



Water, Water Everywhere

We drink water, we bathe in water, we play in water, we swim in water, and fish live in water...but water can be a major hazard when it's mixed with electricity. Water is a primary conduit. WATCH OUT!

Most construction sites, at one time or another, have water throughout the site, particularly following a sudden afternoon rain storm in spring and summer.

And, on these same construction sites, we have countless workers handling a broad cross-section of tools powered with "electricity." Are these tools grounded? Are there defects in these power tools? Are there defects in the extension cords? Is there "standing water" where we're working?

The next time you're on a jobsite, take a look at the pole that is used to mount the temporary power lines on the jobsite. Nine times out of ten, there is a pond of water right at the base of the 4x4 that has been driven into the ground. And what else is at the base of this 4x4? WATER, WATER, WATER!

- **And who has to step up** to this panel and attach our extension cords and power tools? YOU, YOU, YOU!
- **Do you use a vibratory compactor** on your jobsite? What is this compactor used for? To "compact" wet concrete.
- **Do you sometimes see extension cords** lying in water, or muddy soil. And do you often times see the extension cord plug also lying in the same water?

Yep, we've probably all answered YES to each of these questions, and we don't give even a second's thought that in so doing we're setting ourselves up for the shock of a lifetime...or a deathtime.

In the military there used to be off-repeated phrase: KEEP YOUR POWDER DRY! Why? Because if you had wet powder, you couldn't fire your weapon.

So maybe we should use this same phrase on the jobsite! But, instead of saying "keep your powder dry" we should say "keep your jobsite dry," particularly when we're knee-deep in water (or at least foot deep).

Do you ever work "over" water, such as bridge construction, or where there are ponds, lakes, rivers or water storage tanks? What protection are you taking to prevent immersing yourself (drowning) yourself? Ever think about this? Yes, you can probably swim pretty good, but if you fall from almost any height, you're going to be temporarily stunned when you hit the water.

And, in this stunned condition, and overloaded with heavy clothing, tools, tool belt, etc., you're probably going to go to the bottom of the pond, or lake, or river, or ocean. Fish do well in this environment, but human beings don't.

Working in and around watery conditions, and safety-related issues, are part common sense, part statutory, and part application.

The first portion of this **Safety Talk** deals with "common sense," of which all of us are blessed, to varying degrees.

Now let's talk "statutory:"

OSHA's CFR 1926 (Construction Industry Standards) Section 1926.106 (Working Over or Near Water) stipulates the following:

"Employees working over or near water, where the danger of drowning exists, shall be provided with U.S. Coast Guard-approved life jacket or buoyant work vests."

It also says that "prior to and after each use, the buoyant work vests or life preservers shall be inspected for defects which would alter their strength or buoyancy. Defective units shall not be used."

Additionally, OSHA stipulates that "Ring buoys with at least 90 feet of line shall be provided and readily available for emergency rescue operations. Distance between ring buoys shall not exceed 200 feet?"

And, the last portion of this OSHA Standard indicates that "at least one life-saving skiff shall be immediately available at locations where employees are working over or adjacent to water."

In another section of this 1926 Construction Standard (Section 1926.105) in addressing **Safety nets**, it says:

"Safety nets shall be provided when workplaces are more than 25 feet above the ground or water surface..."

We've now covered (a) the common sense approach to water safety, and (b) the statutory approach to water safety, so lets close out our treatise on water safety with (c) the "application" approach.

Each jobsite is different, the work to be performed is different, the workers are different, and the site conditions are different. So why don't we **Engineer Out the Water Hazards?**

Among safety professionals, this term (Engineer) is used to view the jobsite as a unique situation, calling for unique solutions to safety hazards. We know that we have to visit a jobsite many times before the actual construction begins, to determine topography, site conditions, type of equipment required, AND, the safety hazards that we think we might encounter.

Water is a unique site hazard, and as described in the OSHA Standard, life-saving equipment (U.S. Coast Guard-approved) is absolutely required when "working adjacent to or over water."

Life saving procedures, equipment, and plans, require the ABCs previously mentioned:

- Commonsense
- Statutory
- Application

This then, is your roadmap. Use it, determine your goal, and the route you'll use to get there. Good Luck!!!

*Fish gotta swim, birds gotta fly, but on construction we don't gotta die. We've taken liberty with one line from the musical **Show Boat** to make a point: We gotta be safe on our jobsites, all of us.*