

Tanker truck crash in Pennsylvania kills one, closes Interstate 95

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On Sunday, a bridge collapsed on Interstate 95 in north Philadelphia as a result of a massive tanker truck fire. The damaged section of the interstate—the most important thoroughfare on the East Coast—will remain closed for months while the damage is repaired.

One body has been found. The deceased has not been officially identified, but is presumed to be the driver, Nathaniel Moody, 53, of New Jersey. Moody, who was transporting gasoline to a local distributor when he lost control of the truck, had over 10 years of experience on the job and was certified to handle hazardous materials. He leaves behind a girlfriend and a seven-year-old daughter.

“I am kind of baffled,” Moody’s cousin, Isaac, told a local news station. “I am trying to not cry because I don’t know what happened.” Isaac, who is himself a truck driver, stressed that his cousin was “very experienced,” according to the news story.

The truck owners, K Transport and Penn Tank Lines, have yet to comment.

The disaster occurred when the tanker, carrying 8,500 gallons of gasoline, crashed and caught fire under an overpass, sending thick black smoke across the area. The fire was reported at 6:20 a.m., and firefighters arrived around 10 minutes later. The blaze became so hot that it began to weaken the steel girders of the bridge above—steel begins to lose structural strength at about 750 degrees. The fire was not extinguished until the afternoon.

The death toll could have been worse. In spite of the fire below, motorists continued to use the overpass above, very likely hastening the bridge’s eventual collapse. One driver, Mark Fusetti, took a video showing a depression emerging in the highway, while thick black smoke whirled around. He described the sensation of driving on the overpass prior to the

collapse as similar to driving off a curb.

In response to the disaster, Pennsylvania Governor Josh Shapiro declared an emergency, which allows the state to access federal funds. Shapiro also made \$7 million available for reconstruction efforts of the highway.

When asked about how long it could take to repair the damaged section of the interstate, Shapiro said it could “take some number of months.”

I-95 is a major interstate, daily handling millions of motorists and up to \$200 billion of goods and services up and down the East Coast from Maine’s Canadian border to Miami. In its center, I-95 links the major cities of Washington D.C., Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York City and Boston, a vast urban zone inhabited by some 55 million people. The damaged stretch of the road alone carries 160,000 people per day.

The media have not reported on Moody’s work conditions, but his family stated that he worked overnight, which means he may have been near completion of a long shift when the disaster took place at 6 a.m.

Trucking is one of the most dangerous professions in the US. The National Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries reports that around one in seven workplace deaths occur in the trucking industry. Truckers are ruthlessly exploited by owners. Of the more than 5,000 fatal truck crashes that occurred in 2019, 13 percent involved a drowsy driver, according to the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA). Truck drivers average under five hours of sleep per night, and nearly two-thirds report suffering fatigue regularly.

Another major contributing factor in truck crashes is inadequate and failing infrastructure. According to media reports, while the northbound highway was destroyed by the explosion, the southbound highway

was inspected and was also found to be structurally unsound.

This is a major problem in Pennsylvania. Over 3,000 bridges, 15 percent of all bridges in the state, are considered structurally deficient. A 2017 report from the Federal Highway Administration found that 30 percent of roads in the state of Pennsylvania are in poor condition. In a 2018 report, the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) gave Pennsylvania a D+ grade for the conditions of its roads and bridges. Yet another report, this one from 2019, found that Pennsylvania was the 11th-worst state for the condition of its interstate system, and 12th from last for structural integrity of interstate bridges

Disasters like the one that took place in Philadelphia are not uncommon. In neighboring Maryland, three such disasters have happened in the last three months. On March 4, a tanker truck fire in Frederick, killed the driver, Ronald Leroy Heiston Jr., 58, and caused extensive damage to homes in the area. On March 24, a tanker overturned on I-795 in Baltimore County, causing all ramps in the vicinity to be closed. On May 24, a portion of Interstate 895 in northeast Baltimore was closed after a tar tanker overturned on an overpass above the highway.



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