AUGUST
SAFETY TALK

Are Excavations Confined Spaces?

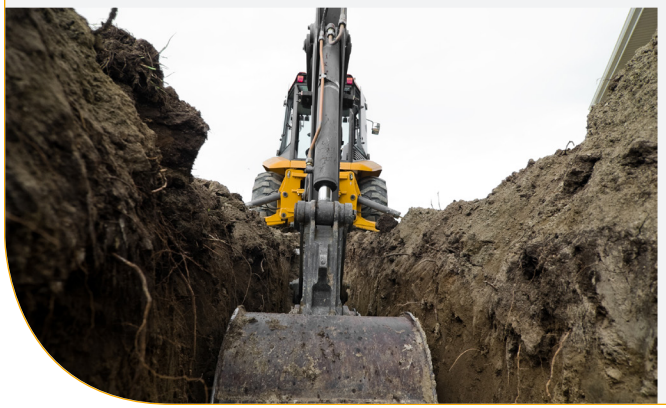
As recently as November 2016, WorkSafeBC modified guidelines to the OH&S Regulation that said excavations could be exempted from confined space regulations only if they meet nine criteria, including the assurance of “clean respirable air at all times”.

Excavations present many of the hazards associated with confined spaces. Because of this, any excavation over four feet should be assessed as a confined space, to rule out the potential that they are.

A confined space is:

- Enclosed or partially enclosed
- Not designed for continuous human occupancy
- Has restricted means of entry or exit that could hinder the provision of first aid
- May become hazardous to a person entering the space due to design, construction, location, materials or substances in it or potentially in it

One of the greatest hazards in confined spaces is air quality. This could be present in excavations as well.



ENCLOSED SPACE? CONFINED SPACE?

In order for enclosed spaces to not meet the WorkSafeBC definition of Confined Space, they need to satisfy specific exclusion criteria, as follows:

- The design, construction, location and intended use of the space will ensure they have clean respirable air at all times
- The space has an interior volume of not less than 64 cubic feet per occupant (eg: 4’ x 4’ x 4’)
- The space has openings to the atmosphere that can provide natural – clean – ventilation
- There is no potential for a high or moderate hazard atmosphere to exist or develop immediately before or during any work in the space
- There must not be a need to mechanically ventilate, clean, purge or inert the space
- There must be no potential for a hazardous substance to infiltrate the space
- The space must be free of residual material – such as water, sludge or debris – that if disturbed could generate air contaminants that could immediately and acutely affect a workers health
- No risk of entrapment or engulfment to workers
- No equipment or processes that could generate air contaminants that could immediately and acutely affect a workers’ health (eg. Gas powered equipment in the space where ventilation would not remove the carbon monoxide)

If ALL the exclusion criteria are met, the employer, in consultation with the Joint Occupational Health and Safety Committee or worker health and safety representative, may make the determination that the excavation is not a confined space as defined in Part 9 of the OH&S Regulation.

For further information on this topic, review Parts 9 and 20 of the WorkSafeBC Occupational Health & Safety Regulation and the associated Guidelines.

British Columbia Municipal Safety Association

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