

Fatality Narrative

Helper Killed When Trench Collapses*

Industry: Excavation work
Occupation: Helper (wife of company owner)
Task: Measuring grade
Type of Incident: Trench collapse

Release Date: January 26, 2006
Case No.: 04WA08701
SHARP Report No.: 71-43-2006

On October 21, 2004, the wife of an excavation company owner was killed when an unprotected trench collapsed. The 41-year-old victim was helping her husband and others in his work crew with the excavation of a trench. The trench was being dug by an excavator in order to install a sewer line to a new house. The trench was about 8 to 10 feet deep and 3 to 4 feet wide. The victim was using a grade stick to take measurements in the unprotected trench. It is unclear whether the victim was standing on top of the trench or had entered it, when a portion of the trench wall collapsed and buried her up to her neck in wet soil. Unsuccessful attempts to free the victim were made by the work crew and then by emergency responders. She died at the scene from mechanical asphyxia.

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: sloping, benching, shoring or, shielding.
- ! A competent person must evaluate an excavation or trench to determine whether there is a possibility of employees being exposed to a cave-in.
- ! The competent person must make daily inspections of trenches and excavations and protective systems as the work progresses.
- ! If there is evidence of a potential cave-in, the competent person must remove exposed employees.
- ! Spoil piles and equipment must be kept at least 2 feet from the edge of an excavation to help reduce the potential for a cave-in.
- Workers should not conduct tasks near the edge of a trench. If it is necessary to work near the edge of a trench, appropriate fall protection should be used.

State Wide Statistics: This was the 81st out of 92 work-related fatalities in Washington State during the year 2004, and was the 17th out of 17 construction-related fatalities.

**This bulletin was developed at the Washington State Department of Labor and Industries to alert employers and employees of the 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. The FACE Program is supported by a grant from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). 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>.