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your crew

Trench troubles

Shortcuts can be deadly

The accident: A subcontractor was removing old gas, storm and sanitary sewer lines on a site to prepare for new utility lines. A laborer was working in an 8-foot-deep trench on the abandoned gas line, which was a 600-foot-long high pressure line with a 10-inch steel casing. The worker climbed into the trench with a saw to cut through the gas pipe and the casing. The sides of the trench were not shored, and as the worker began to saw, the sides of the trench collapsed and buried the worker. He was pronounced dead at the scene.

The bottom line: Prior to beginning the work, the soil technician assigned to the project determined the soil was not cohesive, might have fissures and could be subject to vibration from traffic. The trench dug to remove the gas line was within a few feet of a heavily trafficked drive, which served neighboring businesses. When uncovering the end of the gas line, the excavator operator dug the trench with straight sides instead of sloped, and no shoring system was used.

Trench collapses are frequently fatal, as a cubic yard of soil can



Illustration by Don Lomax

weigh as much as a car. Fortunately, trench cave-in fatalities are often preventable. Taking the time to ensure the appropriate measures have been followed may save your life, or that of a fellow worker.

Safe work practices

The employees working for this contractor were working in trenches deeper than 5 feet, and therefore should have taken the appropriate safety precautions.

- Ask the site's competent person to evaluate if a trench is correctly shored, shielded, benched or sloped before beginning work.
- Excavated materials and equipment should be placed away from the edge of the trench.

There should be a minimum of 2 feet between the edge of the trench and materials or machines.

- Find the exit. Ladders or ramps should be provided for safe entry and exit. Never jump down into a trench.

Finally, resist the temptation to take shortcuts. In this instance, cutting through the pipe would have taken a matter of minutes, and the workers didn't want to spend time on the far lengthier task of installing a trench safety system. Remember, taking a shortcut will often leave you unprotected.

To download a tips card in English and Spanish on trench safety, visit http://www.osha.gov/Publications/trench/trench_safety_tips_card.pdf.

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Information for this Safety Watch was compiled from an accident report, the CDC's NIOSH Fatality Assessment and Control Evaluation program and OSHA Standard 29 CFR 1926.652(a)(1). It is meant for general information only.

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