

Never fear, the FSP is here

Program helps drivers in distress

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Sunday, February 01, 2004 - REDLANDS - Melvin Williams was getting off Interstate 10 at Tippecanoe Avenue one afternoon last week when he heard a pop followed by the scraping sound of metal dragging on concrete.

He pulled into a convenient wide spot on the off-ramp and found the driveshaft drooping from the bottom of his 1991 Ford Aerostar.

At the same time, Josh Pallas was driving by in his tow truck and saw Williams standing by his immobile van. Pallas got on the radio and using his call sign, "125-340," notified his dispatcher at the California Highway Patrol.

He got off at the next exit, backtracked west, then headed east again so he could reach the van.

"This is a hazardous spot," Pallas told Williams, and convinced the stranded motorist to let him tow the van off the freeway.

Pallas and his older brother Jason are I-10's knights in shining tow trucks for the new Freeway Service Patrol, which started operating last month on the 9.8-mile stretch between California Street and County Line Road.

"I like it helping people all the time," the 20-year-old from Highland said. "Now I can just stop and help anyone I want."

The two-year program is meant to clear stranded cars off the freeway as quickly as possible to keep traffic flowing.

The two trucks cruise in repeated laps along the section of freeway where a truck-climbing lane is under construction. They run from 5:30 to 8:30 a.m. and 3 to 7 p.m.

The situation will get more critical in coming months, when the shoulders on the long grade are lost during construction, meaning any stalled vehicle instantly becomes a safety hazard as well.

The trucks from Armada Towing of San Bernardino carry a few gallons of gasoline, a few gallons of diesel, 10 gallons of water and a few other things to help motorists stranded by minor problems.

If it's something they can't fix in a few minutes, they tow the vehicle off the freeway to the nearest predetermined drop spot, always on a well-lighted street where there's a phone and some kind of shelter, such as a restaurant.

There is no charge for any of the services.

The county's transportation agency, San Bernardino Associated Governments, is paying \$500,000 for the service, with \$375,000 from an air-quality grant and \$125,000 from Measure I, the county's half-cent sales tax for transportation projects.

The program qualified for the air-quality grant because vehicles moving at full speed produce fewer emissions, said Michelle Kirkhoff, director of air quality and mobility programs for Sanbag.

CHP Officer David Soffa oversees the Freeway Service Patrol in San Bernardino and Riverside counties.

"The freeway gets back to operation quicker and you have fewer secondary incidents other accidents, vehicles in traffic overheating or breaking down," he said.

So far, about a third of the people the Pallas brothers have met up with on the road have been truckers, either sleeping on the side of the road or cooling down after their rigs started running hot on the climb.

"Everyone we've pulled up for has been real happy to see us," Josh Pallas said.

Except for the truckers and motorists who are sleeping.

"We wake them up and make them mad."

The program will be expanded to cover the area east from Orange Street next year when work to widen I-10 through that area begins.

Sanbag had hoped to have the program on several stretches of freeway, but the state budget crisis put that plan on hold.

For Williams, whose crippled van would have sat on the off-ramp overnight, the arrival of Pallas and his unexpected assistance was welcome.

"I sure appreciate it," he said after the van was safely parked on a side street.

Pallas loves the work.

"This is the top you can get as a tow truck driver," he said. "It's been a blast so far."