

Common Ground Alliance (CGA) 811 Excavation Safety Conference & Expo
Wednesday, March 7, 2018 – 8:00 am to 9:30 am
Phoenix Convention Center, South Building – Phoenix, Arizona

**Speech as Written for Delivery by
Howard “Skip” Elliott
Administrator
Pipeline & Hazardous Materials Safety Administration
U.S. Department of Transportation**

**Common Ground Alliance (CGA)
811 Excavation Safety Conference & Expo**

**Phoenix Convention Center, South Building
Phoenix, Arizona**

Wednesday, March 7, 2018



[Introduction]

Thank you, Sarah [CGA President & CEO Sarah Magruder Lyle], for your kind introduction and for inviting me to speak here today.

Let me start by saying that the Common Ground Alliance is one of PHMSA's **most valued safety partners**.

I'd also like to thank CGA Chairman and President of the Shell Pipeline Company, Greg Smith – as well as the entire board – for your leadership in damage prevention.

And, I would like **to recognize** the whole Common Ground Alliance staff for their dedication toward reducing damages to the nation's underground infrastructure.

I want to **personally** thank **all** CGA sponsors for their financial support and commitment to protecting underground utilities and the people who dig around them.

PHMSA has been a platinum-level sponsor of the CGA since its inception, and I encourage other sponsors here to look at your level of support and perhaps consider increasing it.

This is very important work.

I recognize that many of CGA's accomplishments are generally attributable to its committees and want to spotlight the Technology Committee's outstanding support during the development of the congressionally-mandated damage prevention technology report.

Your expertise and energy were **invaluable**, and I'm excited to say that our cooperation has breathed new life into the Technology Committee.

And lastly, I'm also grateful for the hard work of the Data Committee.

As a data-informed agency, PHMSA relies on data collection and analysis to **continuously** improve data quality and **analytic capabilities** to identify, assess, and manage safety risks.

The Data Committee's work is particularly crucial for our increasing focus on **the use of data** to fully and accurately understand damage prevention solutions.

You all play an essential role in preventing damage to underground utility infrastructure and protecting those who live and work near these important assets.

I strongly encourage all CGA members to participate on these committees, whether on the national or the regional level.

[Your Background and PHMSA's Goal of Zero Incidents]

I was sworn in as PHMSA Administrator about five months ago after working in the freight rail industry, where I focused on public safety, security, the environment, occupational health, and hazardous materials transportation safety.

During my 40 years on the railroad, I witnessed **first-hand** the impacts that major incidents can have on communities and the environment.

What I saw bothered me, and those experiences convinced me that improving safety must continue to be my personal goal and our top priority.

As I was going through the PHMSA selection process, I was deeply impressed with Secretary Chao's commitment to safety.

I am even **more so** today.

For Secretary Chao, me, and the entire PHMSA team – safety will always be job one.

I'm honored to serve with PHMSA's hardworking safety professionals **each day** in support of the nation's pipeline system, which boasts an excellent safety record.

But, despite this admirable record, **there's always room for improvement.**

While we should all pride ourselves on the amazing advancements we've achieved in the past, our focus now **must be** on future safety improvements.

Protecting those who work near underground infrastructure and their communities **is of the utmost importance.**

Coming into this job, I was alarmed to see the amount of excavation damage that occurs – **because, as you all know,** it continues to be one of the leading causes of serious pipeline incidents involving death or injury... **but also one of the most preventable.**

I'm convinced however, that by working together, **we can reach that aspirational – but, I do believe, achievable** – goal of zero incidents.

Let me talk about the important role of the Common Ground Alliance.

For almost 20 years, CGA's 1,700 members and the PHMSA team have worked together to reduce damages to underground infrastructure.

CGA was founded on the principle of shared responsibility, and the organization's unique structure is reflected in this philosophy.

And, we at PHMSA rely on the CGA for so much.

CGA helps to provide PHMSA with 8-1-1 messaging and awareness data, Best Practices, gaps in technology, and data from root cause analysis **and CGA's Damage Information Reporting Tool, or DIRT.**

DIRT and the DIRT Report play an important role in helping industry identify near-misses and root causes of damages.

They also make important recommendations to industry about areas **where** safety can be improved.

I know that **the** Data Reporting and Evaluation Committee puts a lot of time and effort into this report, and I would like to thank them for their hard work.

CGA's Best Practices Committee, which was born out of the original Common Ground Study conducted by DOT in 1999, takes shared responsibility seriously.

These Best Practices are considered the preeminent resource for underground damage prevention.

Any best **practice or program** endorsed by the CGA comes with consensus support **from experts** representing all stakeholder groups.

Additionally, CGA's contributions were helpful in finalizing our PHMSA Technology report to Congress last year.

I encourage all pipeline safety stakeholders to review PHMSA's Damage Protection Study to Congress and to act on the findings, where applicable.

Also, I'd like to take this opportunity to **congratulate** CGA on becoming a **semi-finalist** for the National Safety Council Green Cross for Safety Award.

This is an incredible honor, and very much deserved.

As of January of this year, PHMSA entered into a new five-year contract to continue our financial support of CGA.

In addition to providing CGA with funding, PHMSA also actively participates on CGA committees.

Together with CGA staff, PHMSA outlined some ideas that we believe will affect positive and lasting change.

I am excited to see what the CGA staff and volunteer committees will achieve in the coming years!

Let's talk a bit about Excavation Damage, 8-1-1, and Enforcement.

According to CGA's Damage Information Reporting Tool, we've seen great progress on the reduction of excavation damage, with damage reduction of more than 50 percent over the past 10 years.

This is a solid improvement, and you should all be congratulated.

This decline shows that fighting excavation damage is a key way to protect existing underground infrastructure.

However, pipeline damage during excavation is still a leading cause of serious pipeline incidents involving fatalities or injuries, which is why the promotion of 8-1-1 is a top priority for me.

The CGA DIRT team's research proves that if someone calls 8-1-1 before they dig, they have a 99 percent chance of avoiding incident, avoiding injury, and avoiding harm to the environment.

The societal costs associated with underground facility damages in the U.S. **in 2016 were** estimated at \$1.5 billion dollars.

While 8-1-1 has made considerable progress, we still occasionally see serious incidents involving excavation damage to pipelines.

Let me bring home this point by reminding you about an excavation damage incident that happened **just this past** December in northern Illinois.

While this incident is still under investigation, we know that a father and his son working to free a tractor stuck in a farm field **struck** an underground pipeline.

They were both killed.

Unfortunately, the required 8-1-1 call was not made prior to the plowing.

What a senseless tragedy!

This incident, and others like it, **remind me** that we all must remain vigilant in our efforts to ensure safety.

Our goal at PHMSA is not only to make dialing 8-1-1 as familiar to all Americans as dialing 9-1-1, but to also ensure the effective enforcement of damage prevention laws when contractors or companies don't follow the requirements to protect underground pipelines from excavation-related damage.

State law is a cornerstone of strong state damage prevention programs and should provide **both clarity and accountability** for all stakeholders.

Data shows that states with effective enforcement of One Call laws have **lower damage rates and** improved safety.

It also reveals that **more** 8-1-1 exemptions lead to **more** incidents.

PHMSA actively encourages our state partners to adopt and enforce these minimum standards through annual reviews and the provision of grant funding.

And, I want you to know that I am willing to **personally** work with states, if needed, to provide you support in improving enforcement laws.

It is remarkable how many states have answered the call to improve enforcement of their One Call laws.

Alabama, California, Illinois, Michigan, North Dakota, Ohio, South Carolina, Texas, Wisconsin, **and others** have made tremendous improvements in their One Call programs.

Additionally, several states are working on legislative and procedural changes that will improve One Call law enforcement.

PHMSA is **proud** to stand with the states that improved their programs and to support states that are currently working to improve them. To all of these states, PHMSA would like to say **that we** thank you, **and** stand with you.

What about Infrastructure and Technology?

PHMSA works to enhance the safety of pipeline infrastructure by ensuring it is built and operated properly.

Our efforts are challenged, however, by high-risk infrastructure that is aging **or** in need of repair.

The Department of Transportation and PHMSA have long been working to have operators accelerate the repair, rehabilitation, and replacement of pipeline infrastructure that poses the highest risk.

This past February, our efforts in infrastructure safety got a boost when the Administration submitted a legislative proposal to Congress designed to revitalize and rebuild America's infrastructure.

Empowering decision-making at the state and local levels is an important aspect of this plan.

As you may know, the federal government owns **only** about 10 percent of our country's infrastructure and contributes approximately **only** 14 percent **of total** infrastructure funding.

If you think about that, giving decision-making power back to local communities makes a lot of sense.

The President's One Federal Decision mandate, announced on August 15, 2017, is another current focus for the DOT.

In fact, the Department is working on a **new** process to handle the permitting of complicated, multi-agency projects.

This process will meet the President's **expedited** timeline, generate less paperwork, reduce costs, and allow for timely improvements that will better protect the environment **and** our quality of life.

I believe now, **more than ever**, that advances in technology **are how** we will achieve those higher levels of safety.

One of Secretary Chao's priorities is innovation – how can we use technology and automation in improving the safety of our transportation systems?

In my Senate confirmation hearing, I said that – if confirmed **as the** PHMSA Administrator – I would push to explore how we can deploy technology to enhance the safety of pipelines and other forms of transportation.

For example, how can we use drones to inspect pipelines more efficiently?

What can we do to improve locator technologies to ensure that every call to 8-1-1 results in an accurate picture of underground pipelines?

I'm proud of the R&D work we've accomplished so far at PHMSA – funding 270 projects **and** bringing 27 new technologies to market.

Looking forward, I will continue to encourage research and development efforts that will improve the creation and application of cutting-edge technology to improve pipeline safety.

By working together, we can help technologies succeed and improve the safety our nation's pipelines.

Let me wrap up my comments to you by reinforcing some important points.

Pipeline safety is a responsibility that we all share – you could call it “**our**” common ground.

At the DOT, we're guided by Secretary Chao's four key goals – Safety, Infrastructure, Innovation, and Accountability – and when I look at CGA's hard work on damage prevention, I **know** that we share the same goals.

Our nation's pipeline system is already incredibly safe, but together we must continually improve to chase our goal of zero incidents.

One of the most important questions I ask myself is, "**What more can PHMSA do?**" PHMSA is committed to improving state damage prevention programs, including the enforcement of state laws.

To facilitate this, we offer states a variety of support options.

PHMSA continues to educate stakeholders on the importance of One Call law enforcement, **as well as** federal expectations for adequate enforcement.

And, we will continue to ask for **your** ideas on how to improve state and local enforcement when it comes to excavation safety.

Because, our continued collaboration and **never wavering** commitment **will help to save** lives.

Thank you.

###