

In support of North American Occupational Safety and Health Week: May 3 – 9, 2009

The Shocking Truth about Power Line Safety

THE STORY BEHIND THE JOINT UTILITY SAFETY TEAM

Power line safety and power line risks are 24/7/365. Yet the sad reality is that every day, three Albertans risk their lives around power lines. Safety training typically focuses on the top safety issues for a particular industry. Power line safety usually is low on the list and may, at best, be offered once a year. As such, power line safety is often not top of mind for safety leaders or their in-the-field crew. This, combined with the all-too-often pressure to focus on “getting the job done” quickly to meet deadlines and quotas, results in skipped steps and increased exposure to potential power line hazards.

Between 2000 – 2005, there was growing concern among Alberta's electric utility industry and government about the high volume of power line incidents in Alberta. The high-risk industries included transportation, construction, farming, oil and gas, forestry and telecommunications. Incidents ranged in severity from death to long-term disability, affecting victims and their families.

In 2006, Alberta's utilities industry and the Alberta Government formed the Joint Utility Safety Team (JUST) to collectively address the common safety issue of contact with power lines and explore safety awareness and education to help reduce power line incidents. AltaLink, ATCO Electric, ENMAX, EPCOR, FortisAlberta and the Government of Alberta have pooled their resources and continue to be the six active partners.

JUST's mandate is to positively affect change in attitudes and behaviours toward power line safety through ongoing safety awareness and education, ultimately helping the utilities industry breed a “culture of power line safety” in Alberta over the long term.

This is a big challenge. Currently, many operators are unaware of the seven-metre minimum safe distance for equipment from power lines. Often workers panic in a crisis, get hurt trying to exit their equipment or become victims themselves when rushing to the aid of others. What makes power lines that much more hazardous is that often, you don't have to actually touch a power line to be injured or killed. Also, the lines are often “invisible”. Underground lines need to be located before digging and overhead lines can also be difficult to see.

JUST's safety education initiative kicked off in 2006 with baseline research to understand the various stakeholders' attitudes and behaviours in relation to power line safety. In 2007, JUST launched “Where's the line?”, the brand for all its power line safety initiatives through a sustained advertising campaign to allow for ongoing market presence to reflect the ongoing year-round risk of power line incidents. “Where's the line?” serves as a reminder to always ask oneself the question and to know the answer before starting any work. The bottom-line take away: “It's your right and obligation to be safe around power lines”. The campaign has evolved to include high-profile promotional tools distributed to targeted industries as well as new ads. Research is conducted annually and findings are incorporated into JUST's ongoing communications.

FOR JUST MEDIA INQUIRIES, PLEASE CONTACT:

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WHERE'S THE LINE?
POWER LINE SAFETY

The members of the Joint Utility Safety Team:

ALTALINK

ATCO Electric

ENMAX

EPCOR

FORTIS ALBERTA

Government of Alberta