

Worker Struck by Pipe Wrench

Incident Date: November 17, 2023 / Location: Near Drayton Valley, AB / Industry: Oilfield Services



AI Teaching Illustration. Arrow shows the wrench's potential backspin path; inset depicts stored torque. Layout, scale and worker position are conceptual.

What Happened

A field operator was investigating a well with no flow. Believing downhole rod connections had separated, the worker used a 24-inch pipe wrench on the polished-rod clamp to tighten them. The pump-jack motor was off and its brake was applied, but turning the rods built up torque.

When that torque overcame the worker's hold, the rod string backspun and the wrench struck the worker, causing fatal injuries. The operator was alone, using a monitoring app, and had called the supervisor for help. Investigators found the connections intact and the downhole pump blocked with sediment.

Why This Became Fatal

Stored torsional energy remained a hazard even with the motor off and brake applied. Turning the rod string added torque until it released through the wrench. The worker was in its path. Electrical shutdown and a working-alone app did not control that mechanical energy.

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What Safe Looks Like

Identify and control stored energy before manipulating the rod string.



1 Assess All Energy

Include rod torque, pressure and mechanical movement.

2 Stay Clear

Keep people outside potential tool and rod movement paths.

3 Stop and Get Support

Use an approved method and competent help before manipulating rods.

AI Teaching Illustration. Work is on hold: motor lockout does not release rod torque. **LSR links:** Energy Isolation; Line of Fire.

Investigation Outcome

OHS reviewed enforcement on **April 18, 2024; no charges were laid**. Ricochet Oil suspended rod-string movement operations, changed working-alone check-in arrangements, developed task hazard assessments, hired safety support and strengthened supervisor training and competency management. These are reported corrective actions, not a court sentence. The summary was completed May 8, 2024.

Talk It Through with Your Crew

- 1 What stored energy could remain after we switch off a motor or apply a brake?
- 2 How do we verify a fault before trying a method that may add torque or pressure?
- 3 Where would a wrench, rod or other tool move if our grip or restraint failed?
- 4 Would you stop or refuse the task until a safe method and competent help were available?

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-300651](#), pp. 2-7; summary completed May 8, 2024. [CCOHS hazardous-energy control](#), [Alberta refusal guidance](#). Prepared October 19, 2026. LSR links are learning associations, not findings of a breach.

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