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Four people were injured in a six-vehicle collision Friday afternoon on Texas 71 near Bee Cave Road. Traffic flow was sluggish at best while

crews removed debris. One westbound lane of the highway will remain closed this weekend as crews clean up the mess.

Disaster averted after wreck

Spewing fuel threatened to contaminate creek, but quick-thinking crews kept it largely in check

By Asher Price and Virgil Dickson

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

It had the potential to be an environmental disaster.

During a six-vehicle wreck that critically injured one person on Texas 71 about 3 p.m. Friday in western Travis County, an out-of-control 18-wheeler bearing more than 23 tons of washed sand careened through 275 feet of guardrail along Spanish Oaks Club Drive. The truck then

stumbled onto a bridge, where it tore through a handful of steel 12-inch anchor bolts before shuddering to a stop, with diesel fuel and oil spurting out.

About 20 feet below the bridge runs the lazy Barton Creek, which makes its way through the Hill Country before falling through limestone fissures of the Edwards Aquifer and re-emerging at Barton Springs. The creek supports at least seven endangered plant species.

The quick thinking of first responders and the odd combi-

nation of heavy drought and the high cost of gasoline averted a small catastrophe after the wreck.

Four people were hospitalized, one listed in critical condition. The other three, including a 2-year-old, did not appear to have life-threatening injuries, officials said. The wreck shut down eastbound lanes of the highway until 9:30 p.m. One westbound lane will be closed over the weekend for cleanup, officials said.

An 18-wheeler driving west struck a passenger van before hitting four other vehicles. The truck driver reported losing his brakes, Department of Public



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Safety officials said.

Fifteen gallons of used motor oil spilled onto the road when the truck engine's crank case

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A tow truck removes one of the remnants of a six-vehicle crash Friday on Texas 71.

WRECK: Quick-thinking crews prevent environmental mess

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was torn out. The crash also crushed the truck's two saddle tanks, each about 5 feet long and 24 inches across, sending another 140 gallons of diesel fuel onto the road, said Thomas Bashara, an environmental compliance specialist with Austin's watershed protection department.

Each tank was only about half-full, Bashara said.

"With the price of fuel being what it is nowadays, it costs truckers too much money to keep them full every day," he said.

The Oak Hill Fire Department

came within minutes, followed closely by officials with the state Department of Transportation. The bridge is designed to drain water into the creek, and already the gasoline was spilling onto the creek bed.

The firefighters acted fast, spraying a soft, clay absorbent onto the pollutants. Transportation officials applied Biomatrix, a treated peat moss, which absorbs up to five times its volume in liquid.

"On the road surface, it turned that stuff into putty," Bashara said. "It solidifies in a matter of minutes. If they hadn't done that, another 50 gallons would have gotten into the creek."

As it is, about 50 to 60 gallons of diesel fuel did make its way onto the creek bed floor, but it fell at least 100 feet from where the creek flows, onto a dry patch of sand and caliche washed ashore in more flush days.

"There are better places it could have dropped," Bashara said, "but it could have been a lot worse."

By 6 p.m., emergency officials had applied kitty litter to coax the oil out. He said a tractor would have to haul the patch out to preserve the creek.

"It will be a simple excavation," he said.

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