



Complacency & Trench Safety *A Rise in Fatalities*

Trench Protective Systems

Per OSHA, any trench 5 feet or deeper must have a protective system. The system used should be chosen based on the soil type, and the logistics of the dig.

Shield Systems – also known as trench boxes; protect the workers from cave-ins and collapses.

Support Systems – also known as shoring; support the sides of the trench and prevent cave-ins and collapse.

Sloping – method of excavating the edges of a trench at an incline away from the workers; angle of the slope is determined by the soil type.

Benching – similar to sloping, but excavated with a series of horizontal and vertical steps, similar to stadium benches.

OSHA Requirements

-4' Safe egress every 25' laterally from a worker

-5' Protective System MUST be in place

-20' Protective System designed by a professional engineer

In 2021, there were a total of 15 recorded trench fatalities. 2022 has seen 22 fatalities so far, and if the trend continues, will more than double the 2021 statistic. This begs the question, “What, in 2022, is different?” Why is there a 68% rise in trench-related deaths this year?

This question is tough to answer. More than likely there are several factors contributing to the rise of incidents. An increase in the frequency of trench work is one likely answer. However, that is not what OSHA is observing when responding to incidents.

For example, consider the following incident recently reported by OSHA:

On June 28, 2022, two workers, aged 20 and 39, suffered fatal injuries in Jarrell, Texas, when the unprotected trench more than 20 feet deep collapsed upon them as they worked. Trench shields, which could have saved their lives, sat unused beside the excavation.

So, what is going on? In one word, complacency.

Complacency is the false belief or feeling of safety and security that leads to a lack of awareness, lower standards of operation, and diminished focus on hazards and prevention of exposure.

What causes complacency, and how can it be combated?

Complacency, in its simplest form, is caused by success. Not the success of winning a game, or finishing a project on time and under budget, but the success of having zero safety incidents. In other words, complacency is the real-world expression of, “out of sight, out of mind.”

Combating complacency is simple, but it requires effort and consistency.

Standards – The employer must set the standards for employees to follow with regard to safe operations.

Training – Workers must know, and be able to recognize the hazards associated with trench work, and be able to correct them. Training must be conducted regularly, and reinforce the safety culture and standards established by the employer.

Enforcement – Employers must hold employees accountable, and enforce the standards set.

There is a fine line between being content, and being complacent. Employers must remain focused on continuous improvements, and not rely on past successes of not having a safety incident. In the end, each of us has a choice in whether or not we allow complacency to creep into our lives. Every day and every activity is a chance to evaluate our actions against the standards set, and choose to look forward and focus on continuous improvement.

*Image via www.ehstoday.com