

Worker Caught in Excavation Collapse

Incident Date: September 1, 2020 / Location: High Level, AB / Industry: Construction



AI Teaching Illustration. The red area marks the wall that failed. Shown before collapse; layout and scale are schematic, not an exact reconstruction.

What Happened

A plumber and apprentice were installing a septic tank behind a mill office. The excavation was 6.7 metres deep with vertical sides. The excavator operator told the supervisor the sides needed cutbacks. Workers nevertheless entered, prepared the bottom, then climbed out while the tank base was lowered.

They returned to fit the next section. As the plumber bent over the concrete rim applying sealing tape, the wall behind the worker collapsed, pinning them against the tank. Emergency crews extracted the worker, who later died in hospital.

Why This Became Fatal

Workers entered a deep excavation without shoring or cutbacks to stabilize the soil. The operator's warning did not lead to protection before entry. Soil movement trapped the worker against the concrete rim. A signed hazard assessment and access ladder did not control the collapse hazard.

NEVER FORGET.

LET THEIR STORY PREVENT RECURRENCE.

What Safe Looks Like

No entry until the excavation is protected and conditions are confirmed.



1 Protect Before Entry

Use suitable shoring or cutbacks, designed for the soil and depth.

2 Inspect and Reassess

Stop for sloughing, cracks or changed conditions; reassess.

3 Control the Work

Confirm permits, locates, safe access and an emergency plan.

AI Teaching Illustration. A pre-entry hold point, not a shoring design or permission to enter. **LSR links:** Ground Disturbance; Line of Fire.

Investigation Outcome

On December 9, 2021, **Northern Services pleaded guilty** to failing to stabilize the excavation by shoring or cutting back. The court ordered **\$360,000 to Northern Lakes College** for industrial safety training. Other charges against the company and all charges against the individual defendant were withdrawn. Withdrawal is not a conviction.

Talk It Through with Your Crew

- 1 Where do we enter excavations for tanks, services, repairs or inspections?
- 2 Who confirms the protective system is suitable before anyone enters?
- 3 What would we do if an operator or crew member raised a collapse concern?
- 4 Would you stop or refuse entry if protection or ground conditions were 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-219500](#), pp. 2-8; summary completed May 12, 2022. [Alberta conviction record](#). [Alberta refusal guidance](#). Prepared October 19, 2026. LSR links are learning associations, not findings of a breach.