

A series of articles published in the Mankato Free Press documenting a tanker truck rollover and the evacuation procedure that followed. The tanker was carrying anhydrous ammonia. The articles are shared by the Minnesota Department of Agriculture as a reference for emergency responders.



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Tanker truck rollover brings road closures, evacuations

Truck filled with anhydrous ammonia

Free Press staff

The Free Press
MANKATO —

The closure of the northbound lanes of Highway 169 north of Riverfront Drive, which is the Northstar Bridge area, has been extended with an estimated re-opening of about 6 p.m. after a tanker truck filled with anhydrous ammonia rolled over this morning.

The Sibley Park neighborhood is being evacuated before emergency crews continue to clear an anhydrous ammonia truck rollover, according to the State Patrol.

Highway 169 traffic is being directed to Blue Earth County Road 90 and Highway 22. Southbound Highway 169 lanes will close for the operation to up-right the semi.

Motorists are asked to avoid the area, according to the Minnesota Department of Transportation.

The portion of the city being evacuated until the truck is cleared is from Highway 169 at the intersection of Riverfront Drive by the YMCA, north down Riverfront to Harvest States. People who are evacuated have the option to go to the Midwest Wireless Civic Center, 1 Civic Center Plaza. The city will provide transportation to those who are in need of it. The Mankato Lutheran Home will evacuate according to their plan.

Residences and businesses along the following streets are being evacuated:

West Second

West Third

A portion of West 5th (the area north of Riverfront Drive)

Park Lane

A portion of Owatonna Street (the area north of Riverfront Drive)

A portion of Hubbell Avenue (the area north of Riverfront Drive)

Spence Street

Marcy Street

Mound Avenue

Owen Avenue

Rogers Street

A portion of Sibley Street (the area north of Riverfront Drive)

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Published: October 21, 2005 12:04 am

Disaster plan gets workout

Ammonia tanker rollover prompts evacuation

By Dylan Thomas

The Free Press
MANKATO —

Ricky Rocha was skateboarding near his Hubbell Avenue home Thursday afternoon when a police officer approached the 10-year-old and told him he had to evacuate the neighborhood.

Soon, Ricky and his brother, Anthony, 12, were on a bus headed downtown.

"I was worried but my brother was cool with it," Ricky said.

Ricky and Anthony were unaware a tanker truck carrying anhydrous ammonia had crashed on the highway less than a mile from their house. They learned about the accident on the way to the Midwest Wireless Civic Center, in a city bus filled with evacuees from their neighborhood near Sibley Park.

"I was holding my breath the whole way there so I wouldn't get it in my mouth," Ricky said.

At the Civic Center, Red Cross workers put name tags on Ricky and Anthony and called their father, Ricardo Rocha. He later joined the boys to wait out the crash cleanup.

It's a scenario city officials have been anticipating for years: A tanker truck or railroad car crashes and ruptures, sending a deadly cloud of toxic gas over the city.

Thursday, city officials ran through a long-written emergency response script. Many said it was the best practice they could get for the real thing.

"Most of the time when we play with this (scenario), it has a leak," Mankato Director of Public Safety Jerry Huettl said. "It was interesting today we didn't."

"The advantage here was we had time to evacuate," Huettl said. "With a moving plume (of gas), you wouldn't have a chance."

Anhydrous ammonia produces a toxic gas that attacks the mucus membranes in the mouth, eyes and nose. A large amount was never released from the tanker, but such an event could have been deadly.

City officials cleared the neighborhood at about 2:45 p.m., before beginning the most delicate part of the cleanup, when they planned to drain and right the tanker.

Mankato Public Information Director Shelly Schulz said the city expected up to 350 residents would have to be evacuated from the area. Between 150 and 200 people live in the neighborhood, with another 150 elderly residents in the Mankato Lutheran Homes on Mound Avenue, Schulz said.

In the nursing home, Administrator Jennifer Pfeffer directed staff members as they wheeled residents toward a line of idling buses and ambulances. About 30 bed-ridden residents were taken to Immanuel St. Joseph's Hospital, while many others were bussed to the Civic Center or Good Counsel.

Kathy Doring, a resident of the assisted living facility, was rushed out the door just as soon as she returned from a trip to River Hills Mall for a haircut.

"The nurse came to my door and said: 'Have you got your meds ready?'"

Within a few minutes, Doring was sitting in the Civic Center hockey rink, bearing her circumstances with good humor.

"Such comfortable furniture," Doring said. "Nothing like a folding chair."

Bob Meyer, South Central Minnesota Red Cross CEO, said the personnel at the Civic Center were well-trained. Many had just returned from stints along the hurricane-ravaged Gulf Coast.

As Meyer arranged to get food and water to the Civic Center, he explained emergency response planning had been stepped up in recent years with the push for greater homeland security.

Thursday's situation was planned for, specifically. In Red Cross' assessment of the most probable disasters in the Mankato area, he said, a toxic spill was "number one or two on the list" — up there with a flood or tornado.

By about 5:15 p.m., evacuation of the Sibley Park area was completed. Several dozen people had arrived at the Civic Center — a few with their dogs, which were allowed on the evacuation busses.

Less than three hours later, the tanker truck was towed off the highway. The roadblocks to Sibley Park were removed.

Immanuel St. Joseph's Hospital Communications Director Kevin Burns said the nursing home residents sheltered there would be home by 10 p.m. None experienced serious medical complications during the evacuation, Burns said.

He said the emergency response "went like clockwork."

"You practice this kind of stuff and you drill this kind of stuff, but this experience was invaluable," he said.

Photos



Residents of Mankato Lutheran Homes nursing home were loaded onto a bus headed to Immanuel St. Joseph's Hospital when the Sibley Park neighborhood was evacuated Thursday afternoon. They were among the first to leave in the area, evacuated according to the center's emergency plan. Pat Christman



Jenny Miller of Mankato was reunited with her 18-month-old son Connor at the Midwest Wireless Civic Center after the evacuation cut her off from her Owatonna Street home. Miller's son, Corey, 15, arrived at the Civic Center with the baby and their dog Marley after being evacuated on a city bus. Pat Christman

Published: October 21, 2005 12:12 am

Rollover took hours to clear off 169

No injuries; truck carried 20 tons of chemical

By Dylan Thomas

The Free Press
MANKATO —

A tanker truck carrying 20 tons of liquid anhydrous ammonia rolled on Highway 169 in Mankato around 10:30 a.m. Tuesday, shutting down portions of the highway and leading to the evacuation of a neighborhood.

The tanker, traveling northbound, rolled over just past the South Riverfront Drive overpass. Long paint streaks on the highway indicated where it slid on its side before coming to a stop at the top of an on-ramp.

The tanker remained there until about 7:45 p.m., when the long process of draining it was completed and it was towed away.

State Patrol Cpl. Kent Hemshrot said it appeared the tanker driver was traveling too fast as he rounded a turn approaching the overpass. The shifting weight of the load would have been enough to pull the tanker over, Hemshrot said.

The driver, Gary Mitteness, 54, of Benson, was not injured in the accident. No drugs or alcohol were detected in his system, but he may face charges if the State Patrol determines he was speeding.

As emergency crews worked to drain the anhydrous ammonia into other tankers and right the damaged vehicle, the Sibley Park neighborhood downwind of the crash was evacuated. Anhydrous ammonia creates a toxic and potentially deadly gas that attacks the mucus membranes, such as the mouth, eyes and nose.

Mankato Director of Public Safety Jerry Huettl said the evacuation was a precautionary measure. While there were several small releases of gas, the tanker never ruptured.

He said vents on the tanker are designed to release some gas in the case of a rollover. Some gas also escaped from the hoses used to drain the tanker.

Huettl said the amount of anhydrous ammonia was enough to be "obnoxious but not hazardous." Several area residents reported smelling a powerful ammonia odor as they passed the crash site.

The evacuation began around 2:45 p.m. and was completed by 5:15 p.m. Neighborhood residents, sheltered at the Midwest Wireless Civic Center and several other locations, were allowed to return home at about 8 p.m.

Road closures lasted far longer.

The northbound lane of Highway 169 was shut down shortly after the crash. Traffic was first diverted through town on Riverfront Drive, but was eventually detoured onto County Road 33.

Southbound lanes near the accident were shut down around 5:30 p.m. as crews prepared to right the damaged tanker.

Hemshrot said the detour hit County Road 90 worst, as both northbound and southbound traffic crowded the roadway. All roads were opened around 8 p.m.