

Excavations: Underground Utilities

There are a number of considerations to take into account when digging. Extensive planning should be done to ensure that workers who are entering a trench are protected. The same care and attention should be done to make sure those performing the excavations do not come into contact with underground utilities.

Underground utility contact can have devastating effects and could potentially lead to death. Coming into contact with underground utilities can also have serious impacts on the environment and surrounding assets. In 2017, bridge builders in North Carolina struck a main underwater electrical line while digging to secure bridge supports. The contact cut the electrical power to the Outer Banks, a popular tourist destination on the Atlantic coastline of North Carolina. Thousands of residents and tourists were evacuated, and an estimated 13 million dollars were lost in business revenue during the week of the power outage.

There are steps that can be taken to help avoid contact with underground utility lines and pipes during excavation operations. Excavation standards require employers to do the following before starting work:

Determine locations. Start by determining the location(s) of underground utility installations. This includes all sewer, telephone, fuel or natural gas, electric, and water lines. A common industry practice, is to call 811, the “Call Before You Dig” phone number, which helps to establish any underground utilities within the area where the excavation will take place. Call 811 from anywhere in the country a few days before the work will take place. The call will be routed to the local call center where they will ask about the location, contact information, and the type of work that

is being conducted. Utility companies with potential underground installations will be contacted about your intent to excavate and will send a qualified locator to mark the approximate location of the lines. In some cases, depending on the project size, marking the lines can take up to two to three days. Always confirm that lines have been marked or that lines aren’t in the path of work before starting.

Proceed with caution. Utility companies may not always be able to respond in a timely manner. If they cannot respond within 24 hours, employers may proceed with caution and use detection equipment or other safe and acceptable means to locate utility installations. If an approximate location of utility installations is found, employers should determine the exact location when the excavation approaches these approximate locations.

Maintain a safe dig. Keep workers safe by protecting or supporting any found and uncovered underground installations. In cases where the safest option is to remove the installation, make sure that the proper precautions have been taken and removal processes are coordinated with the utility owner before beginning the removal.

In any excavation operation, make sure to take the time needed to check what is beneath the surface. A mistake or oversight can be costly. 811 call centers are available to answer questions and the operators will walk employers through the process and expected timelines. For more information on staying safe during excavations see OSHA standards 29 CFR 1926.651 and 29 CFR 1926.652.

Astor, Maggie. (Aug. 4, 2017). *Outer banks business tally their losses after power is restored.* New York Times.

Additional Topics: _____

Notes: _____

Meeting Date: _____
Conducted By: _____

Attended By: _____

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