



Natural Gas Lines and Fittings

Recent news reports have highlighted dramatic natural gas explosions that have destroyed both commercial and residential buildings with accompanying loss of life.

The most recent was a gas explosion in Ramsey on December 28th, 2004 that leveled an office building and killed three workers.

The cause has been attributed to the faulty installation of a fitting and additionally to the material from which the fitting was made. The cause is at least partly attributable to a brand of Minnesota-made plastic pipe called Century that's prone to cracking under stress. The Century piping has been linked to at least eight Midwest explosions, which killed six people in the past 28 years and injured many more.

Many states and municipalities have eliminated or abandoned all Century piping but Minnesota still has 95 miles of it in use and there is apparently no long-term plan to remove all of it.

This highlights the necessity of all contractors involved in digging or excavating to be doubly diligent in contacting underground utility locating services. Scrupulous attention to rules regarding hand digging should be followed when close to underground gas lines in particular. Century pipe is likely much more vulnerable to even slight injury than other brands might be and it may be impossible to determine beforehand which pipe one might be dealing with. Other methods for removing dirt close to gas lines such as vacuum excavation are properly considered.

The question arises as to if and how contractors, agents and insurance companies should address this problem.

The problem of faulty workmanship can be addressed directly only by the installation contractor and the gas utility who has the ultimate responsibility. The additional problem of faulty material can be addressed only by the manufacturer and the approving agencies.

The reaction of the agents to this problem will probably be dictated by the actions of the insurance companies and installers.

Insurance companies will become more diligent in risk selection with likely expanded selection criteria and agents will invariably be in the middle reacting to this and the effect of the complaints of potential customers that will likely ensue, it may be more difficult to make a case for a particular customer.

Loss control departments will react by more closely looking into current training and its documentation, evaluating the potential insured's knowledge of the myriad rules regulations and standards applying to this area of their business and a general assessment, both objectively and subjectively of the quality of a given risk.