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Panel detects power, gas lines Winnipeg company patents device

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By Larry Kusch

A Winnipeg-based company says it has patented a device that will save lives and speed excavation around gas and power lines.

Keiberg Inc. has developed a panel that will show excavators exactly how close they are to underground lines when digging.

The panel, which is almost a meter long, one-third of a meter wide and 2.5 centimeters thick, was invented by Keith Barry, a Winnipegger who worked for 27 years as a heavy equipment operator in the Alberta oilpatch and throughout Canada and the United States.

"I've had close calls and, I will be honest with you, over the years I've also struck my share of lines," Barry said in an interview.

While he was never injured himself, he said he has witnessed several accidents, which motivated him to come up with the device.

Bruce Waite, Keiberg's CEO, said the company envisages selling the panels -- which it has patented in 36 countries -- to small and large excavation firms, utilities such as Manitoba Hydro and oil and pipeline companies.

They will sell for \$89 each.

So far, the company has not actively sold the product in Manitoba.

Its first marketing foray was at a large oil and gas trade show last week in Weyburn, Sask.

However, the company has sounded out a number of potential customers, including a utility in New York state, which plans to test the product.

Waite said while the panels are easy to use, they're complex to manufacture.

The panels are manufactured at Friesens Corp. in Altona, which is a partner in Keiberg.

They consist of more than 15 metres of folded, coated cardboard that can be left in the ground for up to a year. (The company is also designing products that will last several years underground without breaking down.)

"Working with Friesens, we've had to actually manufacture a folding machine specifically to fold these panels," Waite said.

There are thousands of reported line strikes caused by excavation equipment each year in North America, he said.

"The leading cause of that was improper excavation technique, which is exactly what we address," Waite said.

Keiberg, which was formed specifically to design and manufacture the panel, has arranged with the Southeast Regional College in Weyburn, Sask., to provide an online course on how to use the product.

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WHAT IS LINE ALERT?

It's a cardboard panel that is inserted into the ground over a gas or power line to guide an excavator.

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

It's almost three meters long, one-third of a meter wide and 2.5 centimeters thick. The panel is colour coded so that the top one-third is green, the middle is yellow and the bottom third is red.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

A client typically would hire a hydrovac truck -- a machine that uses high-pressure water to dig channels into the ground -- to expose the line. They would then insert the panel into the narrow opening left by the hydrovac and cover it up with earth until they were ready to excavate. Once excavation begins, the bucket cuts through the panel, tearing sections off, unleashing 45-centimeter ribbons of colour-coded cardboard telling equipment operators the depth they are working at.

WHAT ARE ITS ADVANTAGES?

It should speed the digging process and cut down on accidents from piercing gas and power lines.

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