



A View From the Underspace

Dead or Alive?

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How can you tell an abandoned gas pipe from a live gas pipe? I once observed a gas company employee answer that question by loosening a cap on a pipe stub protruding from a basement wall. Yup, that pipe was a live gas pipe.

What if the pipe is one that has been uncovered during excavation? Is it safe for an excavator to assume a gas pipe is abandoned because the pipe was not marked while other gas pipes nearby were? Abandoned pipes are a fact of life for excavators. Usually, abandoned pipes are not marked.

Can you tell by looking if a gas pipe is abandoned? No, in fact you can't tell for a fact that it's even a gas pipe. Not too long ago a Chicago-area gas crew inadvertently tapped into an underground electric transmission pipe pressurized with oil to cool the cables. In 2005, a water crew tapped into an abandoned cast iron gas main mistaking it for their water main. Unfortunately, this was a fatal mistake. A live plastic gas line inserted inside the abandoned cast iron pipe was punctured and the leaking gas migrated into the basement of an adjacent house. Two women in the house were killed in an explosion after an activated light switch ignited the gas.

Here's how an abandoned gas pipe appears after an excavator has yanked it out of the ground. How did the excavator determine that this pipe was abandoned? Did the gas company make that determination after onsite analysis? Did the gas company check records and make the determination remotely? Or did the excavator assume the pipe was abandoned because there were plenty of yellow marks in the dig area but none over this pipe?

The circumstances surrounding every unmarked, uncovered pipe or cable are identical and that goes for the action of the excavators and utilities, too. Naturally, one approach for the excavator is to treat every pipe and cable uncovered as live until the owner of that facility confirms otherwise. But confirmations vary in their level of commitment. A declaration, "It's abandoned," spoken onsite means a lot more than a voice on the telephone saying the same thing. "It appears to be abandoned," is something a locator dispatched by the utility may say to the excavator. There is also the always helpful utility reply, "It's not ours," and the obvious excavator retort, "Well, who's is it then?"

The Department of Transportation's Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration produced a document in September of 2008 entitled, *Damage*

Prevention Assistance Program: Improving State Damage Prevention Programs. The purpose of this document is to provide "guidance to stakeholders for improving state damage prevention programs." The document "draws on the definition of effective damage prevention programs found in the Pipeline Inspection, Protection, Enforcement and Safety (PIPES) Act of 2006." The PIPES Act identified nine elements of "effective damage prevention programs."

Since *Underground Focus* produces nine issues a year and there are nine elements for effective damage prevention programs, I've decided this column will be themed according to the corresponding element. Element 1 from the PIPES Act is as follows: "Participation by operators, excavators, and other stakeholders in the development and implementation of methods for establishing and maintaining



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effective communications between stakeholders from receipt of an excavation notification until successful completion of the excavation, as appropriate."

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excavation than the problems associated with abandoned utilities. I cannot think of nor can I list all of the potential locating and excavating issues that result from the presence of abandoned utilities. But since the miles of abandoned facilities increase each year, it's safe to assume our problems dealing with abandoned facilities will increase in similar proportion.

Here are four facts to consider when dealing with what appears to be an abandoned pipe or cable:

- 1) You can't tell by looking if a pipe or cable is live or abandoned.
- 2) Utility maps and records have tremendous value in differentiating between live and abandoned pipes and cables.
- 3) Utility maps and records are not 100 percent accurate.
- 4) Only the utility company has the means to positively determine whether a pipe or cable is live or abandoned.

As efforts to enhance communication between operators and excavators go, so go the prospects of successfully dealing with the problems presented by abandoned facilities. Whether you're an operator or excavator, acknowledgement of these facts is crucial in establishing an effective program for dealing with the identification of abandoned facilities. **UF**

Publisher's note: Underground Focus has a history of creating products designed to enhance communications between operators and excavators. For 20 years, our Digging Dangers videos have been shown at excavator breakfasts, damage prevention meetings and other such industry functions. These videos capture the attention of viewers because of the sometime graphic nature of digging accidents. The just released Digging Dangers 20 attempts to bring to life excavation best practices, including a substantial presentation of an accident involving what appeared to be an abandoned pipe.

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