

Get the dirt on danger below the ground



For Starters

By CHERRY BRIESER STOUT

If you're a typical farmer, the soil is the source of your livelihood. You know the most productive parts of every field, as well as every wet spot.

However, the soil harbors more than nutrients for your crops. It harbors underground gas, oil and water pipelines, as well as electric and telephone services that affect our lives above the ground.

When farming practices — such as deep tillage, tiling, construction of waterways, terraces or even setting a fence post — interfere with an underground service, it can be very dangerous or costly.

Many farmers have had close encounters of the unwanted kind with util-

ities. Some pay the ultimate price. My farm family became all too aware of the risks of overhead power lines, when my brother was electrocuted while on top of a grain bin in 1988.

When occupied with a farming task, it's hard to be alert to all the dangers above the ground. It's an even greater challenge to recognize dangerous situations below the ground.

I recently met Ray Muhs, a damage prevention manager for JULIE in southern Illinois, who shared some

scary stories of near misses between farmers and underground pipelines on their farms.

JULIE stands for Joint Utility Locating Information for Excavators.

A few years ago, a northern Illinois farmer was doing deep tillage and scratched a pipeline. "He came that close," said Muhs.

Another farmer near Cairo was deep ripping a field at 22 inches. "I know of a natural gas pipeline in the area that's less than 20 inches," Muhs said.

Close calls

As farms get bigger and bigger, and tillage gets deeper and deeper, the chances of hitting a pipeline become greater and greater. "If you punch a hole in a pipeline the size of a pencil, it could be fatal," added Muhs. "I worry about the life of a farmer, but it's a lot more than that." Puncturing a pipeline and discharging thousands of barrels of oil out onto farmland could pose an environmental catastrophe.

Most pipelines were installed in the 1950s by federal mandate. The law doesn't specify a depth for pipelines, but states that it should be deep enough to not be in conflict with any tillage operation. Five decades ago, deep-tillage tools and deep rippers were not invented yet, said Muhs, noting that moldboard plows only went 6 to 7 inches deep.

Over the decades, erosion has also altered the lay of the land, putting some pipelines closer to the surface.

Times have changed

The forces of Mother Nature, modern farming practices and manmade threats such as terrorism have companies keeping closer tabs on pipelines. If a pipeline runs through a farm, a pipeline representative has to meet with a farmer every two years.

Especially when a change is made in tenants, a farmer may not know where a pipeline or fiber optics cable runs through a farm, said Muhs.

Along with deep tillage, tiling is another operation the merits a call to JULIE before you take equipment to the field.

Last fall, a tiling contractor working near my house took out phone service to the neighborhood when his tile blade hit a fiber optics cable that ran a couple feet out into the field, instead of along the road ditch as marked. Good thing for the contractor that JULIE was called first.

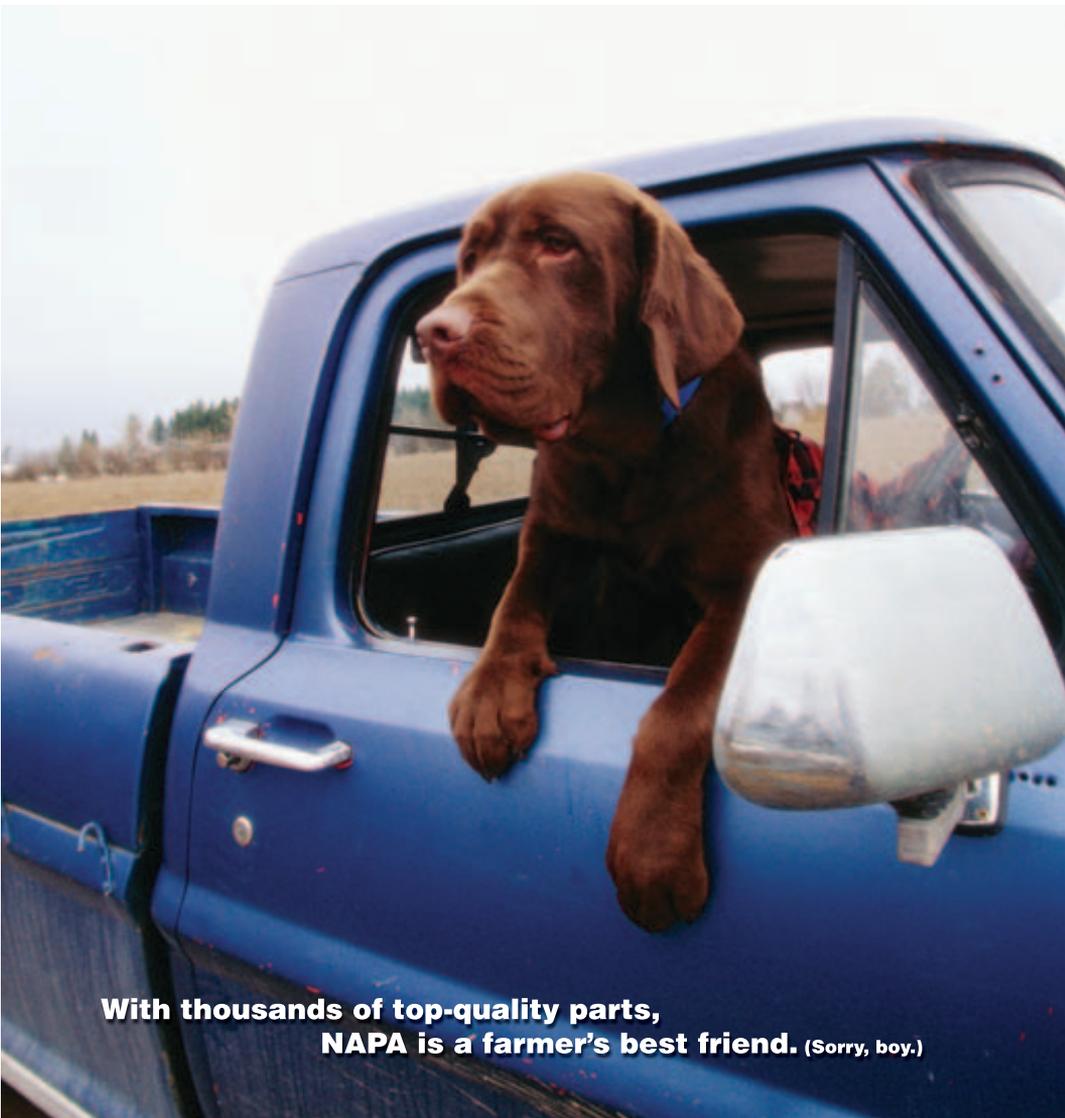
"If you hit a fiber optics cable, it can be a huge cost," said Muhs, who used to work on fiber optics with AT&T. "When I retired with AT&T, we could get 96,000 calls on a pair of fibers. Most cables can run 24 to 48 pairs of fibers."

More is at stake than upsetting the neighbors or even the cost of repairs. "We're talking about knocking out communications to hospitals, ambulance and national defense," said Muhs.

Don't risk your life or someone else's. Call JULIE at (800) 892-0123 to notify any utility companies to mark lines at least two working days before you do deep tillage or any type of digging.

It's a free call — a free service to help protect your family, your employees and your business.

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