



WEATHER

What goes into the decision to close interstates



An electronic billboard along Interstate 94 warns drivers the interstate is closed ahead. Matt Henson / WDAY News



By **Matt Henson**

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FARGO — The lights are flashing on the interstates across the region Tuesday, April 4, meaning they are shut down. That has truck stops filling in as fast as the snow is filling in the roads.

"I don't want to talk about it, man. It's the worst," said truck driver Johnny Vasquez.

These truckers may be stuck for a couple of days before roads reopen.

"It's frustrating. We have a little mini apartment with food, a refrigerator, microwave and TV," said truck driver Sharon Ladue.



The barriers went down across Interstate 94 and Interstate 29 late Tuesday, bringing traffic to a halt.

"I was watching the storm and unfortunately I got caught right before I could escape it," said Vasquez.

This is the ninth time I-94 has closed between Fargo and Jamestown this year. Stretches of I-29 between South Dakota and the Canadian border have been blocked off a total of 10 times.

I-94 only closed twice in 2022, while I-29 closed 8 times. Neither of them closed in 2021.

"Every storm is a little different," said North Dakota Highway Patrol Captain Bryan Niewind.

Niewind said the priority is to keep the highways open. According to him, a number of factors go into making the decision to close the interstate. The main ones are visibility, drifting and whether or not the wind is strong enough to blow vehicles on icy roads.

Niewind said real-time information from plow drivers, troopers and deputies, along with programs and weather forecasts provide input into the decision. While the highways have closed more than usual this year he says the decision making has not changed.

"The conditions don't always warrant exactly where you are at but the conditions in between — where we have closure points a lot of times — determine whether or not we are going to close a road," Niewind said.

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Back at the truck stop, all Vasquez can do is get back in his truck and wait.

"Thinking of April, I didn't think it would be this bad. That's why I took a load coming up here. If I would have known this I would have never come up here," Vasquez said.

He reminds drivers it could take several hours to rescue stranded drivers.

Drivers who try to drive on closed roads could be fined \$250.

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Matt Henson is an Emmy award-winning reporter/photographer/editor for WDAY. Prior to joining WDAY in 2019, Matt was the main anchor at WDAZ in Grand Forks for four years. He was born and raised in the suburbs of Philadelphia and attended college at Lyndon State College in northern Vermont, where he was recognized twice nationally, including first place, by the National Academy for Arts and Science for television production. Matt enjoys being a voice for the little guy. He focuses on crimes and courts and investigative stories. Just as often, he shares tear-jerking stories and stories of accomplishment. Matt enjoys traveling to small towns across North Dakota and Minnesota to share their stories. He can be reached at mhenson@wday.com and at 610-639-9215. When he's not at work (rare) Matt resides in Moorhead and enjoys spending time with his daughter, golfing and attending Bison and Sioux games.