

Fatality Narrative

Construction Laborer Killed When Trench Collapses*

Industry: Construction site preparation

Occupation: Laborer

Task: Locating sewer line in trench

Type of Incident: Trench collapse

Release Date: October 25, 2004

Case No.: 03WA05201

SHARP Report No.: 71-26-2004

On September 25, 2003, a laborer was working in a 7 foot 6 inch deep trench that had not been shielded, sloped or shored. The victim was attempting to find a sewer main when the trench failed and he was engulfed by soil. The 29-year-old laborer was employed by a subcontractor to install and tie-in, two side sewers, to an existing sewer main at a new multi-use apartment/retail complex. The owner of the company was operating a backhoe and had dug a 7 foot 6 inch deep trench in order to locate the existing sewer main. Due to a high water table the trench had begun to fill with water. Workers were draining the trench using a pump. The victim entered the unprotected trench by climbing down a ladder. He was using a steel bar to poke at the side of the trench to locate the sewer main when the walls began to fail. The victim started to climb the ladder but was hit in the back by dirt and knocked to the bottom of the trench where he was partially engulfed by soil. The company owner and an employee attempted to dig out the victim without success. A fire department emergency response team arrived at the scene and attempted to rescue and resuscitate the unresponsive victim. He was pronounced dead at the scene. The victim died of blunt force injury to the head.

Requirements/Recommendations

(! Indicates items required by law)

- ! Employees working in a trench or excavation must be protected from cave-ins by adequate protective systems, such as benching or sloping the sides of the excavation, or by placing a shield or supports along the sides of the excavation.
- ! A competent person must evaluate an excavation or trench to determine whether there is a possibility of employees being exposed to a cave-in. If there is evidence of a potential cave-in the competent person must remove exposed employees.
- ! The competent person must make daily inspections of trenches and excavations and protective systems as the work progresses.
- ! Water in a trench causes soil to become unstable, greatly increasing the possibility of a cave-in. Water must be removed or allowed to drain before work continues in a trench unless proper precautions are taken to protect employees.
- ! If water removal equipment is used, the equipment and operations must be overseen by a competent person.
- Precautions vary by the situation but a safety harness and lifeline may also be recommended, in addition to structural protection, when water cannot be adequately removed.

State Wide Statistics: This was the 58th out of 74 work-related fatalities in Washington State during the year 2003, and was the 9th construction-related fatality of the year.

This bulletin was developed at the Washington State Department of Labor and Industries to alert employers and employees in a timely manner of a tragic loss of life of a worker in Washington State. We encourage you to consider the above information as you make safety decisions for or recommendations to your company or constituency. The information in this notice is based on preliminary data ONLY and does not represent final determinations regarding the nature of the incident or conclusions regarding the cause of the fatality.

Developed by the Washington State Fatality Assessment and Control Evaluation (FACE) and Washington Industrial Safety and Health Act (WISHA) Programs at the WA State Dept. of Labor & Industries. For more information, contact the Safety and Health Assessment and Research for Prevention (SHARP) Program, 1-888-667-4277, <http://www.lni.wa.gov/Safety/Research/FACE>.