



## **PRELIMINARY REPORT**

**Avenal, CA**

**HWY21FH003**

(3 Pages)

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## HIGHWAY

### HWY21FH003

*The information in this report is preliminary and will be supplemented or corrected during the course of the investigation.*

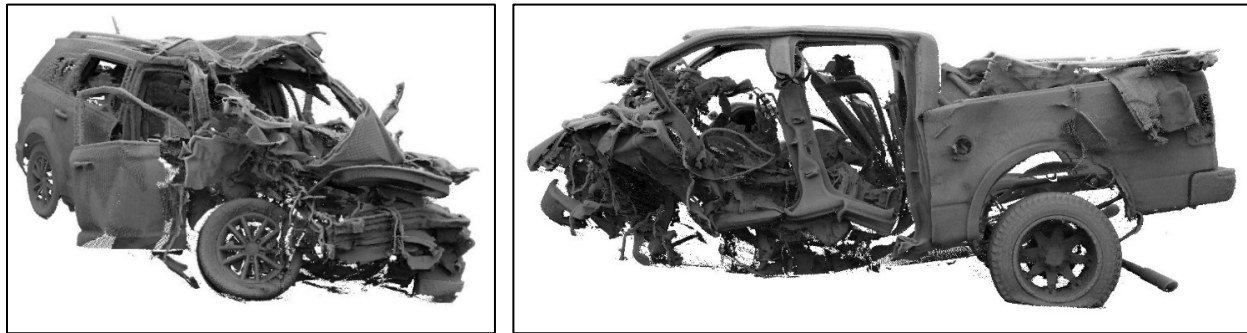
About 8:00 p.m. Pacific standard time on Friday, January 1, 2021, a 2013 Dodge Journey sport utility vehicle (SUV), occupied by a 28-year-old driver, was traveling south on State Route 33 (SR-33) in Fresno County near Avenal, California. The driver had just departed a New Year's Day gathering and traveled about 1.2 miles from the party location when the SUV approached a 2007 Ford F-150 extended-cab pickup truck traveling north in the opposite lane of travel. The lanes were separated by a broken yellow centerline and the highway had a posted speed limit of 55 mph. The pickup truck was occupied by a 34-year-old driver and seven passengers, ranging in age from 6 to 15 years old. The driver and child-age passengers were returning from a trip to Pismo Beach, California.

About 1 mile north of the Kings County line, the SUV departed the roadway to the right, traveling over the west asphalt shoulder and then onto the adjacent dirt and gravel shoulder. As the driver steered left to reenter the roadway, the SUV yawed counterclockwise and crossed into the northbound lane, colliding with the front and left side of the oncoming pickup truck. After impact, both vehicles rotated counterclockwise. The SUV came to rest facing in a northeasterly direction with its damaged front end over the highway centerline. The pickup truck caught fire and came to rest in a dirt and grass area east of the roadway, facing in a westerly direction (figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Northbound view of vehicles at final rest. (Source: California Highway Patrol)

As a result of the crash, the driver of the SUV and all eight occupants in the pickup truck were fatally injured. The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) is examining seat belt use by occupants in both vehicles to determine if the injuries could have been mitigated in this severe head-on crash.<sup>1</sup> Because of the collision and fire damage to the onboard event data recorders, investigators were unable to retrieve operational data from either vehicle. The NTSB is reviewing the physical evidence and 3-dimensional (3D) laser scan data of the crash scene and the damaged vehicles to evaluate the dynamics of the crash event (figure 2).



**Figure 2.** 3D scans showing damage to the Dodge Journey SUV (left) and Ford F-150 pickup truck (right). (Source: California Highway Patrol)

The SUV driver was unlicensed. His postmortem toxicology test revealed a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) level more than double California's *per se* legal limit of .08 g/dL.<sup>2</sup> Both drivers' test results also showed evidence of marijuana used. The NTSB is awaiting the results of further toxicology testing for both drivers and will evaluate the potential role of alcohol and drug impairment in this crash.<sup>3</sup> Medical and human performance evaluations will also examine whether driver fatigue, distraction, or medical conditions were factors in the crash.

The NTSB continues to gather information on the actions of both drivers, vehicle conditions, event data recorder crashworthiness, highway condition and maintenance, and issues related to occupant protection. All aspects of the crash remain under investigation as the NTSB determines the probable cause, with the intent of issuing safety recommendations to prevent similar crashes. The NTSB is working alongside the California Highway Patrol, which is conducting a separate, parallel investigation.

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<sup>1</sup> The pickup truck was equipped with only six seat belts but was occupied by one adult and seven children. Additionally, section 27360(a) of the California Vehicle Code requires all children under 8 years of age to be properly secured in a child safety or booster seat, placed in the rear seat.

<sup>2</sup> BAC represents a mass of alcohol per volume of blood, and laws establish the BAC level at which it is illegal for a driver to operate a vehicle, regardless of the driver's apparent condition or actions.

<sup>3</sup> The toxicology test results referenced in this preliminary report were extracted from a forensic toxicology report prepared by the Federal Aviation Administration's Forensic Sciences Laboratory. The NTSB is awaiting toxicology results from the Fresno County Sheriff coroner's office.