

Shed Build Shock: What Steve Missed in the Ground

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Steve was excited. Today marked the start of a long-anticipated project—a new commodity shed that would boost storage capacity and protect the quality of feed. It was the biggest structure yet on the farm, set to sit between the feed mill and the machinery shed. The team knew the construction would disrupt access and laneways, but the benefits of the new shed would be great and everyone was happy to work around the inconvenience.

With a background in construction, Steve had been heavily involved in the shed's design and was now keen to be hands-on with the build. His team picked up many of his regular tasks, leaving him free to manage site preparation and formwork for the slab.

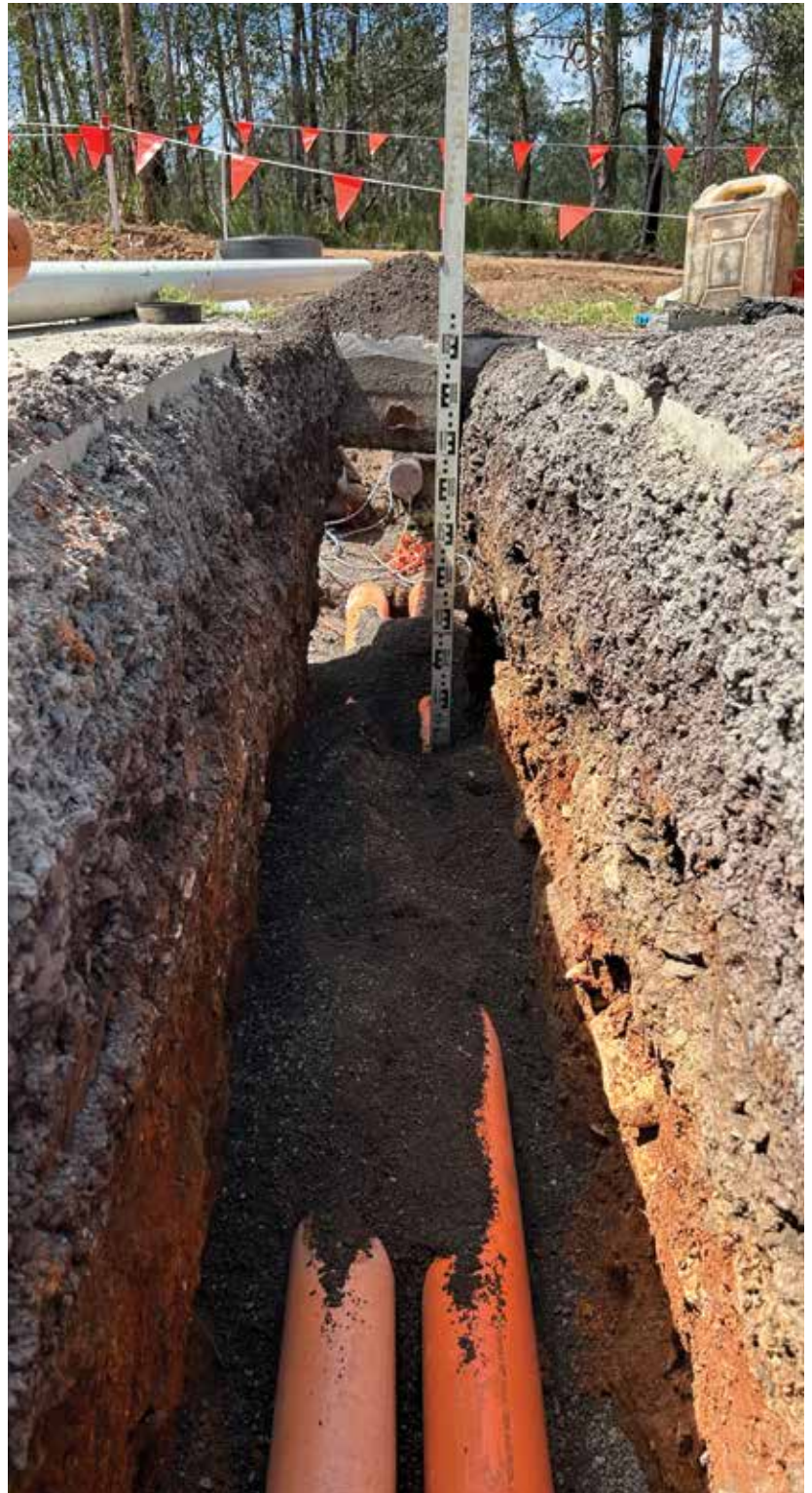
After scraping the grass with the front-end loader, Steve jumped into the hired excavator to dig footings. Just three buckets in, he heard a loud crack. As he pulled back the arm, he saw the unmistakable end of electrical conduit rising from the ground.

He'd hit the main underground power line connecting the switchboard on the machinery shed to the silos and feed mill.

The excitement turned to extreme stress.

The entire farm lost power—including the house. The electrician and the electricity service provider had to be called in urgently. The farm's operations ground to a halt, and the service provider was far from impressed. What had been planned as a smooth construction started with a costly and disruptive incident.

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Where Things Went Wrong

Steve's focus had been on logistics—shed layout, vehicle access, and getting the job done. What he had not done was a thorough risk assessment, especially around the site preparation phase. Had he paused to assess the risks, the damage could have been avoided.



Here's how Steve's risk assessment should have looked using the **SAFER** approach:

S – SEE IT: Identify the Hazards

- The shed site sits between two power-connected structures. That's a strong clue that underground cables may be present.
- Steve assumed there was no risk because the new shed would not be powered—but the feed mill and silos still relied on underground supply.
- A quick discussion with the farm electrician or his father (who oversaw the feed mill installation) could have confirmed the cable's presence.
- The key hazard: **Underground power line beneath the proposed build site.**

Key Risks:

- Damaging underground cable during excavation or footing work
- Electric shock, equipment damage, or full-site power outage
- Breach of service provider clearance and access requirements
- Cable location and depth unknown—creates hidden hazard



A – ASSESS IT: Evaluate the Risk

- **Likelihood:** High during any ground disturbance if cable position is unknown
- **Consequences:** Severe—electrocution, serious injury, outages, repair costs, possible fines
- **Risk rating:** **High;** 1 on the risk matrix
- **Control step:** Contact electrician, use a cable locator, and confirm cable depth and alignment



F – FIX IT: Control the Risk

Avoid building directly over the cable—reposition shed if possible.

If the cable can't be avoided:

- Consult the electricity provider for approval and conditions before starting any work
- Use vacuum excavation or hand digging near cable zones
- Clearly mark the cable route with paint or physical markers
- Never use a probe to search for buried services
- Install barriers and signage around high-risk areas
- Have an observer or spotter during any digging
- Brief all workers on the location and risks
- Have an emergency plan in place in case of contact



E – EVALUATE IT: Ensure Controls Are Working

- Use a pre-start checklist to confirm all controls are in place
- Double-check the cable location before and during excavation
- Monitor site changes—any design or method shift can introduce new risks



R – REVIEW IT: Improve Over Time

- Review the risk after key construction milestones or changes to the build plan
- Keep thorough records of cable locations, provider advice, and staff training
- Update the farm map to show cable locations for future works or repairs

Final Thoughts

Steve's story is a reminder that even with experience, enthusiasm can cloud judgment. A few minutes spent identifying and managing risks can save hours of repair, thousands in costs, and potentially a life. Farm safety isn't about slowing things down—it's about keeping progress on track, without the setbacks. ■ ■ ■