

I'm trying to think of what to write. I know what I want to say, but the words aren't flowing. ESPN is on the tube; and I've found it's easier to listen to someone else's words than to create ones of my own. Plus, I'm tired. I've traveled continuously for the last five months with my training work. I have also been to two industry conferences, produced a video and have engaged in a bit of expert witness work.

In these months, I reckon I have talked to over a thousand people who are involved with damage prevention. Some conversations were longer than others, but all of them were one-on-one conversations. At

places like the gas company in Providence, an engineering office in Houston and the convention center in Charlotte. I've talked with locators in Pittsburgh, Phoenix, Los Angeles and Indianapolis. I've spent time with people who head-up one-call centers, like Harry and Judy in Wyoming and Louise in Alaska. And I've spent time with people who talk to juries, insure excavators, run utility construction trade organizations, and bring oil and natural gas to the surface and put it in pipelines.

Hey, it's commercial time on ESPN and, low and behold, JM Eagle is running a spot. These guys make PE and PVC pipe that brings us gas and water, takes away

our waste, and provides our cables an easy pathway to our homes and businesses. A quick trip to their website finds that "JM Eagle is committed to making the world a better place, helping those who help and inspire others." Hey, how about providing some inspiration for tracing your underground water, gas and sewer distribution piping? That would make our damage prevention world a better place. Now, maybe this is a big concern to JM Eagle but, then again, maybe it's not. But now, for me, the words are starting

to flow thanks to the ESPN sales guy who closed the JM Eagle deal.

It's amazing how much plastic pipe goes into the ground without any tracing mechanism. And I mean today. Unless you're the gas company, I'm not aware of many laws that require that new, non-metallic systems to be traceable. Even if you're the gas company, I wonder if you have to actually test the tracer wire system at time of installation? Not if you do, but if you are required to do so.

I have been to places this year where gas systems installed since 1990 do not trace. Whole sections of main appear to have been installed without a tracing wire. It's there for two consecutive blocks and then vanishes for half a block. This is all the more amazing considering that the natural gas industry is the only distribution utility with federally mandated safety rules. Want to bet that if you are not required to make your system traceable that you just might not do it?

We have many states whose damage prevention laws require mandatory membership. But I wonder what pressure is on utilities to ensure and maintain traceability? Probably not much, I suspect. Whose job would it be to place that pressure on utilities? You'd have to start with the state agencies designated by damage prevention laws to enforce the legislation. But if traceability is not in the law, what can these state agencies do?

Hey, it's no secret that we can't trace a lot of stuff in the ground. The utilities know that. But just complying with the law does not mean that utilities are always doing the right thing when it comes to damage

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prevention. So, what is the right thing and why don't the utilities always do it? Well, many people say that damage prevention is really an exercise in liability avoidance. Furthermore, they claim that recouping the cost of damages from a locating company or excavator is more important to the utility than preventing the damage in the first place. I'm just not sure why utilities don't always do the right thing. For that matter, I'm not sure why excavators don't always do the right thing, either. I can tell you, however, that the utilities and their contractors constitute the largest percentage of excavators. So maybe it's fair just to ask why the utilities don't always do the right thing.

Well, for starters, this magazine's opinion of the right thing and the utilities' viewpoints may not be the same. So, for the record, here is this magazine's very short list:

### The Right Things:

- 1) New utilities are installed with tracing mechanisms and those mechanisms are tested at installation. This testing is performed with electromagnetic instruments.
- 2) Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) is utilized in an attempt to designate non-traceable utilities. Vacuum excavation is used when GPR does not work.
- 3) Utilities set-up programs that assist their customers in finding solutions to trace privately-owned utility lines.
- 4) Excavators utilize electromagnetic equipment to confirm markings placed by utilities and look for unmarked utility-owned and privately-owned lines.

And this, folks, is our list. Perhaps you have comments? As always, those comments can be sent to [mike@underspace.com](mailto:mike@underspace.com). We look forward to hearing from you. **UF**

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