

Worker Drowned After Excavator Broke Through Ice

Incident Date: March 18, 2019 / Location: Winfield, AB / Industry: Construction



AI Teaching Illustration. Cutaway reveals the hidden water hazard. Ice thickness, depth and crack pattern are conceptual, not measured case details.

What Happened

An experienced operator was assigned to clean sloughed banks at a grazing reserve dugout. The pasture manager explained the work, watched for about half an hour, then left. The operator continued alone. Snow covered the unmarked dugout; its size and depth were not recorded.

When the manager returned late that afternoon, only the excavator's boom remained above the ice. The machine had broken through and submerged. Emergency services were called. The excavator was recovered early the next morning, with the operator inside the cab. The worker had drowned.

Why This Became Fatal

The ice failed beneath the excavator, submerging the cab and operator. Snow concealed the water surface, and the dugout was unmarked. The worker was alone when the incident occurred. The report does not establish the exact time of the breakthrough or an opportunity for escape.

NEVER FORGET.

LET THEIR STORY PREVENT RECURRENCE.

What Safe Looks Like

Identify hidden water and keep equipment on verified ground.



1 Know the Ground

Locate water bodies and confirm the route before moving.

2 Exclude the Hazard

Mark boundaries; keep equipment off unassessed ice.

3 Plan for Help

Set risk-based contact intervals, response triggers and rescue arrangements.

AI Teaching Illustration. An off-ice work plan; no safe ice thickness is implied. **LSR link:** Ground Disturbance. Working-alone controls also apply.

Investigation Outcome

Following a May 13, 2020 enforcement review, OHS determined that **prosecution or an administrative penalty was not appropriate** in the circumstances. The investigation closed April 12, 2023. The report describes no conviction or penalty and does not identify a specific employer corrective-action program.

Talk It Through with Your Crew

- 1 Where could snow hide ponds, ditches, weak ground or water on our sites?
- 2 How do we verify equipment routes and communicate no-go areas?
- 3 If someone missed a check-in, who would respond, and how quickly?
- 4 Would you stop or refuse travel when ground support or the route is uncertain?

SAFETY COMES FIRST.

Your Right to Refuse – Alberta. You may refuse work you reasonably believe presents an undue hazard: a serious and immediate threat. Promptly report the refusal and reasons to your employer or supervisor. They must investigate. Contact Alberta OHS if unresolved. Take reasonable care not to endanger others. You are protected from reprisal.

Sources: [Alberta OHS investigation F-OHS-165779](#), pp. 2-6; summary completed April 12, 2023. [Alberta ice safety](#), [Working alone](#), [Alberta refusal guidance](#). Prepared October 19, 2026. LSR links are learning associations, not findings of a breach.