

Dial 511 for information about wildfires



Florida residents and visitors who need the latest information about the effects of wildfires on travel conditions statewide can call the Florida Department of Transportation's free 511 travel information service. The 511 service is available from cell phones and landlines statewide and provides real-time traffic conditions and road closures on all interstate highways in Florida and Florida's Turnpike.

The Florida Division of Forestry reported Jan. 4 that drought conditions are expected to worsen over the spring months, indicating a high potential for another active wildfire season.

Last week's closure of Interstate 4 in Polk County due to accidents involving fog and smoke is a serious reminder of the hazardous conditions that can result when wildfires occur, Florida Highway Patrol spokesman Sgt. Jorge Delahoz said.

"Wildfires can come up suddenly, and motorists may not be aware when their area is affected," Delahoz said. "By calling 511, they will learn of any trouble areas on their route, and can alter their plans if necessary."

When in low-visibility conditions, drivers should slow down, keep lights on low beam, and shouldn't use flashing lights unless pulling off the road. Another key, he said, is to minimize distractions.

"If you've got your radio on, turn it off. Stay off the cell phone. You need to pay

attention to what's going on," Delahoz said.

The I-4 closure indicates Florida residents are turning to 511 when unforeseen situations arise. The Central Florida 511 system logged 7,813 calls on

Jan. 9, more than three times the 2,425 calls on the same date last year. The Statewide 511 system experienced a 40 percent increase in calls the same day.

In addition to the free 511 phone service, Florida residents can access real-time traffic information, traffic cameras, lane closures and emergency alerts on the Web at www.FL511.com. Regional information is available at www.jax511.com, www.511tampabay.com, www.southwestflorida511.com and www.southflorida511.com. ■

511 Tips

- Speak as clearly as possible and minimize any background noise, including radios and open windows.
- Say, "other parts of the state" to transfer to Florida's regional 511 services.
- Say, "help" for instructions.
- Say, "next," "previous," "stop" or "repeat" to navigate through the phone menus more quickly.
- Say, "main menu" at any time to start over.
- Say, "feedback" to report congestion not already on 511.
- Interrupt 511 at any time if you already know your selection.

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