April 27, 2026 HIR-26/04

Sport Utility Vehicle Roadway Departure, Overturn, and Submersion

Belle Glade, Florida
August 5, 2024

On August 5, 2024, about 7:19 p.m. eastern daylight time, a 2023 Ford Explorer sport utility vehicle (SUV) was traveling west on Hatton Highway near Belle Glade, Palm Beach County, Florida.[1] While negotiating a left-hand curve, the SUV departed the roadway, struck and overrode a metal beam guardrail, overturned, and came to rest on its roof partially submerged in a canal adjacent to the roadway (see figure 1). The seven-seat SUV was occupied by a driver and nine passengers, including five children 8 years old and under. Only the driver and front-seat passenger were restrained. As a result of the crash, nine occupants were fatally injured and one sustained serious injuries.

[1] (a) In this report, all times are eastern daylight time. (b) Visit ntsb.gov to find additional information in the public docket for this NTSB investigation (case no. HWY24FH012). Use the CAROL Query to search safety recommendations and investigations.

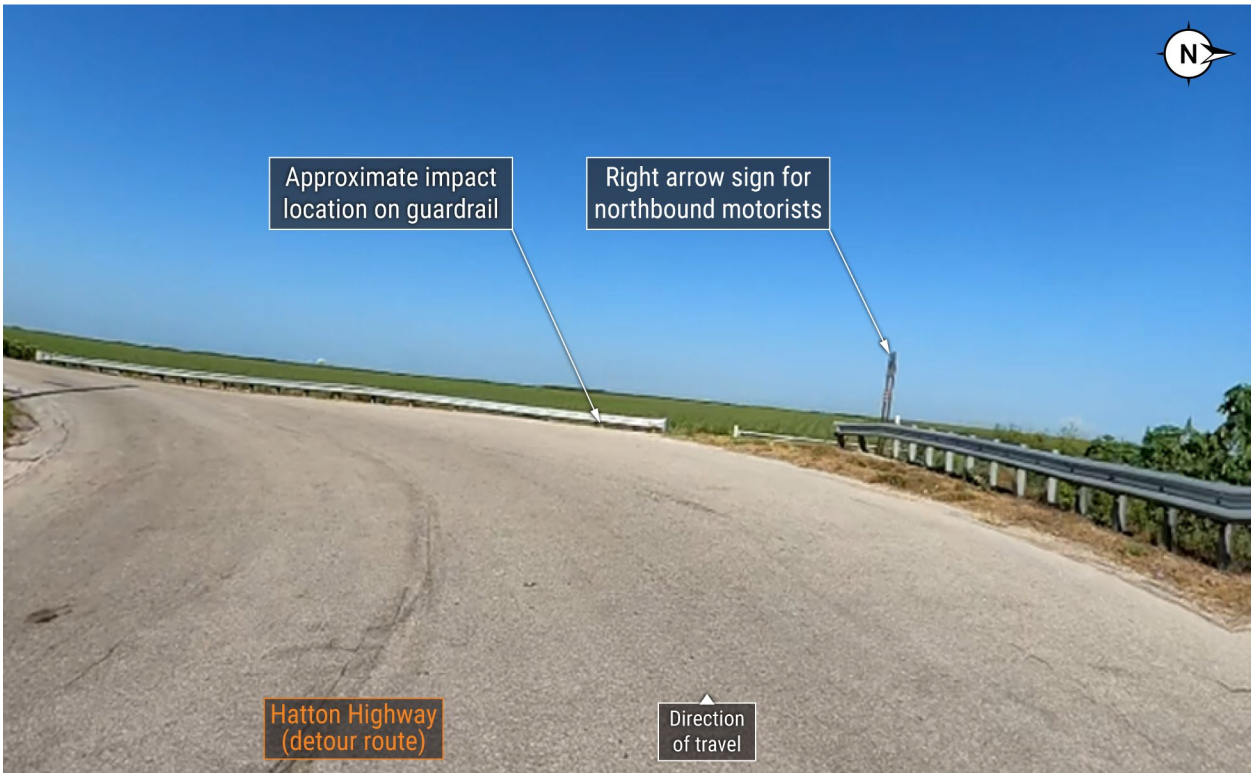

Figure 1. Still image of the crash location taken by Palm Beach County dashboard camera footage on May 2024, 3 months before the crash occurred. A right-arrow sign for northbound motorists is installed (perpendicular to westbound motorists) at the end of a guardrail. (Source: Palm Beach County; annotated by NTSB)

Location	Hatton Highway, Belle Glade, Florida (see figure 2)
Date	August 5, 2024
Time	7:19 p.m.
Involved vehicles	1 (2023 Ford Explorer SUV)
Involved people	10
Injuries	9 fatal, 1 serious
Weather	Dry, mostly cloudy, and daylight
Roadway information	The roadway was dry. The posted speed limit was 55 mph with a warning sign and advisory speed of 20 mph for the curve.

1 Factual Information

1.1 Background

On the day of the crash, the SUV driver and nine passengers, five of whom were children aged 1 to 8, were traveling to Palm Beach International Airport to return their rental vehicle, a seven-seat 2023 Ford Explorer, before their flight. The driver's original route to the airport, southbound Connors Highway (State Route 700), was partially closed for road work, so the driver was detoured south on Hatton Highway, the first leg of the detour route. The detour route added about 4 miles to the driver's original route (see figure 2).

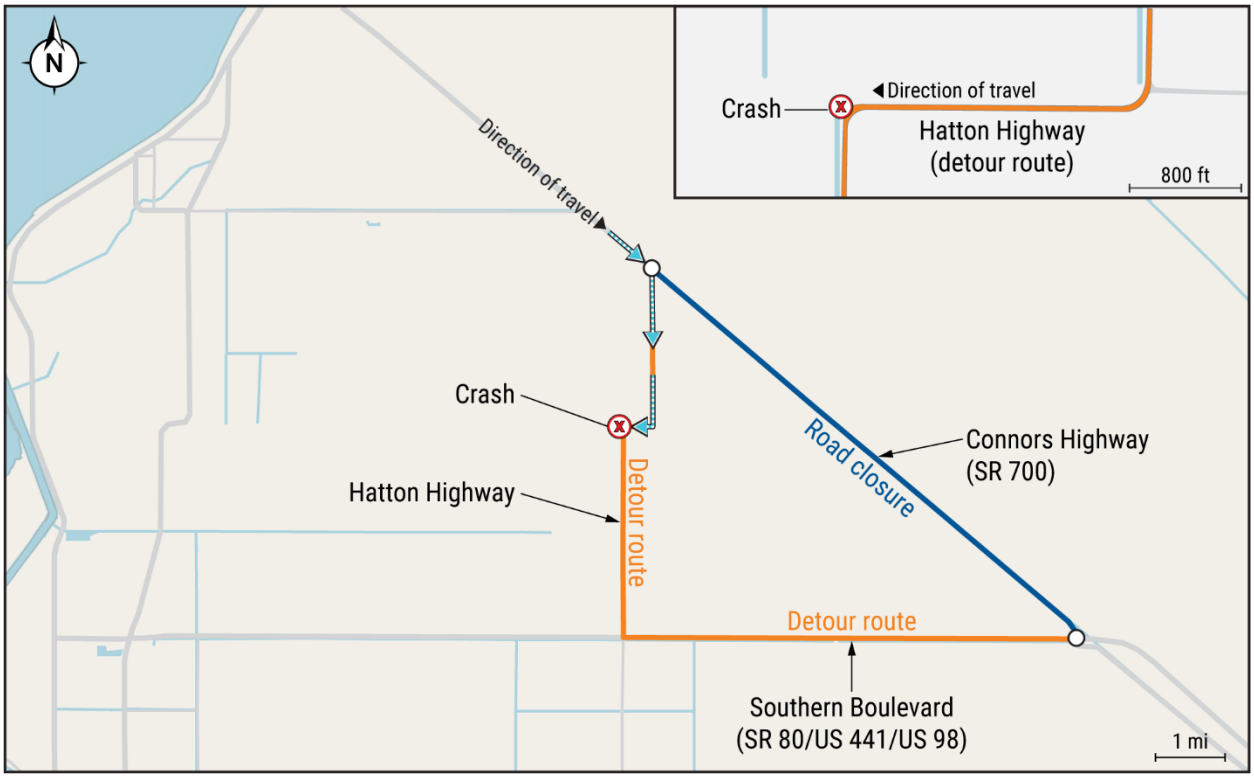

Figure 2. Map showing the detour route, the SUV's route, and location of the crash.

Hatton Highway was a two-lane, low-traffic road that passed through agricultural land. A double yellow center line separated the two traffic lanes and white edge lines bordered the roadway, but at some points, including at the approach to the curve, the center line and edge lines were not in good condition.[2]

[2] The condition of the center line had deteriorated, and it was no longer visible as it neared the curve; the edge lines had also deteriorated and were not visible in places, or were obscured by roadside vegetation and soil.

Drainage and irrigation canals lined the roadway. The posted speed limit was 55 mph.

Hatton Highway was mostly straight but featured two curves in the area of the crash.[3] The right-hand curve had an inside radius of about 245 feet. The left-hand curve, where the crash occurred, had an inside radius of about 120 feet. Approaches to both curves were marked by two flashing beacons, an arrow warning sign, and a 20-mph advisory speed plaque mounted on a pole. At the outside of both curves, in line with a driver's path, one-direction large arrow signs combined with object markers had been installed side by side (one for westbound motorists, one for northbound motorists) to indicate where the roadway changed direction (see figure 3).[4] However, at the crash location, and at the time of the crash, the large arrow sign intended for westbound motorists was missing after having been damaged and displaced in a previous crash.[5]

[3] These curves are classified as horizontal curves, which change the roadway alignment or direction without changing the slope.

[4] According to the *Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices* (11th ed., 2023), an object marker is used to warn drivers of obstructions on or near the roadway.

[5] The sign had been damaged and displaced in a crash that was not documented by law enforcement. It occurred sometime between June 2021 and May 2023. Photographs from May 2023, when a Palm Beach County contractor was onsite to repair a guardrail near the crash location, show that the sign was missing at that time.

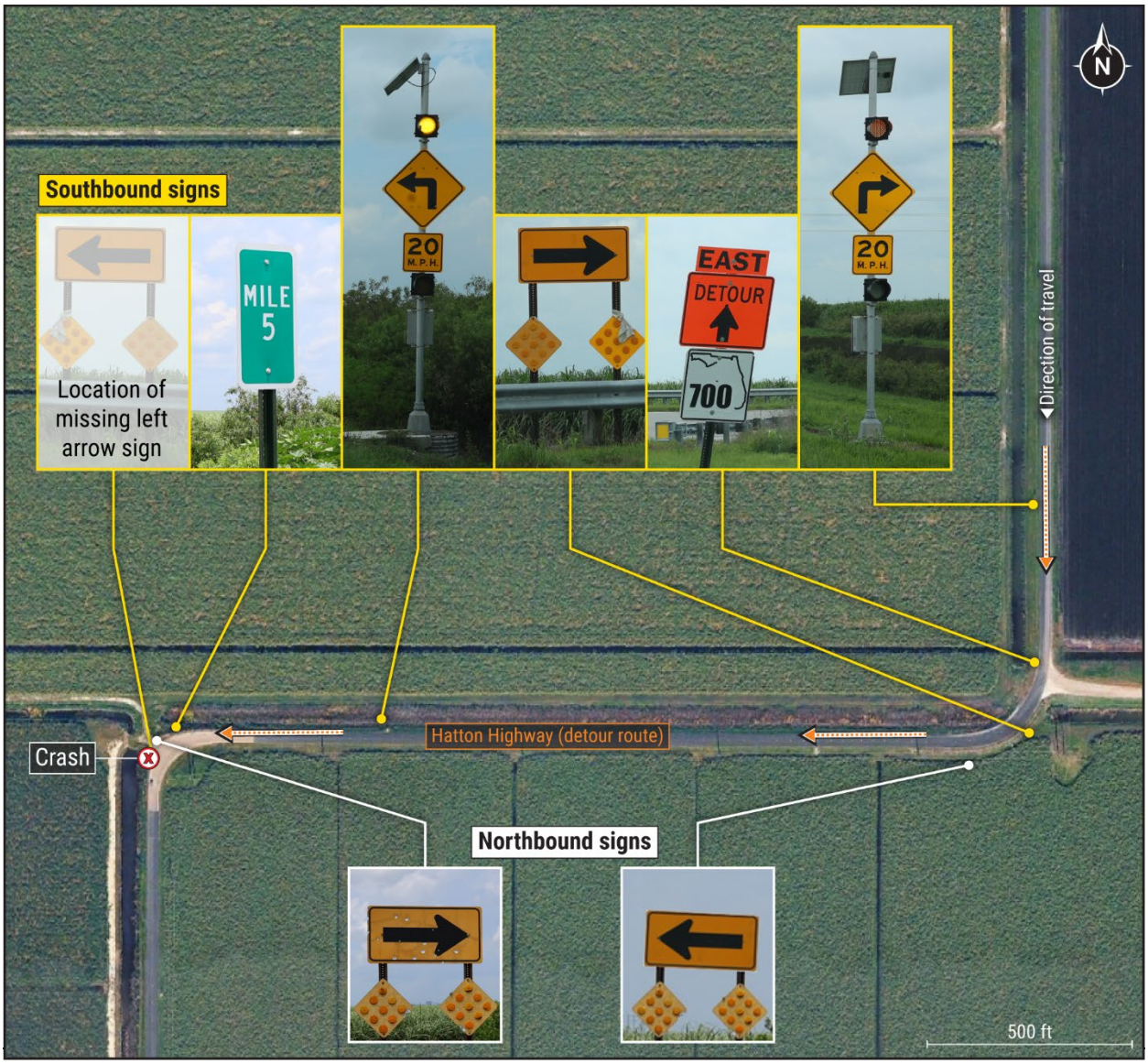

Figure 3. Signage along the driver's route on Hatton Highway up to the crash location. (Source: Google Earth; inset images and annotations by NTSB)

At the crash location, two metal W-beam guardrail systems were installed along the outside of the horizontal curve—one along the north side of the roadway and the other along the west side. The west guardrail initially paralleled the roadway; however, as it approached the curve's apex, it diverged from the roadway edge, resulting in a lateral offset of up to about 18 feet before terminating at the entrance of an unpermitted dirt road (see figure 4).[6] This offset placed a portion of the guardrail on a slope descending toward an adjacent canal. At that location, the top of the

[6] In this case, there were no permits filed with Palm Beach County for the construction of the road.

guardrail measured about 15 inches (1.3 feet) above the roadway edge (refer to figure 1).[7]

1.2 Event Sequence

The SUV driver negotiated the first (right-hand) curve at an unknown speed. She then entered a straight portion of the roadway and was traveling about 60 mph with the accelerator pedal partially depressed according to the SUV's airbag control module (ACM), which had an event data recorder (EDR) capability.[8] The SUV approached the second (left-hand) curve. EDR data indicated the service brake became engaged about 2.4 seconds before impact with the guardrail and while the SUV was still in the straight portion of the roadway.[9] At the same time, the data showed the steering wheel angle beginning to steadily increase leftward from 12 degrees to 128 degrees at impact with the guardrail. The antilock brake system engaged 1.1 seconds and then disengaged 0.4 seconds before impact and the electronic stability control system engaged 1.0 second before impact and remained engaged at impact.

Two tire-friction marks were identified in the westbound travel lane. The marks were approximately parallel to each other and measured about 29 and 32 feet long. Both marks terminated at the white edge line where the SUV exited the roadway.

The SUV struck the guardrail at an angle and at a recorded speed of 44 mph (see figure 4). It continued west over the guardrail, overturned, and landed on its roof in the canal that bordered the roadway. The canal was about 5 feet deep, 48 feet wide, and 20 feet from the roadway edge. After the SUV came to rest in the canal, one passenger was able to extricate himself from the vehicle.

[7] The guardrail was 31.2 inches (2.6 feet) tall when measured from its base. A 31-inch guardrail height is the standard height as specified in the Florida Department of Transportation's (FDOT) *Standard Plans for Road Construction*, which gives construction details for items such as guardrails. The *FDOT Design Manual*, which provides design rules and criteria for highway projects, specifies that barriers should be installed on slopes of 1V:10H or flatter (for every 1 unit of vertical rise, there are 10 units of horizontal distance); installations on steeper slopes is either not permitted or requires a specialized installation method. The manual specifies the maximum distances from the road edge that a guardrail can be installed. Slopes 1V:3H and steeper are classified as "nonrecoverable," meaning that most motorists will be unable to stop or easily return to the roadway.

[8] The driver's speed on the approach to the curve was recorded by the SUV's EDR. Although the unit was damaged by the extended time it was submerged, the NTSB was able to recover the data using a destructive chip-level forensic procedure.

[9] The SUV was equipped with safety systems including antilock brakes, electronic stability control, front and rear antiroll bars, precollision braking, and lane-departure warning.

Figure 4. Reconstructed overhead image of the SUV's travel path to impact location. (Source: Google Earth; inset image and annotations by NTSB)

The first 911 call was received at 7:28 p.m. A Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office (PBCSO) unit was dispatched at 7:29 p.m. and arrived on scene at 7:37 p.m. The first Palm Beach County fire/rescue unit was dispatched at 7:30 p.m., arrived on scene at 7:41 p.m., and began recovering the remaining occupants from inside the SUV.

The occupant who extricated himself from the vehicle sustained serious injuries, and the other nine occupants were fatally injured. Autopsy reports documented blunt-force trauma on several victims; the cause of death for all victims was drowning. EDR data indicated that only the lap/shoulder belts for the driver and front-seat passenger were latched, and a postcrash inspection of the belt mechanisms and webbing found evidence of use for only these two seats. The EDR data showed that the seat belt pretensioners for both front seats had deployed. At the same time, the driver and right-front passenger thorax and side curtain airbags also deployed.[10] The data also showed an unbelted status for the three seating positions in the second row. Data on belt status for the third row was not available. The postcrash inspection found no child restraint systems in the vehicle. According to the surviving passenger, who was seated in the second-row center seat, the driver and a 14-year-old passenger were seated in the first row, two other adult passengers

[10] The driver and right-front passenger frontal airbags did not deploy during the crash.

were seated in the second-row outboard seats, and three children ages 3 to 8 were seated in the third row. The seating positions of a 1-year-old child and a 5-year-old child could not be determined.

Postcrash examination of the SUV revealed that the undercarriage was damaged, the hood was crumpled, the rear portion of the roof was displaced downward with minor intrusion into the rear portion of the passenger compartment, and the front and rear windshields were shattered. The lower cover and molding below the front bumper were torn off the vehicle. Postcrash examination found that the SUV's steering, suspension, and brake systems were intact and undamaged.

1.3 Driver Information

The SUV driver was a 57-year-old female. She held a class D noncommercial Virginia driver's license with no endorsements or restrictions, set to expire in August 2028.[11] A review of the driver's Virginia Department of Motor Vehicles records for the past 10 years did not show any violations or crashes.

Cell phone records from the mobile carrier showed that the driver's last texting activity before the crash was an incoming text at 6:22 p.m. and her last phone call before the crash was a recorded outgoing call about 30 minutes before the crash at 6:49 p.m. to the car rental agency. During that call, the driver discussed rental car charges and stated that the SUV was making a noise. That call ended at 7:12 p.m.[12]

Medical records indicated the driver had several medical conditions, including end-stage kidney disease on dialysis, chronic pain, insomnia, and prior seizure. At the time of the crash, she was wearing a controlled ankle motion (CAM) boot on her right ankle and foot for a chronic condition associated with nerve damage from past diabetes.

Toxicological testing of postmortem specimens from the driver identified several potentially impairing medications, including a prescription opioid pain reliever (tramadol), a sedating antihistamine (diphenhydramine), and an anticonvulsant (levetiracetam).[13] No alcohol was detected.

[11] In Virginia, a class D license is a standard, noncommercial driver's license that authorizes a driver to operate passenger vehicles and small trucks with a gross vehicle weight rating less than 26,001 pounds.

[12] The driver had made two additional calls to the car rental agency, one on July 31 and one on the morning of August 5, both of which were recorded, indicating the vehicle was making "clunking" noises.

[13] The measured levels of diphenhydramine and tramadol in iliac blood were 1,312 ng/mL and 2,459 ng/mL, respectively.

1.4 Postcrash Actions

After the crash, Palm Beach County initiated a project to rehabilitate portions of Hatton Highway. The straight segments of the roadway east and south of the curve were resurfaced and restriped; the road was last resurfaced and restriped in 2013.[14] The county began reconstructing the curve in December 2025; the project was projected to be completed by the end of April 2026. Among other improvements, the project will remove the existing guardrails, add a shoulder, and install a new, stronger (thrie-beam) guardrail at the FDOT-specified height (31 inches) on the shoulder along the full length of the curve. The unpermitted road entrance will be blocked off. The project will also add enhanced signage along the curve, build up the slope leading to the canal bordering the roadway, alter the curve's horizontal alignment, and resurface the curve, which includes adding rumble strips for the shoulder, center line, and painted median island.

[14] The roadway was scheduled to be resurfaced in 2024, but the crash occurred before the project began.

2 Analysis

At the time of the crash, the sky was mostly overcast and the roadway was dry. Although some glare was present and the beacon and sign for the second curve were backlit, both were visible to an approaching driver well before the curve. The driver was licensed and her driving record had no history of crashes or violations in the past 10 years. The mobile phone records from the mobile carrier did not show any regular phone calls or text messages at the time of the crash.[15] Car rental agency transcripts indicated that the driver had called the agency regarding a noise coming from the vehicle. However, a postcrash examination found that the SUV's steering, suspension, and brake systems were intact and undamaged; furthermore, no error codes associated with these systems were transmitted to Ford during the rental period. When notified of the crash, emergency medical services' response was timely and adequate; multiple responders arrived at the crash site within 10 minutes of the call.

The SUV occupants were on their way to the airport to return their vehicle; the detour added about 4 miles to their trip, possibly increasing the time pressure for the driver.[16] Time pressure can have a negative effect on driving behavior (Hussain and Alhajyaseen 2025; Fitzpatrick, Samuel, and Knodler 2017; Rendon-Velez and others 2016). The extent to which time pressure contributed to the crash could not be determined.

Postmortem testing of the driver revealed the presence of multiple potentially impairing medications, including the sedating antihistamine diphenhydramine and the opioid pain medication tramadol. Impairing effects of these medications may be worsened when used in combination. Based on the measured levels of diphenhydramine and tramadol in the driver's blood, some associated impairing effects such as cognitive and psychomotor slowing likely were present at the time of the crash. The driver also had potentially impairing medical conditions. However, there was no reliable way to determine the specific contributions of individual medical factors to the outcome. Vehicle data showed that the driver's CAM boot and associated foot and ankle condition did not prevent her from switching from applying the accelerator pedal to applying the brake pedal before the crash. Circumstantial evidence was not consistent with occurrence of a seizure or other sudden incapacitating medical event.

[15] *Regular phone calls* are telephone calls using the traditional telephone network and not including phone calls through the internet. *Regular text messages* are text messages sent and received through mobile carriers using short message service (SMS) or multimedia messaging service (MMS) protocols, and do not include any text messages sent/received via software applications, which use mobile data over the internet.

[16] According to transcripts of calls the driver made to the rental car company on the day of the crash, this flight was scheduled for 8:20 p.m. Estimates from GPS navigation websites indicate the drive time from the crash scene to the car rental offsite location was 40 to 55 minutes.

2.1 Driver Factors

The driver successfully negotiated a right-hand curve at an unknown speed and then entered a straight, westbound 1/2-mile-long portion of the roadway. On this section, the SUV was traveling at a recorded speed of 60 mph, slightly above the posted limit of 55 mph. As the SUV approached the left-hand curve, the driver encountered a flashing beacon with an arrow warning sign and 20-mph advisory speed plaque. The driver entered the curve at 59 mph; at 2.4 seconds before impact and about 180 feet from the guardrail, she began steering to the left and braking. At 1 second and about 68 feet before impact, the antilock braking system engaged, and the vehicle speed was 50 mph. Tire-friction marks on the roadway indicated the vehicle then entered a counterclockwise yaw. The SUV departed the road and struck the guardrail at 44 mph, more than two times above the advisory speed.

Although the vehicle's antilock braking system and electronic stability control system activated within 1 second before impact with the guardrail, the vehicle speed (above 50 mph), the curve sharpness, and roadway characteristics exceeded the functions of the systems.

The damage to the lower bumper and undercarriage indicated that the SUV struck the top of the guardrail with these lower vehicle structures, below the vehicle's center of gravity.[17] The impact with the top of the guardrail did not redirect the SUV but instead rolled it, causing the vehicle to continue into the canal in an inverted position.

The SUV driver was traveling at a speed too high for the curve. Although the curve was preceded by a beacon with an advisory speed limit sign of 20 mph, the driver was traveling at 60 mph approaching the curve. One second before the crash occurred, as the driver was executing the turn, her speed was 50 mph.

Speeding represents one of the most common factors associated with fatal crashes in the United States (NCSA 2025), and one that the NTSB frequently encounters during investigations. The NTSB has recently investigated several other fatal crashes in which speeding was the primary causal factor. The breadth of the safety recommendations that we have issued as a result of these investigations highlights the broad approach required to address the frequently fatal consequences of speeding.

In our 2025 report on a vehicle run-off-road and postcrash fire in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, we found that the driver of a truck-tractor entered a curve well above the posted advisory speed limit, ran off the road, and overturned, resulting in a postcrash fire that caused one fatality and a bridge overpass collapse (NTSB 2025).

[17] Rollover testing done for NHTSA's New Car Assessment Program found that a 2020 Ford Explorer had an average center of gravity height of 26.30 inches.

In our 2023 report on a multivehicle crash at an intersection in North Las Vegas, Nevada, we found that a driver's excessive speed due to impairment and disregard for safety and traffic laws resulted in a multivehicle crash (NTSB 2023). In that report, we made several recommendations aimed at reducing the prevalence of speeding on our roadways.

In our 2017 safety study, *Reducing Speeding-Related Crashes Involving Passenger Vehicles*, we wrote that "speeding—exceeding a speed limit or driving too fast for conditions—is one of the most common factors in motor vehicle crashes in the United States" (NTSB 2017). We also noted that "the stopping distance of a vehicle and the chance of a vehicle being driven off the road while negotiating a curve both increase with vehicle speed."

The NTSB recommended that the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) increase public awareness of the effects of speeding on traffic safety and initiate enforcement efforts to combat speeding.[18] NHTSA worked with law enforcement and safety advocates to develop a national media campaign to raise awareness of the dangers of speeding.

2.2 Highway Factors

To accommodate the unpermitted road entrance, the guardrail deviated from the shoulder edge and beyond the slope break. Although the rail height was about 31 inches relative to the ground surface at the post line, its placement downslope resulted in a reduced effective height relative to the roadway—about 1.3 feet above the roadway edge and about 1 foot below the SUV's center of gravity. This reduced effective height is insufficient for proper vehicle-barrier interaction and increases the potential for vehicle override, thereby diminishing the guardrail's ability to redirect an errant vehicle. Placement beyond the slope break and on a side slope steeper than 1V:10H further compromises post support and system performance. In addition, a portion of the guardrail face was oriented nearly perpendicular to the westbound direction of travel, a configuration that may increase impact severity and reduce the guardrail's redirection capability.[19]

[18] NTSB's Safety Recommendation H-17-25 is classified Closed–Acceptable Action.

[19] (a) This offset is the full shoulder plus 2 feet, and not to exceed 12 feet; it was depicted in the original Curve Flasher Plan for this location. (b) The FDOT *Design Manual* specifies that the "deep post" method should be used when installations occur beyond the 2-foot setback distance. (c) Testing by the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) found that guardrails installed on steeper slopes tended to "bend backward and 'ramp' the vehicle" instead of redirecting it, especially if the vehicle struck the guardrail at more severe angles; impacts at shallower angles (15 degrees) were more likely to redirect the vehicle. See *Section 5.6.2.2 – Slopes* in *AASHTO Roadside Design Guide*. 4th Edition. Washington, DC, page 5-47.

These conditions—including excessive lateral offset, reduced effective rail height, installation beyond the slope break, and placement on a nonrecoverable slope—are inconsistent with guidance contained in the FDOT *Design Manual* and can adversely affect guardrail performance during a crash.

A large arrow sign intended to alert westbound motorists of the left-hand curve was missing at the time of the crash. It had been damaged and displaced during a previous crash (occurring between June 2021 and May 2023) and had not been replaced by Palm Beach County. The absence of this sign likely reduced advance warning and visual guidance for motorists approaching and entering the curve.

According to planned improvements by Palm Beach County, reconstruction of the west curve on Hatton Highway will include installation of a new, stronger, and contiguous guardrail system along the curve. The proposed guardrail will be installed on a reconstructed shoulder, which will bring the guardrail height and orientation into compliance with the current design standards. The improvement plan also includes enhanced signage, installation of rumble strips, and restriping the lane markings throughout the curve.

2.3 Occupant Protection

The SUV landed in the canal on its roof and became partially submerged. The driver and eight passengers sustained fatal injuries due to drowning; the surviving passenger sustained serious injuries. The EDR of the seven-seat SUV and physical evidence indicated that only the driver and front-seat passenger were restrained at the time of the crash.[20] The side curtain and thorax airbags for the front-seat passengers deployed, but not the frontal airbags. No child restraints were installed, despite state laws that the five children in the vehicle be restrained with such restraints.[21] Further, there were too many occupants in the vehicle for the available seating positions and seat belts. The autopsy report indicated that several of the fatally injured passengers had sustained blunt force injuries; the cause of death for all victims was drowning. Although the SUV came to rest on its roof, survival space inside the vehicle was maintained.

Properly worn lap/shoulder belts and child safety seats protect occupants from striking people or objects inside the vehicle and from ejection during a crash. Importantly, properly worn seat belts also keep occupants in their original seating locations and protect occupants from blunt force injury. Postcrash, when additional

[20] Florida seat belt law requires all drivers, front-seat passenger, and anyone under 18 years old to wear seat belts. See Chapter 316 Section 614 – 2024 Florida Statutes | The Florida Senate.

[21] Florida law requires children (ages 5 and under) to be in a crash-tested, federally approved child restraint device or booster seat. See Chapter 316 Section 613 – 2024 Florida Statutes | Florida Senate.

hazards are present such as vehicle submersion in water, there is limited time for egress from a vehicle. Minimizing injury, including minimizing head injury to maintain consciousness and situation awareness during the crash through proper seat belt use, is critical to self-evacuation in challenging postcrash circumstances and increases time to aid others, such as small children, to egress.[22]

[22] For example, research on loss of consciousness (LOC) and its effects on crash survivors' ability to evacuate a school bus found that "LOC had a noticeable effect on the ability for occupants to self-evacuate. Occupants with an observed LOC were not able to self-evacuate, even if they regained consciousness post-crash." See K. Poland and others 2015, "A Continuous Video Recording System on a Lap-Belt Equipped School Bus: Real-World Occupant Kinematics and Injuries During a Severe Side Impact Crash," 24th International Technical Conference on the Enhanced Safety of Vehicles: Traffic Safety Through Integrated Technologies.

3 Conclusions

3.1 Probable Cause

The National Transportation Safety Board determines that the probable cause of the Belle Glade, Florida, crash was the driver's excessive speed into a curve that had an advisory speed of 20 mph, which resulted in a roadway departure, rollover, and submersion of the vehicle in water. Likely contributing to the crash were impairing effects of the driver's medical conditions and use of sedating medications. Contributing to the severity of the crash were the improper installation of the metal beam guardrail, insufficient seating positions and restraints for all occupants, and the non-use of appropriate restraint systems.

References

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NTSB investigators worked with the **Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office** and **Palm Beach County (Engineering)** throughout this investigation.

The NTSB is an independent federal agency charged by Congress with investigating every civil aviation accident in the United States and significant events in the other modes of transportation—railroad, transit, highway, marine, pipeline, and commercial space. We determine the probable causes of the accidents and events we investigate and issue safety recommendations aimed at preventing future occurrences. In addition, we conduct transportation safety research studies and offer information and other assistance to family members and survivors for each accident or event we investigate. We also serve as the appellate authority for enforcement actions involving aviation and mariner certificates issued by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and US Coast Guard, and we adjudicate appeals of civil penalty actions taken by the FAA.

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For more detailed background information on this report, visit the NTSB Case Analysis and Reporting Online (CAROL) website and search for NTSB accident ID HWY24FH012. Recent publications are available in their entirety on the NTSB website. Other information about available publications also may be obtained from the website or by contacting –

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