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I'm sure we all agree that minimum standards for damage prevention efforts are necessary. However, thinking of them as evil in any way is bound to create lots of discussion.

How can they be evil? Well, I just had a BGO (blinding glimpse of the obvious) during a blizzard that was creating near white-out conditions. As I drove along a freeway with knuckles turning whiter by the minute, a pickup eased by me in the outside lane. The logo on the door belonged to a contract locating firm.

I wondered what the heck a utility locator was doing out in that storm. Any marks he would be putting down would be quickly buried in snow or blown away. When the excavator showed up after the storm, there would be no visible marks—a damage waiting to happen.

Then, it came to me. The locator was probably working to meet minimum standards. These standards are often incorporated into laws requiring lines be marked within a specified timeframe. If they aren't marked on time, then the facility owner can be fined, or at least be held responsible for any consequences. Maybe that guy was working on a deadline, trying to avoid a fine.

Over the years, I've seen reports on many damages to underground lines that happened even though everyone involved met the minimum standards for notifying, marking and digging. But, those minimum stan-

## Minimum Standards— A Necessary Evil

dards often aren't enough. If people are hurt or killed, because marks have been obliterated or blown away in the wind, that's evil by any measure.

When minimum standards are taken as gospel to be followed to the letter, evil can be the result. They tend to put people in a frame of mind that meeting the standards is all that is necessary, even when taking a few extra steps could prevent accidents and save lives. You can mark lines and meet the minimum standards, even when there is little likelihood the marks will still be there when the exca-

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vator comes to dig. But, hey, you've met the standards!

The excavator can wait the time prescribed by the minimum standards, then start digging even when there is a regulator for an unmarked gas line on the side of a nearby building, partially obscured by landscaping. He doesn't have to take time to look real hard for above-ground indicators, because he has the minimum standards for his defense.

These scenarios fit a lot of accidents that have happened over the years.

Obviously, it's a good idea to do more than just meet the minimum standards whenever possible or when obviously necessary. Those standards are not the end all/be all. Specific situations can differ on specific jobs, and minimum standards usually don't cover such specifics. By nature, they are broad enough to blanket the field, especially when they are incorporated into laws.

Sometimes those laws can be overly broad. I get a chuckle when I remember a situation that occurred many years ago near Flagstaff, Ariz. during one of that area's notorious snowfalls. A friend of mine was sitting in a roadside restaurant waiting for the snow to let up. Out the window, he saw a snowplow coming down the highway with its blade high above the road surface. There was plenty of snow, but the plow wasn't moving any of it off the road.

When the plow driver stopped at the restaurant for a coffee break, my friend asked if trouble with the hydraulic system was preventing him from lowering the plow. The driver said no, he just had to wait a few hours before his One-Call ticket became effective. Seems the Arizona One-Call law at that time contained a definition of "excavation" that was so broad that it covered snowplowing. So, the snowplowers had to wait the prescribed time before starting to dig/plow?

That law was changed rather quickly, partly because of the publicity the incident got in this magazine. I think we even used it as a cartoon at that time.

Maybe getting a laugh out of minimum standards helps put them into a safer perspective.

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