

Loss Prevention News

Provided by the Texas Municipal League Intergovernmental Risk Pool

Underground Hazards Associated with Excavation and Trenching Projects

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Excavation and trenching projects and the associated, unintentional strikes and damage to underground utilities are becoming a significant and unfortunate operating occurrence throughout public entity operations and cost public entities hundreds-of-thousands of dollars in damages each year. Moreover, the safety of the public and utility workers is being compromised because of “unknowns” that go hand-in-hand with these buried utilities.

As utility easements become more and more crowded, preventing damage to underground utilities has become increasingly challenging. Easements have become a spider web of utility lines, including electric, gas, telephone, fiber optic, cable TV, water, and sewer. At some locations, there may be additional national communication lines, major oil and high-pressure gas pipelines, as well as those services that may be presumed “dead” but are, in fact, fully functional or “live”.

That said, the ability to determine the physical location, nature, and depth of each underground utility is critical to reduce the risk and consequences of inadvertent damage during trenching and excavation operations.

Pre-design and pre-construction meetings to discuss the project scope and to collect key information, including underground utility types and locations, will aid in preventing future incidents. The following steps are provided to help ensure proper precautions have been taken to prevent an accident strike to a utility line.

- Pre-marking, commonly referred to as “white-lining”, should be performed prior to contacting the ‘one-call’ locate service.
- Contact the local/appropriate ‘one-call’ locate service to advise of the excavation and request a utility line locate.
- Review and clarify excavation plans and locations as the job progresses to help ensure locates are consistent with your plans.
- Collect and maintain documentation, including photographs of the site, prior to commencement of work, at the time locates are made, at the beginning of excavation, when uncovering any utility line, as work progresses, when backfilling, and during final restoration.



An emergency action plan should be developed and implemented in the case of an accidental strike. This plan should contain specific procedures for field staff to address their safety and the safety of the public. Procedures should be reviewed with staff on a periodic basis to ensure proper protocols are being followed and that no changes to the plan are warranted.

RESOURCES

Call Before You Dig (Dig Tess) is a free service that locates underground utilities. Use this service any time you plan to excavate. (800) DIG-TESS (344-8377). **Texas Excavation Safety System** operators are on duty 24-hours a day, seven days a week (excluding legal holidays). You may call up to 14 business days before excavating, but no later than 2 business days before excavating. The operator will ask you where, when, and what type of excavating is to be done. Keep your assigned request number for future reference. A locator for the various utilities will come mark their underground utilities at your site.

Texas Underground Facility Damage Prevention and Safety Act - The State of Texas **Underground Facility Damage Prevention and Safety Act** governs excavations and states that anyone that plans to disturb soil to a depth of 16 or more inches must contact a notification center before proceeding with their work.

The TMLIRP Media Library includes #719 - *Seeing is Believing - Safely Exposing Buried Utilities*. Refer to www.tmlirp.org or call 800-537-6655 and ask for the Loss Prevention Department.