

How highway debris gets cleared

Vital service sometimes gets a bum rap from drivers

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

At the risk of stating the obvious: A load of lumber dropped on the highway is dangerous.

But getting it off the road can be just as hazardous. It's an operation that requires specialized equipment and workers whose safety can be threatened by the very motorists they're trying to protect.

"If it's been attached to or loaded on a vehicle, we've picked it up," says Bob Doupe, maintenance superintendent for the ministry of transportation's Durham office in Whitby.

"It's really about traffic control," he says, "and then picking up the object after the traffic is controlled."

The work is done by private companies under contract to the ministry. In addition to removing debris from the driving lanes, they're also required to pick up any objects on the shoulder the size of a car battery or larger. The ministry maintains a good relationship with the OPP, Doupe says, and crews will sometimes be asked to help control traffic at major collisions. In turn, the police do the same when extra vehicles are needed at a road cleanup.

The job is a multi-step process that always begins at the shoulder. The workers who actually pick up the stuff park a pickup truck, equipped with flashing lights and a signboard with an arrow.

"It's a real challenge in areas with little or no shoulder," Doupe says. "The pickup driver stays as far over as he can."

On smaller highways with light traffic, such as sections of Highway 7, the crew may be able to simply use a large sign warning of road work ahead.

But on multi-lane highways such as the 401, there must also be a crash truck. This carries lights and a signboard, but also has a rear-mounted crash attenuator that crumples to absorb energy if a vehicle smashes into the back. Situated behind the cleanup crew, the crash truck diverts traffic out of the lane while workers clean up the mess. In some cases, if the debris doesn't present an immediate danger to motorists, the crew may clear the lane adjacent to the



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Bob Doupe, maintenance superintendent for the ministry of transportation in Durham, shows off some of the items collected off the highway.

shoulder and then come back and work from the opposite shoulder.

It's tougher if the object is in the middle of the highway or strewn across several lanes. Now the crew shuts down two or three lanes, always starting at the shoulder so traffic won't pass them on both sides. This can be done with extra crash trucks or with the help of police.

And if it's a really big job, they'll close all lanes with a "rolling closure" far ahead of the problem area.

"Between the crash trucks and the OPP, they'll block every lane," Doupe says. "The traffic will be moving, but it will be slow. If the speed limit is 100 km/h, they'll probably reduce it to 40 or 50."

Once the road's cleaned up and reopened, some drivers at the back of the jam get angry when they see only the crew on the side.

"They'll think we've closed the highway for nothing," Doupe says. "Sometimes they'll throw stuff at the crew, in addition to the insults."

Despite all the precautions, it's a very dangerous job. Inattentive drivers frequently run into the crash trucks, or go the opposite way of the sign arrow and drive into the lane where the crew is working. One Boxing Day morning, Doupe was called to the scene to identify a co-worker killed by a driver. Years later, it's still too painful to discuss.

Over the years, Doupe has seen refrigerators, lawn furniture, truck caps, and even large landscaping rocks on the highway. If it's too big to

lift by hand, crews may push it off to the side with the pickup truck or call in a loader. Back at the depot, scrap metal and tires go to recycling, while everything else goes to the garbage.

Not everyone stops once they've lost something. Some drivers don't realize something's fallen off, but they could also fear getting caught. The fines for insecure loads or detached parts, such as a loose muffler falling off, go up to \$2,000 for regular drivers and up to \$20,000 for commercial trucks.

And, yes, Doupe has a list of the strangest stuff picked up, which includes a cash register, a handgun, a bathtub surround and a life-size silicone sex doll a worker found while cutting grass with a tractor beside the highway.

"He thought he'd run over somebody and killed them," Doupe says. "He was still shaking an hour later."

If you see something on the road, you can call *OPP (*677) on some cellphones. An OPP rep says if yours won't do this, you can also call 911.

Consider safety first if there's debris in your path. If you might hit another vehicle or go into the ditch by swerving, then run over the object. "You can be severely injured by taking drastic evasive action," Doupe says. "Change lanes if it's safe to do so, but if you absolutely have to, hit it."

"Secure your load, but if you lose something, don't go out to pick it up," he adds. "Call and wait for the crew to get there. Nothing you can drop is worth your life."