of people trying to take advantage," Nava says. "With gas at \$4 a gallon, it's no wonder."

To catch those trying to game the system, Nava and the FSP folks politely ask the driver to attempt to start his or her car and move it off at the next exit. If the driver makes it, they reassess and perhaps give the driver gas at the exit. If the driver can't start the vehicle, Nava happily supplies the stranded motorist with a gallon.

Accidents are a little different situation for the FSP drivers. They aren't trained paramedics, so they don't attempt to move injured people unless they feel their lives are being threatened.

"If someone's injured, we wait for the CHP and the fire department to come handle the situation," Nava says. "I'll put out cones and flares, divert traffic around them, and then tow them off to the side once the CHP gives me the go-ahead."

Countywide

Metro's FSP program is composed of 151 trucks patrolling more than 475 miles of freeway in Los Angeles County. Nava is only one of dozens of drivers patrolling the freeways each day, attempting to limit the traffic congestion caused by accidents and lookie-loos.

In the 16 years of operation since the program began in July 1991, FSP drivers have conducted nearly four million assists. Operating under the theory that Metro is here to help people move around LA County, FSP continues to be a huge success for the agency and its partners: CHP and Caltrans.

As someone who drives each day on the freeway, Nava sees the good the program does. "You can really see how traffic clears when we get people off to the side in a timely manner."

Metro's Freeway Service Patrol is the largest program of its kind in the U.S. A 2006 survey by UC Berkeley found that the FSP benefit/cost ratio for motorists was 6.3 to 1; for each dollar spent on the FSP program, LA County motorists realized a savings of \$6.30. This is based on FSP reducing commuting delays.



Nava stops to assist stranded motorist on the freeway.

Reporter's Recount: A Wednesday morning call

Wednesday, May 21, 10 a.m. I had been riding with Nava since 6 a.m. And we'd only stopped once to make sure a trucker wasn't in trouble – he'd only stopped to check his load was secure.

After four hours, we'd traveled the Glendale (2) Freeway twice. The same with the Ventura (134) Freeway: back and forth twice with nothing to stop for. We'd heard some calls, but we'd either just passed them or were nowhere near the location, and Nava's partners aided those motorists.

I was almost ready to return to Gateway.

Just as we exited Glendale Freeway southbound, Nava picked up on a #399 call: a three-car accident between Verdugo Road and Avenue 36. We were less than a mile from the accident. Nava did a quick U-turn and we headed south to the accident.

We were first responders, arriving only 10 minutes after the accident, to a fender bender in the left-most, number one lane. A driver had stopped

quickly, causing the driver of a small SUV to do the same. A Honda Accord driver was on a cell phone and didn't see the quick stop. CRASH.

No one was hurt, but the SUV's muffler was dragging on the ground and the Honda Accord's front end was a mess – the radiator had been punctured and was leaking. Traffic was backing up quickly.

Nava rapidly assessed each car and driver's condition and determined they could be moved to the right shoulder. We waited for a CHP officer (one was on the way) to run a "break," to stop traffic so Nava could get the cars off to the right shoulder. Nava cleared the bigger pieces of debris and prepared for the move.

After the cars were over, CHP began to take a report. Nava dug through his truck for wire to tie up the SUV's muffler so it was safe to get to a garage. While the drivers dealt with the CHP, Nava was under their cars, making sure everything was safe.

The Honda Accord needed a tow, but its driver had called AAA to get the car all the way to a dealership; FSP only tows to the next freeway exit.

Each driver thanked Nava for his assistance and after CHP had written out the accident report, we were all off. The incident had taken less than half an hour from start to finish.

"Not only was congestion reduced in this incident, but other accidents were avoided," Nava says. "The longer you let the cars sit in lanes, the greater the possibility for other accidents – people not avoiding them and even the lookie-loo factor."

Though it was after morning rush, many cars traveled that stretch of the (SR-2). Once CHP threw up the break, traffic backed up at least a half mile and slowed substantially.

But after the accident was cleared to the right, traffic resumed. Within 10 minutes, you wouldn't have known there had been an accident if you didn't notice the cars, CHP cruiser and FSP tow truck on the right shoulder.

Hearing that FSP provides a valuable service is one thing. Going out with a driver and watching him in action, watching him clear an accident and avoid further congestion is another.

Read ['Freeway Angels' Part 1](#)