Ground Water Problem Not Communicated

A contractor had been awarded the job of replacing a town’s sewage system. An engineering firm had taken samples for ground conditions, and their report was available to bidders. Sampling via boreholes disclosed ground water at relatively shallow depths. Sand pockets near the surface needed “dewatering” before work could be carried out. The consulting engineer at the site was aware of the hazards, but the project supervisor and the crew were not.

One member of the crew was last seen standing directly in front of a backhoe. It was a dangerous place to be, and his co-workers did not know why he was there. The backhoe was digging a trench with vertical, rather than sloping, walls making them unstable. The ground collapsed and the worker was buried by the dirt.

A number of things went wrong to create this situation, including poor communications. Information about possible job hazards must be communicated and discussed at all levels so appropriate precautions can be taken. Safe trenching techniques of sloping, shoring and barricading will help prevent fatalities such as these. Fall arrest equipment should be worn anywhere there is danger of falling or engulfment by moving materials to prevent injuries and aid in prompt rescue.