



November 2018
Acting on Recognized Hazards

The following is a personal experience from your Safety Coordinator.

While at a work location conducting a crew observation. I witnessed an excavation wall collapse (also known as a cave-in).

The excavation appeared to be safe. The soil type was about one foot black dirt top soil and yellow clay in the remaining depth of the excavation.

Crew had completed one of two splices in the trench. The trench was approximately 25 to 30 feet long. A crew member was standing in the trench using spade shovel to loosen dirt from trench sidewall to put under a splice for support during backfilling.

As the crew member was removing dirt from sidewall of excavation, I noticed that a fissure (or crack) was developing. I mentioned to crew member that it looked like the excavation wall could collapse because every time he shoveled dirt from sidewall the fissure increased.

The crew member got out of trench when he felt the splice was supported enough. Then, with a little coaxing with a shovel while standing on the ground, the trench collapsed. Based on where employee had been located while putting dirt under the splice for support, the collapse might have missed him – if it did hit him it would likely have caused some injuries. If the collapse had occurred while the crew member was on his knees installing the splice, the injuries would likely have been much worse.

This was a close call where fortunately the employee had plenty of time to get to a safe location.

Here is the disappointing part of this near miss. Both the employee and I recognized the potential hazard for some time, but neither of us thought immediately to have the employee get out of the trench. I can't explain why, since I continually train and preach on excavation safety. I think we both felt safe in regards to the time before the trench would collapse and the location of the employee. That is a disappointing excuse for not responding to a recognized hazard.

No one can predict the outcome of a potential hazard. We should have reacted immediately. I think this is a good opportunity to learn from on recognizing hazards and how best to react.

