

Planning ahead key to safe digging projects

By Tabitha Kuehn, Iowa's Center for Agricultural Safety and Health October 21, 2024



It is important to carefully plan agricultural excavation projects and contact Iowa One Call or other state programs before starting.

Photo courtesy I-CASH

Combines are starting to become a more frequent sight as harvest season ramps up.

This is a special time of year. Farmers spend long hours in their equipment, support systems cook and deliver field meals, and grain trucks dot rural roadways across the state.

I always appreciate the hard work and beauty of this time of year, but — ever the overthinker — my mind also jumps to the activities that happen once crops are out.

Surveys start getting done on where your new farm pond might be, you might be taking on a new fencing project or planning out what fields need tiling. Tackling these types of projects requires all sorts of planning and taking the proper steps before excavating, such as contacting One Call when necessary.

Examples of digging projects that require contacting One Call include tiling projects, waterway projects, drilling water or irrigation wells, chisel plowing, deep ripping, digging fence posts and more.

Not all agricultural digging operations require contacting One Call. “Normal farming operations” including planting, harvesting, plowing, cultivating and replacing a fence post in an existing location are exempt. However, if you are unsure, it is better to err on the side of caution and call anyway.

Definitions of normal farming operations can vary from state to state, so if you are planning projects outside of Iowa, be sure to look up the requirements for the state in which you are working — or develop the good habit of calling before any digging to ensure precautions are always taken.

In Iowa, One Call must be contacted two working days in advance of the proposed digging project. Iowa One Call can be reached via phone, 811 or through iowaonecall.com.

The person who will be doing the excavating work is who should contact One Call. If you are doing your own work, you are responsible for contacting One Call and communicating the proposed digging project and location. If a contractor is hired to do the excavating, it is their responsibility to contact One Call to check for utility and gas lines.

The excavator is also responsible for “white lining” the proposed digging.

This means that the areas that are planned to be excavated need to be marked with white paint, stakes or other white markings. This is essential for showing the utility professionals where the proposed digging will be and ensuring that they check the correct areas for underground pipelines and utilities.

Hitting an underground pipeline or utility can be extremely dangerous for you, those around you or the environment. Striking an underground gas line can result in injury or death, damage to equipment, immediate or delayed loss of pipeline function, as well as high expenses such as fines, repairs and project delays.

Even a small nick or scratch on a gas line can compromise the protective coating and negatively impact the safety and effectiveness of the gas line.

Striking underground utilities can also have major consequences. Internet, phone services, electricity, water and more can be knocked out for you and your neighbors and may not be fixed for hours or days. Even worse, you or others may be hurt or killed from electrocution.

If you do hit an underground pipeline or utility when digging, contact the associated company immediately. Even if the line does not appear damaged, it is important to notify the company. Small scratches, dents and gouges can still cause major problems, and these need to be addressed as soon as possible.

It is important not to assume you know the locations and depths of utilities even if you think you know where they were installed or assume you won't reach their depth.

Naturally, dirt can move over time due to forces such as erosion. This can impact the depth and location of underground pipelines and utilities. Making these assumptions can put you and many others at risk.

Be sure to dig carefully, even after getting the all-clear from One Call. Operate machinery according to directions, keep machinery away from steep edges and be mindful of all markings set out by utility operators.

One Call is a free service for users, and the turnaround time for utility and pipeline location is quick. Within two to three business days, professionals will have assessed the site and marked areas with underground utilities and pipelines.

Protect your farm, your family and community by taking the necessary steps before you dig!

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