

# It's a Jungle Down There. How Does One-Call Help?

by Walt Kelly

**B**oring a line parallel to known underground utilities is always a bit anxiety producing. You breathe a sigh of relief when the tool pops into the pit right where it is supposed to. Now for the pullback. Halfway back and you hear the "pop." Natural gas blows a cloud of sand and gravel out the hole. Equipment gets shut down quickly and one of the crew is on the phone to the gas company. Your gut churns as you try to decide whether to call 911 or not.

Will it blow safely into the air? Can the crew keep traffic and pedestrians safely away? Is it leaking into any basements where it will accumulate and blow up the building? Do we need to evacuate buildings? Will the press show up? Will you be on TV? Thinking of all the questions you are going to have to answer, your hand reaches into your pocket. There it is—the One-Call ticket. At least you called before you dug.

One-Call. How much security does that ticket give you? Are there things you can do to increase the security, to really minimize the chance of seeing your mug on TV?

Let's take a look at this incident in view of a model damage prevention program. While "One-Call" is the common name, making that one call is only a part of the whole process of preventing damage to underground facilities. It is important, but it's not the whole story.

There are four points of a model One-Call program:

- Mandatory membership by all facility operators
- Excavators must call the One-Call center
- Strong damage avoidance education program
- Swift, simple administrative enforcement procedure.

## Drilling Through Red Tape

Only about half the states have laws that require all facility opera-

tors to be members of the system. Seventeen states do not have mandatory membership at all, and at least nine have major exemptions such as the state Department of Transportation. That means you aren't going to get by with one call. Four states without mandatory membership even call their programs "One-Call." Makes you wonder about truth in advertising, doesn't it?

In about 45 states and the District of Columbia the excavator must inform facility operators of an intended excavation. However, in about 18 states, that call does not have to go to the One-Call cen-

ter, it can go directly to facility operators. Calling the One-Call center first is probably the best idea because it will tell you which operators it will notify. Then all you have to figure out is who else needs to be called.

There are many tricks of the trade when it comes to minimizing damage. Good education programs share those tricks. These programs cover topics such as: how you can make your notification in the least amount of time; what is the best way to describe the location of the dig site; where different types of facilities tend to be buried; how many of them are

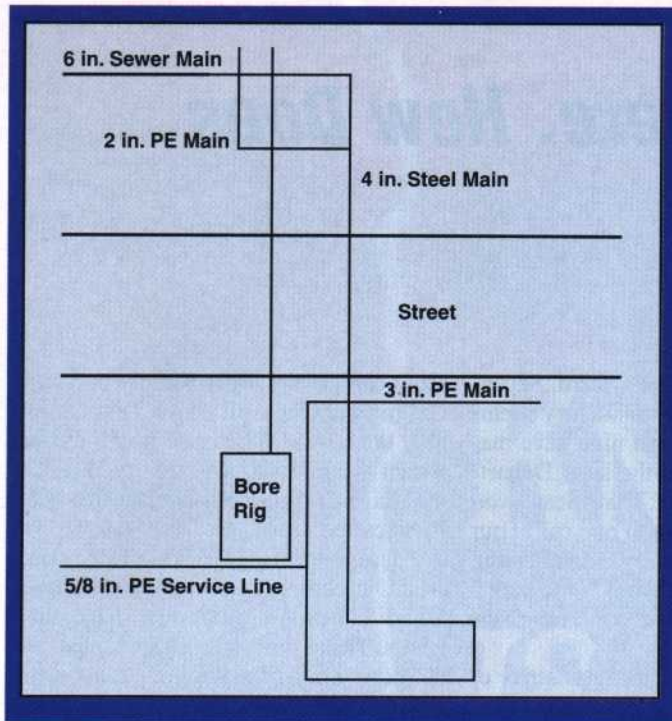
there; how big are they; who should you call when you can't find the facility under the marks; when you should suspect they are there when there are no marks; when is proper backfill material critical; how much and what type compaction should be used; what will happen when you hit different facilities; who should you contact in case of damage; what precautions should you take to prevent further loss; when should you try to stop a leak; when should you call 911; do you call 911 or the operator first; and how soon should you call your insurance agent?

## Enforcement

People who are involved in enforcement of damage prevention laws agree that most excavators and facility operators try to do the right thing most of the time, but are willing to cut corners when faced with time pressures or stiff competition. Most hits occur because people do not understand the significance of something they did or failed to do. When people understand the system, they have fewer problems. When they

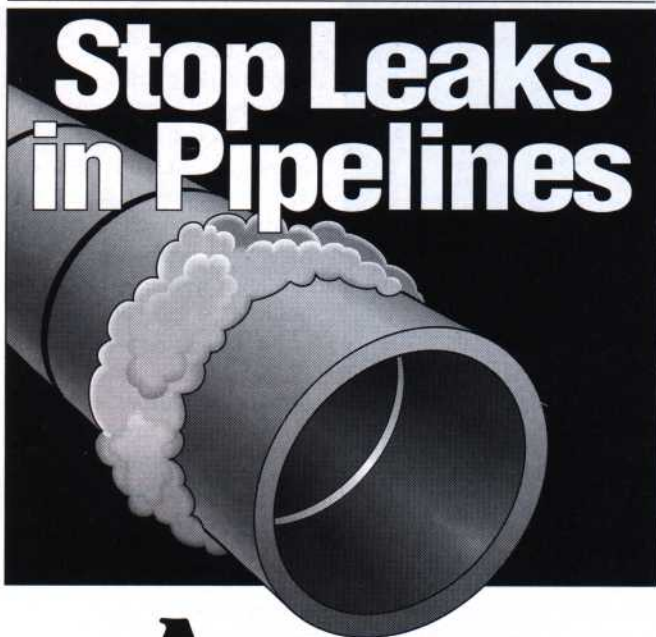


This drilling operator thought he only had to worry about gas mains across the street until he hit a 2-in. PE gas main. He even put three anchors within 4 in. of three gas lines, as this photo illustrates.



This diagram of an actual drilling site points out the many possible "hits" that contractors are faced with. Calling the One-Call center first is a smart way to navigate through the maze.

learn from an incident, they mistake a second time, especially if they received a visit



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from the utility. They seem to learn even faster if an enforcement officer comes by for a chat, or gives them a warning letter or fine.

Good administrative enforcement makes a level playing field for everyone. That is very important when most of the players are out of sight, underground. Everyone faces temptation, and it is easier to resist when you know the odds are good you will be caught if you mess up. It also keeps your competition in line.

Enforcement is something that is best done for excavators, not just to them. Excavators have a right to have the marks placed within the proper time. They have a right to marks placed accurately. They have a right to stay within the law.

That's right. Excavators have the right to say "no" when someone—especially a government agency—suggests or tells them to do their job in an unsafe manner!

Case in point: blind boring under a street with facilities to be crossed. The city says, "No potholing our nice new street." After several near-misses and three direct hits on gas mains in Oregon, the Public Utilities Commission sent a very stern letter to all government agencies informing them of the requirement to pothole, the liability they take on by prohibiting potholing, and informing them that the commission would take action through the Department of Justice on any agency that did not allow potholing. The commission then sent a letter to all utilities directing them to report "the names of those public authorities that are not in compliance with the Oregon excavation laws..." End of problem.

About 18 states have statutes that specifically require hand exposing of the facility before using power equipment near the facility. Other states have more general language. In answer to the "I don't want my street damaged" objection, the American

Public Works Association recently completed a study that said that properly filled street cuts do not affect the life of the pavement.

### Marking the Spot

Another area of concern for trenchless technology is the degree of accuracy of marks on major projects. The safest approach, again, is to call in your own location request and then pothole to verify the accuracy. If the marks were placed for design purposes to primarily show the existence of the lines, the information may be based on maps rather than accurate location efforts. In congested areas, the accuracy may be diminished by the other facilities interfering with the location devices. There is also a problem when you are unaware that there are multiple facilities or unexpected changes in depth of burial or presence of cable loops.

Even if the marks were accurately made and you are the second or third subcontractor on the site, the marks may have been destroyed by those before you. In general, relying on the general contractor to have the site marked does not meet your obligation to call. A few states say, "There is no such thing as a blanket ticket."

About 17 states have One-Call bills being heard. Most are trying to modify penalty and/or enforcement provisions or trying to get mandated membership by all operators.

In the next year, excavators can look forward to some centers accepting their location requests, being able to check on mark-out status on the internet and using GPS coordinates for specifying dig sites, especially in rural areas.

*Walt Kelly is a consultant and owner of Walt Kelly Enterprises, Inc., Winona, Minn. He is former director of pipeline safety for the state of Minnesota, where he had responsibility for legislation and enforcement of One-Call laws. Photo courtesy of Minnesota Office of Pipeline Safety*