

News Column

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Safety first when planning deep tillage or earthwork: Call before you dig!

After harvest, many producers might head to the field for deep tillage such as ripping, or to make earthwork repairs around the farm. A few days before you want to start these activities, it's worth a call to 811 for your safety and to prevent expensive damage to underground utilities. The website, <http://call811.com>, has easy-to-follow instructions for requesting this free service and detailed information concerning why you need to know what's below.

A video produced by Marathon Oil tells the story of a farm family and their close-call with a pipeline when installing tile drains. The landowner knew where the pipeline entered and exited the field, and they assumed the pipeline was straight— it wasn't. Watch this 6-minute, eye-opening video for the whole story; <https://youtu.be/oe-iknpYzF8>

There are over 2.6 million miles of buried pipeline alone in the U.S. and new pipelines are being installed each year.

Many overlook the complex network of pipeline systems below the topsoil. Pipelines of all ages, sizes, shapes, and content can be found under the soil surface of rural America. Disturbance of the soil profile is necessary on occasion in both crop and livestock production. Whether the task ahead of you is tillage or fence installation, safety should be your number one priority.

Plan where you will conduct your work and utilize your state's One Call system (811) to have public pipelines or utilities in the vicinity marked. This process is usually completed within 2-3 business days of your call, and is a free service.

Deep tillage methods present more risk to pipeline safety compared to many farm implements. Two tools in this category are the disk ripper (12-16 inches) and the inline subsoiler (15-20 inches). A disk ripper is used for benefits in erosion control compared to the moldboard plow and the subsoiler is used to break up compaction. Another consideration that should not be overlooked is installing terraces, doing maintenance and rebuilding of terraces.

If you use, or plan to use, these tools, you should know if and where any utilities lay on the property and take the time to communicate with the utility company through the 811 service.

If you are using a tool to break up compaction, consider that both erosion and compaction can result in the pipeline being closer to the surface than expected.

Installing fence posts for livestock systems often requires using an auger and fence post driver to secure the posts. Since the depths are greater than 12 inches, this activity requires a call to 811 for both contracted fence companies and landowners alike.

State laws generally prohibit the use of mechanized equipment within 18-24 inches of a marked utility. If you must dig near the marks, hand dig to expose the facility. For gas and oil pipelines, use contact information for those companies provided by your one-call center, for further assistance.

It is easy to take for granted our assumed knowledge of where we think pipelines are located. Whether your recollection of pipeline location comes from your memory, a marker, or a map, never assume the location of a pipeline in an area where you are disturbing the soil profile. Soil type, farm topography, production practices, and weather can all change our perception of pipeline location.

Remember to keep safety as your top priority, know what's below, and call before you dig.

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