ONE MORE SCOOP

One More Scoop is a monthly column that examines issues involved in the prevention of damage to underground facilities. Each month, industry leaders give their views on a specific topic. This month, our panel **Walt Kelly**, a consultant in underground facility damage prevention; and **Ron Peterson**, president of S.E.E. Underground Technologies and Consulting.

This month, our panel of industry leaders discusses whether there should be a call for testing of tracer wire at installation.

Ron's View

I would hope that everyone can agree that all nonmetallic underground facilities should be accompanied by a tracer wire system to allow for the location of the facility through the use of electromagnetic locating systems. For about as long as I can remember, the buzz around the industry has been that new technology was out there that would be able to locate any facility regardless of its construction. Ground penetrating radar was one possible solution. While effective in some areas, GPR is dependent on soil conditions and is not 100 percent effective in many parts of the country. So until this new technology hits the market and is proven to be effective, we must depend on tracer systems to find these sensitive lines.

It was great to see installation standards discussed in the "*Deeds*" article in a previous addition of the magazine. This is a great start and hopefully the industry will work toward adopting standards such as these. One key issue in the standard was to keep the tracer wire with the facility and not just "floating" around in the vicinity of it. This should allow for more accurate locating as well as preservation of the tracer wire itself.

Testing the system is another positive step in the process. Just "throwing" some wire in the ground with the pipe is not enough. A thorough test of the tracer system at the time of installation is a way to insure a properly functioning system. Deficiencies can be found at this time and repaired at minimal cost to the owner. Once the system is active, every locate becomes a test of the system. Communication lines should be established between the locator, whether in-house or contract, and the responsible department to identify and correct issues with the system.

Another issue is education. Many contractors are not aware of the implications of a cut tracer wire. One utility company that I know attends the One Call excavator breakfasts in its area. A company representative takes five minutes to talk about tracer wire systems. In addition, the company provides repair kits to any contractor that wants them as well as a phone number for the contractor to call if a tracer wire is damaged or cut. The company will repair the wire at no cost to the contractor as long as he has called in the damage. Since the inception of this program, the utility company has seen a dramatic reduction in cuts to its tracer system. Early on, no calls were reaching the field. What the company found was that it had not educated its dispatch staff as to the importance of these calls. Dispatch did not pass on these calls because they were "just wire breaks." After a quick training session, the process quickly took off. The utility company sees very few issues with its tracer system.

Tracer systems are a critical part of our nonmetallic utility infrastructure. By combining proper installation, testing and education, we can insure that these systems continue to be a valued part of the damage prevention process.

Walt's View

This month's question about testing locate wires had the potential for a lot of different opinions,so I contacted a number of industry leaders for their opinion. Here are some of the responses.

Municipal official: "If we follow procedures, it will work, so why test it?"

Subsurface utility engineer: "The short answer is YES, unless the utility owner opts to survey its facility to third order accuracy and makes those records available to the public when needed for a locate purpose."

Contractor association executive director: "Of course they should, it would be negligent not to. I find it frustrating when an owner/operator avoids simple processes and procedures to protect his plant, yet expects all other stakeholders to work around the results of their conscious decisions to avoid operational responsibilities."

Another contractor executive director: "In today's litigious environment, the cost of being liable for damages just ONCE as a result of NOT testing would surpass the costs of routine testing."

One-Call center public relations director: "If I test the wire then I would be required to fix it and that just isn't going to happen so no one tests it. End of story."

Canadian gas company manager: "We also started a practice several years ago of checking all tracer wire with a continuity tester as part of our installation process. The crew will then locate the portion of tracer wire with the damaged coating and repair it before leaving the site."

Excavator training specialist: "…Yes, testing of locating systems should be required. Thinking in terms of locating devices, one would not attempt to locate with a hand held locating device that does not work. In that case, the device would be recalibrated or discarded for a working unit. … the in-ground systems should be treated the same way."

Pipeline safety official: "My recommendation would be a creation of best industry practices to address the materials used such as coatings, CP and mechanical fittings which would better serve locating wire quality and longevity. Testing or periodic testing would help, but to a lesser benefit and would also be less cost effective than doing it right the first time following best practices standards. The ultimate quality control would have the system installed to the standard and the tested for confirmation."

Benjamin Franklin's saying, "a stitch in time saves nine," might just be appropriate today. UF

Correction—

In the April 2008 column "One More Scoop," it was incorrectly reported that gas lines have had to be locatable since 1993." It should have read 2003