

Worker Drowned After Excavator Slid into Water

Incident Date: June 6, 2021 / Location: Aurora Mine, AB / Industry: Oil Sands



AI Teaching Illustration. Highlights bank failure and submersion exposure. Machine position, soil section and failure sequence are schematic; the incident was unwitnessed.

What Happened

A dewatering crew was building a level pump pad and berms beside a water-filled gravel pit. The specific pump work plan had not yet been developed. A bucket push-test made the ramp appear stable, although part of its soil was soft, sandy or loose.

A team leader continued placing material with an excavator while another operator moved aggregate with a dozer. The ramp's south bank sloughed. The excavator slid down the embankment and toppled, submerging its cab in sand and water. The other operator discovered the machine and called for help. The team leader drowned.

Why This Became Fatal

The ramp's over-steepened slope was unsafe for excavator access. A firm-looking surface and bucket push-test did not establish safe ground support. The bank failed under the work. The machine had no contributing defects, and its escape hatch and glass breaker did not prevent the fatal outcome.

NEVER FORGET.

LET THEIR STORY PREVENT RECURRENCE.

What Safe Looks Like

Verify the ground and work plan before heavy equipment approaches water.



1 Assess the Ground

Confirm soil, slope and load capacity with competent input.

2 Define Safe Access

Set approved routes, setbacks and operating positions.

3 Prepare for Emergency

Plan communication, escape and water rescue before work starts.

AI Teaching Illustration. A planning hold point; shown distances and machine position are not an operating design. **LSR links:** Ground Disturbance; Line of Fire.

Investigation Outcome

On April 4, 2024, **Syncrude Canada pleaded guilty** to allowing the worker to operate on an over-steepened ramp. It was ordered to pay **\$390,000** toward excavation-safety guidance and a field app. The report also records training and a checklist addressing perpendicular track orientation around water. Equipment positioning does not replace safe ground support.

Talk It Through with Your Crew

- 1 Where do we work near water, embankments or ground with uncertain support?
- 2 Who verifies that the ground can support our machine, load and work position?
- 3 What would make us stop when ground looks firm but its condition is uncertain?
- 4 Would you refuse access until the route, setbacks and rescue arrangements were confirmed?

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 OHS-249224](#), pp. 2-8; summary completed July 4, 2024. [Alberta conviction record](#). [Alberta refusal guidance](#). Prepared October 19, 2026. LSR links are learning associations, not findings of a breach.

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