

# Nightmare on I-95

## First significant snow in years wreaks havoc

» BY KARI PUGH  
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State officials are promising an “exhaustive” review after the season’s first snowfall closed a 50-mile stretch of Interstate 95 for 36 hours earlier this week, stranding thousands of travelers overnight.

On Tuesday afternoon, as crews finally began to clear the interstate from Dumfries to Caroline County, Virginia Department of Transportation officials called the situation “unacceptable.”

“We do apologize, and we’ll be taking an exhaustive look at this incident,” VDOT spokeswoman Kelly Hannon said.

Gov. Ralph Northam said it was “a perfect storm” and defended not declaring a state of emergency or calling in the National Guard after taking criticism for how the incident was handled.

“This was an incredibly unusual event and it’s going to take some time to clean up,” Northam said during a Tuesday afternoon media briefing. “I certainly understand the frustration and fear that people felt.”

Marcie Parker, VDOT’s Fredericksburg District engineer, said the agency was overwhelmed during the storm. “Snowfall rates were faster than anticipated. Pretty

much when it gets over an inch an hour, we have a hard time keeping up.”

VDOT did not pretreat I-95 because the storm began with rain, which would have washed away any pretreatment, Parker said.

A former VDOT resident engineer, who declined to be identified, told InsideNoVa the situation was avoidable. The engineer said that even if roads could not have been pretreated, trucks carrying salt and sand could have been pre-positioned to treat the highway and melt snow and ice as soon as it began to accumulate.

“It’s absolutely ridiculous,” the engineer said.

The trouble began at 8:20 a.m. Monday with whiteout conditions in Stafford County, causing multiple tractor-trailers to jackknife. I-95 south was closed all day Monday, reopening briefly around 5:45 p.m., before closing again. Northbound lanes fared slightly better, with one lane open through Stafford most of the day Monday. But by nightfall, it, too, was impassable.

Virginia State Police say there were no reports of deaths or injuries during the closure, although many stranded drivers were posting desperate pleas on social media through the night.

U.S. Sen. Tim Kaine was one of the stranded drivers, tweeting Tuesday morning that his usual two-hour drive from



Drivers on northbound Interstate 95 in Caroline County were stopped in traffic from about 7 p.m. Monday until early Tuesday afternoon. PATRICK KING

Richmond to the Capitol had turned into 19 hours. By the time he got off the interstate, his trip had taken 27 hours.

As the ordeal stretched into a second day, many stuck on the highway questioned the response from state agencies.

“I don’t know what’s been going on behind the scenes, but I feel like we’ve known this storm was coming, I’ve seen how we handled prior storms. I had a certain expectation how it would be handled and that expectation wasn’t met,” said Rebecca Barnes, who was stuck on I-95 north in Caroline County starting about 7 p.m. Monday while returning from a trip to Florida.

Barnes, owner of Prince William Living magazine and a first responder with the Occoquan-Woodbridge-Lorton Volunteer Fire Department, said the temperature

dipped overnight to 14 degrees and the ground was too icy for those stranded to even get out of their cars and walk away.

VDOT fully reopened I-95 Tuesday at 8:30 p.m.

Monday’s storm dropped the most snow the Washington area has seen since January 2019. Snow totals tallied 13 inches in Stafford County, 12.5 inches in Dumfries and 12 inches in Dale City, according to the National Weather Service.

The snow, along with high winds, also snapped trees and toppled power lines. More than 150,000 customers around Northern Virginia were without power by late Monday afternoon, with utilities saying restoring electricity would be a multi-day effort. Dumfries, Dale City and Stafford were particularly hit hard by outages.

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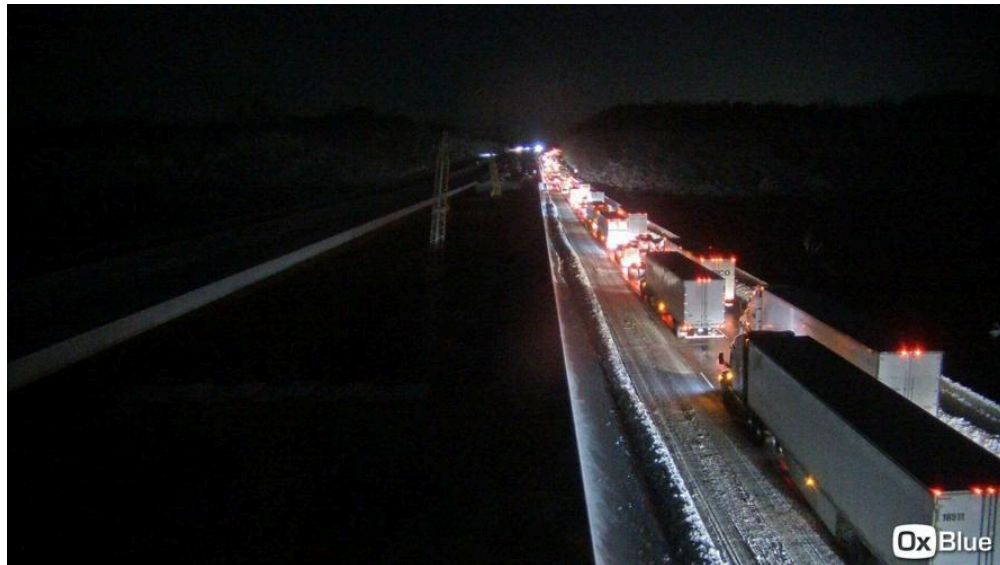


[https://www.insidenova.com/headlines/update-i-95-in-stafford-shut-down-again/article\\_1437227e-6cb9-11ec-96f5-4b3f61b259f1.html](https://www.insidenova.com/headlines/update-i-95-in-stafford-shut-down-again/article_1437227e-6cb9-11ec-96f5-4b3f61b259f1.html)

BREAKING

## UPDATE: I-95 in Stafford shut down again

Jan 3, 2022



Interstate 95, Fredericksburg, Jan. 3, 2022  
VDOT

### MORE INFORMATION



I-95 remains closed south of Dumfries area; motorists still stranded

Interstate 95 in Stafford County was at a standstill again Monday night after being closed all day due to a wreck involving six tractor-trailers southbound, and several disabled tractor-trailers stuck in the northbound lanes.

"Travel remains stopped on I-95 northbound and southbound at various points in the Fredericksburg area; crews continue to clear disabled vehicles and downed trees following winter storm to allow travel to resume," the Virginia Department of Transportation said in a news release.

Motorists should avoid the area until further notice due to significant congestion and to assist crews with clearance, VDOT said.

With 511Virginia.org traffic cameras out of service due to power outages, specific locations and the number of affected lanes couldn't be confirmed, VDOT said.

"Crews continue to be mobilized in emergency response and are clearing trees blocking lanes and working to clear disabled trucks and vehicles throughout the region," the release said.

Additional resources from other regions were expected to arrive Monday night to support debris removal, road treatment and clearance efforts.

The latest information on lane reopenings and traffic will be available as it is confirmed on 511Virginia, although traffic cameras remain out of service.

'I am just so sorry': Virginia transportation officials apologize after I-95 snowstorm backup

Audit finds VDOT doesn't have enough contractors for major snow removal

Earlier Monday evening, Stafford County officials asked "people seeking shelter to STAY-IN-PLACE" tonight as road and utility crews work to reach those in need and restore power.

"Please stay off the roads unless it is absolutely necessary as the county looks to provide more resources tomorrow with more accessible roads available," the county said in a Monday evening news release.

About 5:45 p.m., Interstate 95 southbound in Stafford County reopened to traffic near exit 136 at Centreport Parkway after an accident this morning involving six tractor-trailers. The northbound lanes, which had been partially blocked near the Courthouse exit due to disabled tractor-trailers, was also cleared.



[https://www.insidenova.com/headlines/interstate-95-nightmare-highway-reopens-36-hours-after-snowstorm/article\\_505ed8de-6d70-11ec-9baf-f3901acfab2.html](https://www.insidenova.com/headlines/interstate-95-nightmare-highway-reopens-36-hours-after-snowstorm/article_505ed8de-6d70-11ec-9baf-f3901acfab2.html)

BREAKING

# Interstate 95 nightmare: Highway reopens 36 hours after snowstorm

Jan 4, 2022



U.S. Sen. Tim Kaine showed his view after being stranded on I-95 for more than 19 hours.



A 50-mile stretch of Interstate 95 reopened tonight around 8:30 p.m., 36 hours after thousands of motorists were stranded, some for more than 24 hours, due to Monday's snowstorm.

Trending on InsideNoVa

State audit audit pinpoints what went wrong during I-95 snowstorm gridlock

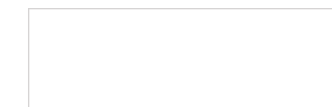


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Congresswoman seeks answers on next steps following IG report on January snowstorm

On Tuesday afternoon, as crews finally began to clear the interstate, VDOT officials called the situation "unacceptable" and have promised an "exhaustive look at this incident."





Guest Opinion: How to prevent another I-95 snow disaster

Gov. Ralph Northam called it "a perfect storm," and defended not declaring a state of emergency or calling in the National Guard after taking criticism for how the incident was handled.

"This was an incredibly unusual event and it's going to take some time to clean up," Northam said during a 4 p.m. media briefing. "I certainly understand the frustration and fear that people felt."

MORE INFORMATION

'I am just so sorry': Virginia transportation officials apologize after I-95 snowstorm backup

Youngkin declares state of emergency ahead of winter storm

Outside firm to investigate Virginia's I-95 snowstorm response

VDOT to begin pretreating I-95 ahead of possible Sunday snow

After I-95 shutdown, Senate committee approves restrictions on truckers during wintry weather

Report details state response to snowstorm that stranded I-95 travelers for days

Declaring a state of emergency needs to happen in advance, he said, and is usually reserved for hurricanes and other emergency situations where resources can be placed in advance. As for calling in the National Guard, he repeated what emergency management officials said earlier in the day: No state agencies or localities requested National Guard assistance.



A Woodbridge couple stuck on I-95 in Caroline County overnight said the had moved no more than a quarter-mile in more than 12 hours.

By Patrick King

Marcie Parker, VDOT's Fredericksburg District engineer, said the agency was overwhelmed by snowfall rates during the storm.

"I do believe VDOT was prepared for this storm but anticipated snowfall rates were faster than anticipated. We got more snow than initially predicted and the rate was harder," she said during a Tuesday media briefing. "Pretty much when it gets over an inch an hour, we have a hard time keeping up."

Though the storm was forecast well in advance, it started with rain and VDOT did not pretreat I-95.

"It would have just washed away any pretreatment," Parker said.

A former VDOT resident engineer, who declined to be identified, told InsideNoVa the situation on I-95 was avoidable. The engineer said that even if roads could not have been pretreated, trucks carrying salt and sand could have been pre-positioned to treat the highway and melt snow and ice as soon as it began to accumulate.

Once the interstate became blocked with wrecks, it becomes impossible to treat, and additional drivers get stuck behind the wrecks, spin out or run out of gas, blocking the transportation department's vehicles.

"It's absolutely ridiculous," the engineer said.

The trouble began at 8:20 a.m. Monday with whiteout conditions in Stafford County, causing multiple tractor-trailers to jackknife. I-95 south was closed all day Monday, reopening briefly around 5:45 p.m., before closing down again. Northbound lanes fared slightly better, with one lane open through Stafford most of the day Monday. But by nightfall, it, too, was impassable.

Virginia State Police say there were no reports of deaths or injuries during the closure, though many stranded drivers were posting desperate pleas on social media throughout the night.

U.S. Sen. Tim Kaine was one of the stranded drivers, tweeting Tuesday morning that his usual two-hour drive to the Capitol had turned into 19 hours. By the time he got off the interstate, the trip took a total of 27 hours.





A Woodbridge couple stuck in Caroline County overnight said temperatures dipped into the teens and the road was a sheet of ice.

As the ordeal stretched into a second day, many stuck on the interstate questioned the response from state agencies.

"I don't know what's been going on behind the scenes, but I feel like we've known this storm was coming, I've seen how we handled prior storms. I had a certain expectation how it would be handled and that expectation wasn't met," said Rebecca Barnes, who was stuck on I-95 north in Caroline County starting about 7 p.m. Monday while returning from a trip to Florida to see family.

Image: 95patrickking3.jpg



Barnes, owner of Prince William Living magazine and a first responder with the Occoquan-Woodbridge-Lorton Volunteer Fire Department, said the temperature dipped overnight to 14 degrees and the ground was too icy for those stranded to even get out of their cars and walk away.

Barnes said VDOT and state police made no effort to check on drivers stuck south of Fredericksburg or offer any assistance.

"I'd like to see some National Guard, some troopers walking over from the southbound side," said Barnes, who was well-equipped to get through a night stuck on the interstate and was traveling with family, but worried for others who were alone and unprepared.

On Twitter, families of drivers trapped pleaded for help, urging Gov. Ralph Northam to declare a state of emergency and send in the National Guard.

"Where is the National Guard? Please help us!!!" one wrote.

Another tweeted to Northam that he had been stuck in his car for 18 hours without insulin.

"Can someone please send help? I'm starting to feel very weak," he wrote.

Another said her daughter and three grandchildren, one a 2-month-old baby with special needs, were trapped going on 14 hours and had run out of food.



Northam tweeted Tuesday morning that an "emergency message" was going out to those stranded "connecting them to support, and the state is working with localities to open warming shelters as needed."

When pressed during Tuesday's media briefing about why the National Guard wasn't called in to help, Virginia Department of Emergency Management Communications Director Lauren Opett said no requests came from the state or localities to do so.


When asked by reporters Tuesday why there had been no apology to the stranded motorists, VDOT Fredericksburg spokeswoman Kelly Hannon said "we do apologize, and we'll be taking an exhaustive look at this incident."



VDOT said it expects the interstate to be fully reopened by tomorrow morning's rush hour.

In Prince William County, fire and rescue personnel were using the Express Lanes -- which remained closed to allow passage of first responders and highway crews -- to hand out snacks, water and gas to those stranded.





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**Tim Kaine**   
@timkaine · [Follow](#) 




I started my normal 2 hour drive to DC at 1pm yesterday. 19 hours later, I'm still not near the Capitol. My office is in touch with [@VaDOT](#) to see how we can help other Virginians in this situation. Please stay safe everyone.





8:27 AM · Jan 4, 2022 

 [Read the full conversation on Twitter](#)

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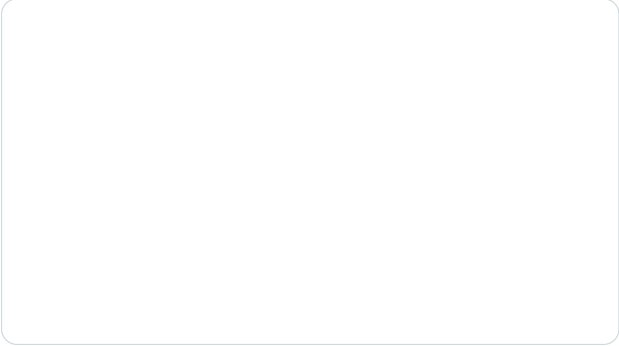
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**VDOT Fredericksburg**  · Jan 4, 2022 


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While I-95 remains closed, we continue to ask drivers in the Fredericksburg area to avoid travel with most roads in severe condition, meaning snow-covered with little to no visible pavement. Travel is expected to remain hazardous for most of the day.



**erinkelly**  
@erinkellyd · [Follow](#)

My daughter, husband & 3 children-including a 2 month old with special needs have been stranded on I-95N near Fredericksburg for over 14 hours. Out of food. No restrooms. Cannot get off. There is no help in sight. Some people are getting out if their vehicles & shouting. Plan?

9:15 AM · Jan 4, 2022 

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