

# Safe Excavation Starts with Awareness



Digging directly on top of locate marks is always an unsafe practice. Even minor inaccuracies or discrepancies in depth data could create a dangerous situation.



Be sure to limit excavation to the area covered by the locate request submitted to, and processed by, ON1Call.

It's been more than five years since the Ontario legislature unanimously passed Bill 8, the Ontario *Underground Infrastructure Notification System Act*, which requires owners of buried infrastructure in the public right-of-way (ROW) to register with Ontario One Call (ON1Call).

Bill 8 also mandates that excavators contact ON1Call prior to breaking ground. The fines for non-compliance can reach as high as \$500,000 for individual corporations. While most contractors today are aware of the requirement to call before you dig, safe excavation requires much more than this initial step. There's a long way to go in terms of education and awareness.

Although instances of utility damages across the province have decreased over the past decade, the latest Damage Information Reporting Tool, produced by the

Ontario Regional Common Ground Alliance, found that 39 percent of damages that did occur were the result of insufficient excavating practices.

Here are a few key steps to keep in mind in order to ensure compliance and prevent a potentially dangerous or costly situation:

**Plan ahead.** Contact ON1Call at least five business days before you plan to start construction works or excavation to arrange for buried utilities within your project area to be located and marked. If you need to locate utilities on private

property, contact a reputable locate service provider in your area. ON1Call manages utilities in the public ROW only. For large, complicated or unusual projects, arrange a pre-excavation meeting with the utility locator onsite.

**Wait for the all clear.** Make sure you receive a complete locate package for all utilities within your project site from ON1Call before proceeding with construction works. All utilities should be marked and you should be provided with documentation confirming completion. When you place a regular locate request, you can expect a response within five business days; emergency requests will be responded to within two hours.

**Respect the marks.** Once utilities are located and marked on your project site, there are a few best practices to keep in mind. For example, the excavator should carefully hand dig around the marks to

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the depth of the excavation. Never dig directly on top of the marks. This is dangerous. Even minor inaccuracies or discrepancies in depth data could create a dangerous situation. Be sure to limit excavation to the area covered by the utility locate request. If the limits of the project site change, submit an additional locate request through ON1Call. Furthermore, for many utilities, ground marks are considered valid for one month only, after which time they should be repainted.

**Never rely on assumptions.** Utility damages have been known to occur even when the utility has been accurately located, the work area has been marked and the marks are valid. How does this happen? Often it comes down to relying on assumptions. For example, in Ontario, a contractor was excavating along the westbound lane of a major corridor, when a force main was damaged, creating an emergency situation. Prior to excavation, the utility had been located, the work area had been marked, and the marks were still valid. However, the contractor made assumptions about the depth of the utility. He dug down four to five feet and when nothing was detected, he continued to drill, assuming that the force main was positioned at a depth that would not conflict with the excavation. Unfortu-

nately, the assumption was inaccurate and the excavator hit the force main.

**Assess qualifications.** Ask a few key questions of the service provider that will be locating utilities within your project site to ensure they are properly qualified. For example, what is the training program in place for field technicians? Does the company abide by a health and safety policy? What is its quality-management process? Does the service provider have experience successfully completing projects of a similar size and scope? What level of accuracy can be expected? Working with a qualified service provider will greatly reduce your level of risk.

**Communication is king.** Damage prevention is a shared effort. There are often many stakeholders involved, so communication plays a big role in ensuring safety. Make sure that everyone on your project team is briefed on the ON1Call process. When placing your locate request, be sure to provide ON1Call with as much information as possible. For example, the contact information of the person that will be excavating, when and where this will occur, the maximum depth of excavation and the method of excavation. Always follow up on the status of your locate request prior to proceeding with the work, and be sure to



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communicate the status to your team. Locate status requests can be checked online through the ON1Call website.

When it comes to safe excavation, awareness is key. The good news is that there are plenty of resources available to arm yourself with the knowledge you need to minimize risk. A good place to start is the Ontario Regional Common Ground Alliance website ([www.orcga.com](http://www.orcga.com)) where you can find best practice documents available for free download. Another helpful resource is the ESA/TSSA *Excavation Guidelines in the Vicinity of Gas Lines* which can be accessed from the Dig Safe website: [www.digsafe.ca/safety-guidelines](http://www.digsafe.ca/safety-guidelines). ■

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