Cal/OSHA Cites Contractor for Fatal Trench Collapse at Residential Construction Site

Santa Ana—Cal/OSHA has cited a Riverside construction company $66,000 for serious workplace safety violations that resulted in the death of a worker when a 17-foot-deep trench he was in collapsed. Cal/OSHA determined that Empire Equipment Services, Inc. did not properly classify the soil and failed to correctly slope the excavation.

On May 9, two Empire Equipment Services workers were installing sewer pipes at a Lake Forest residential construction site when a 30-foot-wide section of the trench’s sidewall sloughed and collapsed. Only one of the workers was able to escape.

Cal/OSHA’s investigation found that the company failed to ensure the site was inspected by someone who was deemed competent by the employer and familiar with trench hazards, soil classification and the appropriate safety requirements. The soil at the worksite was unstable, requiring an adequate protective system.

“Because working in excavations is so dangerous, a competent person must conduct thorough visual and manual tests to properly classify the soil and adequately protect employees from cave-ins,” said Cal/OSHA Chief Juliann Sum. “Failing to carry out these requirements can be fatal.”

Cal/OSHA issued citations to Empire Equipment Services Inc. for two serious accident-related violations and one general violation with $66,000 in proposed penalties. One of the serious violations is classified as repeat. In August 2017, Cal/OSHA had cited the employer $24,670 for serious safety violations after conducting an inspection at another site in Lake Forest. During that inspection, Cal/OSHA found that the employer had exposed its workers to serious hazards while working in a trench deeper than five feet without properly sloping or installing any adequate protective systems.

Cal/OSHA offers information and resources on working safely in the construction industry, including how to safely perform trench and excavation operations. Before starting excavation work, the approximate locations of all underground installations that may be encountered during excavation operations must be determined and the proper
notification must be made to the appropriate regional notification center in either
Northern or Southern California. A permit from the local Cal/OSHA district office must
be obtained before the construction of excavations five feet or deeper into which any
person is required to descend.

A citation is classified as serious when there is a realistic possibility that death or
serious harm could result from the actual hazard created by the violation. Citations
classified as accident-related indicate the injury, illness or fatality was caused by the
violation. A repeat citation is issued when the employer has abated an earlier violation
for which Cal/OSHA issued a citation and a substantially similar violation is found during
a later inspection.

Cal/OSHA offers a guide to developing an Injury and Illness Prevention Program and
model programs for employers in both high hazard and non-high hazard industries.
Cal/OSHA’s Consultation Services Branch provides free and voluntary assistance to
employers to improve their safety and health programs. Employers should call (800)
963-9424 for assistance from Cal/OSHA Consultation Services.

Employees with work-related questions or complaints may contact DIR’s Call Center in
English or Spanish at 844-LABOR-DIR (844-522-6734). The California Workers’
Information line at 866-924-9757 provides recorded information in English and Spanish
on a variety of work-related topics. Complaints can also be filed confidentially with
Cal/OSHA district offices.

Members of the press may contact Peter Melton or Frank Polizzi at (510) 286-1161, and
are encouraged to subscribe to get email alerts on DIR’s press releases or other
departmental updates.

###

The California Department of Industrial Relations, established in 1927, protects and improves the health, safety, and
economic well-being of over 18 million wage earners, and helps their employers comply with state labor laws. DIR is
housed within the Labor & Workforce Development Agency. For general inquiries, contact DIR’s Call Center at 844-
LABOR-DIR (844-522-6734) for help in locating the appropriate division or program in our department.