



TACKLING TRENCH SAFETY

Manufacturers Discuss Current Statistics and the Importance of Protective Systems

By Giles Lambertson

Just when you thought trench worker safety was on an undeviating ever-safer course — BAM! — the dream of zero fatalities collapsed under a ton of dirt. That was the effect of the year-end OSHA report announcing that the number of trench deaths doubled in 2016 from the year before. Doubled!

Statistics can be misleading, of course, but this wasn't a case of experiencing two deaths in 2016 versus one in 2015. Twenty-three workers were killed last year and another dozen injured. While those are still good numbers

compared to 20 years ago when the United States was annually averaging 54 fatalities, it is a far cry from 2012 when deaths totaled just eight.

A positive spin on the increase might be that contractors are busier now than they were in 2012, but surely there were not twice as many excavations last year as in 2015. There must be another answer. Greg Shreenan at Trench Shoring Company suspects multiple deaths in one or more collapse incidents swelled the total.

“That could be one reason,” he says, though he stops

short of attributing the increase solely to it. “I would say that an increase really has to do with a state and how well it is doing with enforcement of state and federal OSHA regulations.”

Shreenan is in California, where he sees enforcement differ between one county and the next. “San Diego County is more of a safety-driven community because of the presence here of the Corps of Engineers and military bases. There is tighter compliance and higher expectation of performance here than in some other parts of California,” he says.

Shreenan calls it a difference in a local area’s “culture of safety.” Some communities, counties and states have a highly developed safety culture and others simply do not. The culture is largely determined by the local contracting community’s awareness, or unawareness, of the dangers of working below ground-level.

Gary Given agrees. “It boils down to education, especially at the small- to medium-sized contractor level,” says Given, northern California district manager for the United Rentals Trench Safety program. “The construction business is competitive, and jobs of all sizes are bid tight. Safety is not free. Nevertheless, the entire industry needs to be vigilant about educating everybody related to underground construction — contractors, owners, supervisors, workers, engineers, inspectors, even suppliers. It has to be an all-inclusive effort.”

Because safety does cost, investing in it in tight times is a major commitment for a small company. Such investment isn’t always easy to do and Shreenan is sympathetic to the position that small contracting companies find themselves in.

“Contractors with 50 employees or fewer are trying to do everything,” he says, “including managing safety. With all the regulations that exist, sometimes you can’t do everything. When you talk about a company you need to talk in the context of its ability to survive as a company, how to get a job done in a way that is profitable.”

He adds that he is not saying that safety requirements are too high, “but it is difficult to keep track of them all.”

A zeal to comply with the rules can, in fact, cause problems within a company. Mike Ross, national training coordinator at Efficiency Production, a leading trench shoring manufacturer, says it even happens at big firms. “Large contractors are very heavy on the safety side, but the overzealousness of safety officers can create an environment where a concern for safety steps outside its bounds and creates internal conflict. Then there is a rub between safety and production guys rather than a compromising spirit to get a job done safely.”

In the end, evaluating a site for hazards is not an office issue. It is a jobsite matter. Brett Sondergard, who is mid-Atlantic district manager for United Rentals Trench Safety, credits most employers with the best of intentions in regard to employee safety. “Most will go the extra mile when asked to do so,” he says.

But on-site decisions are something else. “The stumbling block is the ability of the workers in the field to assess a site and then request the best system for protection and production.” Sondergard says a hazard can’t be addressed if it isn’t recognized. “The most effective way for employers to overcome this is to provide OSHA-required competent person training from a firm that’s experienced with both regulations and available solutions.”

Trench Shoring Company’s Greg Shreenan credits an area’s “culture of safety” in helping to curb trench related incidents.



As a rule, employers who undergo trench safety training for themselves or their competent persons totally buy into safety. They periodically attend refresher safety courses and otherwise stay conversant about the new safety systems. However, their number is small. “The challenge lies in getting a larger percentage of construction workers involved in site safety education,” Given says.

And while it’s no surprise there are people out there who cut corners on safety, Shreenan says it doesn’t deter him from promoting safe trench practices in his classes. “I have no illusions I can change the world with my safety training class, but I can change it a little, one person at a time.”

One thing is certain: The increase in fatality in trench collapses isn’t because companies are renting or utilizing fewer pieces of safety equipment. “The reverse is true,” Given says. “Safety equipment rentals have increased. As construction companies wrestle with the costs of equipment ownership, they realize it’s more attractive to have the rental companies own the trench safety assets.”

Ross says that, other than when the economy first collapsed in 2009, Efficiency Production market totals have expanded every year. “And there are more outlets for safety equipment than ever before. In the last 15 years, there has been an incredible surge in companies whose only business is trench safety and production.”

“Is it a growing industry because everybody loves shoring?” Shreenan rhetorically asks. “No. It is a necessary tool for keeping people safe. We’re not just trying to sell or rent you something. We care about people in the trenches.”

Reducing trench collapse fatalities this year and every successive year remains the goal, and one that Given says is possible because that’s the direction the industry is headed.



Mike Ross at Efficiency Production notes that other than when the economy first collapsed in 2009, the company’s market totals have expanded every year.

“Construction site safety in general has evolved significantly over the last 20 years. When you stopped at a diner for coffee in 1997, it was hard to tell if the guy at the counter next to you was working at a construction site. Today you see reflective clothing and safety gear all over the place.

“Trench safety systems are on the same path, just not on the same trajectory. The industry still has a long way to go.”

Giles Lambertson is a freelance writer for *Utility Contractor*.

OXFORD PLASTICS SET TO INTRODUCE NEW ROAD PLATE AT NUCA 2017 CONVENTION

Every day, millions of people will drive or walk over — or maybe even around — heavy, noisy steel plate covers that have appeared on sidewalks and driveways for decades. Entrenched in our nation’s daily lives, they have created an unwelcome soundtrack to any busy urban work zone. With non-stop clattering across cities, the number of noise complaints received by Departments of Transportation increases in direct proportion to the number of steel plates installed at any given time.

To remedy this problem, Oxford Plastic Systems has been supplying its trench covers and road plates for more than 30 years. Popular with util-

ity firms, these innovative products are particularly successful in allowing the temporary re-opening of roadways during the rush hour to reduce traffic delays. Molded from a single piece of glass-reinforced composite and much lighter than traditional steel plates, the Oxford Plastics Trench Covers — deployed worldwide for the past decade — are making street works easier and safer. The latest addition to the Oxford Road Plate range is a 3-ft cover — engineered specifically to meet the demands of contractors across North America.

“Following the success of our 15/05 Road Plate, we recognized that utili-

ties, construction and street works contractors were increasingly required to cover wider trenches,” says Peter Creighton of Oxford Plastics. “Traditional solutions are costly and cumbersome, so we have introduced the 23/05 Road Plate to deliver the same benefits to larger excavation projects. Based on our proven 15/5 design, the new Road Plate can withstand a 97,000-lb vehicle over a 3-ft wide trench or a 4-ft trench in pedestrian applications.”

The new Road Plate will launch at NUCA’s Annual Convention and at CONEXPO. For more information, visit www.oxfordplasticsusa.com or call 800.567.9182.

A photograph showing construction workers in high-visibility vests and hard hats installing a large, yellow and black composite road plate over a trench. The scene is at night with construction lights and orange traffic cones visible in the background.

**NEW
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of Modular
Composite
ROAD PLATE
Releasing
Spring 2017**



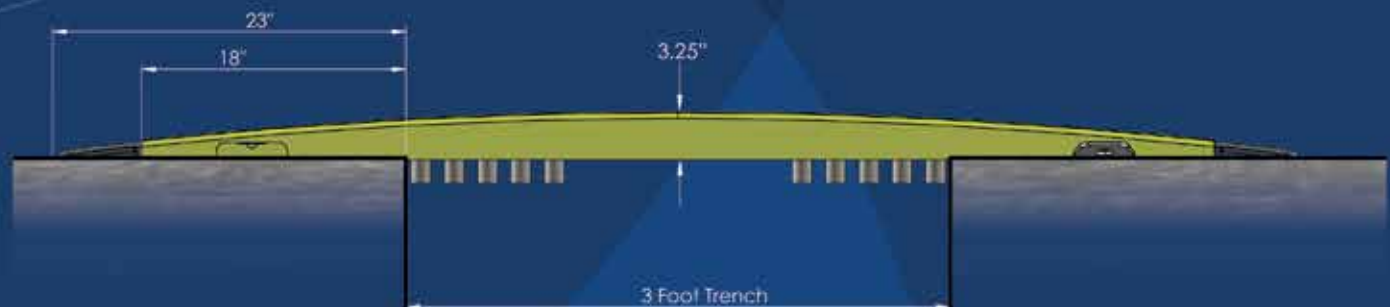
CUSTOMERS SAY IT BEST...

"I came across Oxford's **Composite Road Plates** in an industry publication & thought they would be a **great fit for a National Grid project** where we were burying power lines.

The project required trenching across driveways and cross streets in a residential development. **Oxford's plates can be handled manually**, allowing us to run smaller machines.

Combining that with how much **quicker & safer Oxford plates are to set**, you end up with a **huge cost saving.**"

Mike Hevey, PE, J.H. Lynch Construction, RI



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