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## Computer stops city, and that's the fifth time

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A COMPUTER failure in the M5 East tunnel yesterday left tens of thousands of motorists trapped in a traffic snarl that locked up Sydney - the fifth time such a malfunction has shut the vital artery.

Since the \$800 million tunnel opened in 2001, the road has been roundly condemned as a planning disaster, overwhelmed by demand and filled by smog. Its inadequacy was best captured by a \$10 million commitment in the last federal budget to consider building another tunnel alongside it.

At 7am yesterday, the computer that controls the M5 East tunnel suddenly crashed. Within minutes, technicians in the tunnel operator's Arncliffe control room realised the emergency back-up server had also failed.

It spelt danger. With more than 100,000 motorists travelling through the tunnel each day, it meant there was no way to ensure that the rapid "deluge system", which automatically extinguishes a fire in the tunnel, would work.

About 7.10, the operators rang the Roads and Traffic Authority. The M5 East had to be shut immediately in both directions. It was not reopened for five hours, and the impact was profound.

Tens of thousands of peak-hour motorists heading to the inner city, the North Shore and the CBD - including the Premier, Morris Iemma - were stopped dead.

For Mr Iemma, it capped off a disastrous week: the failure of the Spit Bridge, which created traffic chaos on Monday night; 80 new bendy buses forced off the road over safety concerns; and a bruising Newspoll yesterday putting him behind the Liberal leader, Barry O'Farrell, for the first time.

The M5 meltdown follows four previous computer failures that have closed the tunnel since it opened. Relations between the Government and the tunnel operators, Baulderstone Hornibrook and Bilfinger Berger Services, have been uneasy.

Less than a year after it opened, the operators staged a breakdown in the tunnel in the afternoon peak - without informing the RTA. The exercise, carried out by a staff member who simply switched off their car's engine, resulted in bedlam, and in effect froze relations with high-level RTA officials.

Whatever goodwill was left has been steadily eroded by a succession of computer failures that have wreaked chaos on Sydney's road network. On February 1, 2002, just two months after it opened, a computer glitch forced the tunnel's closure for an hour before 6am to ensure the operating systems would operate properly. Eleven months later, it closed again for 45 minutes in the afternoon peak, because its lighting systems failed. On March 9, 2004, there was a combined power failure that required the full closure of the tunnel in the morning peak. And in December that year, the closed-circuit television systems failed, shutting the tunnel again.

Yesterday, drivers who could manage to turn around began diverting immediately, fanning the effect of the closure to already clogged routes such as the Princes Highway and Canterbury Road. Within an hour, much of Sydney's south-west became a snarl.

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The M5 is the gateway for much of western Sydney to the airport, the city and beyond.

One motorist, Kenny Tian, was trying to drive his son to school, but simply gave up. "We had been struggling for over an hour and a half to get out of the M5 from Bexley North, and my son had to take the train from Bexley North."

At 7.20, the Roads Minister, Eric Roozendaal, received a call. Having apologised only a day earlier for the Spit Bridge, he did so again yesterday afternoon: "I say to today's motorists caught in the delays that I understand their frustration. [But] the tunnel had to be shut for the safety of the public."

Asked whether he was tired of apologies, he replied: "Obviously."

The tunnel reopened just before midday with a "temporary terminal to override the main computer system". Another tunnel closure was scheduled overnight to allow the control room's mainframe computer to be brought back online. It would take several hours from midnight.

"An additional closure may also be required later in the week to complete these tests," said the RTA's spokeswoman, Sally Tindall.

Mr Roozendaal said an investigation would determine why the back-up server had failed, and he promised to make it public. "Private operators have clear obligations under the contract to maintain the tunnel and all of its systems appropriately," he said.

Ms Tindall said: "There are provisions in the M5 East contract for termination by the RTA in the event of a major default by the contractor."

But the tunnel operators were restricted from commenting under a clause in their \$14 million-a-year contract. It leaves all comment to the RTA.

In damage control, Mr Iemma summoned the RTA chief, Les Weilinga, for an explanation. Mr Iemma said he also demanded a technical audit of major roads, tunnels and bridges on all critical arterial corridors in NSW. "It's unacceptable that motorists heading to or from work can be delayed for hours by a simple mechanical or technical fault."

*This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2008/06/25/1214073342057.html>*