

The danger of explosions when clearing sanitary or storm sewers

Workers need to be careful when clearing sewer lines because of the possibility of a “cross bore” that could be contributing to a blockage. A cross bore is a gas or other service line that has been inadvertently drilled through an existing underground utility, such as a sanitary or storm sewer. Cross bores can be a serious threat to the safety of workers and the public if a gas line in a cross bore is damaged, causing gas to leak into homes or other buildings.

How do cross bores happen?

Sometimes utility services use horizontal directional drilling when installing lines so they don't have to excavate to install the service. When drilling, it's possible for a service line to accidentally intersect a sanitary or storm sewer, creating a cross bore.

What are the dangers?

If a gas line intersects a sanitary or storm sewer, the cross bore may go undetected until debris builds up around the gas line, causing a blockage. Clearing the sanitary or storm sewer (for example, by flushing it or using a power auger) could damage the gas line and cause gas to leak into homes or other buildings.

The gas concentration in the air can quickly reach the explosive range. Sparks from electric motors and switches or pilot lights can ignite the gas-air mixture, possibly causing an explosion that could destroy an entire building and result in serious injury or death.



How to proceed safely

Before clearing a sewer line, call the local gas utility company to locate any gas lines in the area. FortisBC has instituted a “Call Before You Clear” program with BC One Call. You can contact BC One Call at 1.800.474.6886 or *6886 on Telus and Rogers cell phones.

Be sure to tell the agent that you are calling about a “sewer service line blockage.” BC One Call will notify Fortis immediately so Fortis can follow up by locating any gas lines in the area and determining whether a cross bore may exist.