



Preservation of Underground Assets: Who is Responsible?

By Arvid Veidmark III, EVP/Sr. Estimator, Specialized Services Co. (SSC)

DIGGING SAFELY

Going “green” has become a global environmental movement to insure the sustainability of our natural assets. While we consider these valuable resources critical to our long term survival, we don’t often consider the preservation of our underground utility assets in the same light.

It’s doubtful anyone really knows the true number of buried utilities here in the States, let alone globally. We do know that the average number of utility lines that are damaged each year is approximately 400,000 and rising, and with numbers this high it’s just a matter of time before we start experiencing more large scale disasters.

Filling the infrastructure hole

Today a gaping hole exists in the area of sound infrastructure management. The culprit is a lack of ownership due to an inadequate understanding of the importance of damage prevention. Twenty years ago we didn’t understand the impact our actions were having on our environment; now through education and implementation of policy we realize our responsibility and are taking action. Preservation of our underground resources is similar in that only through awareness can we work together to create better solutions.

One such solution is the **One Call System**, which has been in existence for more than twenty-years and currently plays a crucial role in damage prevention, especially here in the U.S. However, each program is operated independently, lacks central coordination, and is not supported on a global scale. As an example, I recently completed an auger bore project in the Virgin Islands for one of the largest oil refineries in the world. One Call was a completely new concept to the project managers. This is unfortunate but not uncommon.

We can’t afford to cut corners

Our current economy has not helped the situation. In an effort to make up for lost revenues, contractors are cutting corners. Boundaries are not being called in correctly, excavation areas are miscalculated, and often workers are not waiting for verification from facility owners. One Call centers have also been affected and are cutting back on personnel. As a result locators are doing twice the number of tickets per day.

Regardless of the economy, we as utility sub-contractors need to set an example for our peers. As the guys in the ground, we need to be diligent when



it comes to locating and record keeping, competently exposing and mapping all possible conflicts. Whether public or private, marked or unmarked, utilizing safe and effective surface and sub-surface investigation techniques. **Vacuum Technology** is an excellent example. Vacuum excavating can expose an underground utility without the risk associated with other mechanized devices or even hand digs. While there are costs involved they are minimal compared to possible loss of life and valuable resources.

Utility management is a serious topic that needs to be addressed at all levels, nationally and internationally. Thankfully trenchless associations such as the **Common Ground Alliance** are currently working hard to address important issues such as education and regulation. The bottom line is, however, that we, as a global community, all need to take responsibility and do our part to insure a sustainable future.



DIGGING UP MORE...

Contact the Author Arvid Veidmark, III is Executive Vice-President at Specialized Services Company. You can contact him at 602-997-6164 or by e-mailing him at arvid@sscboing.com