

Digging into Sask 1st Call's history, one year after Saskatchewan Common Ground Alliance (SCGA) Transfer



On January 2, 2003, SaskEnergy launched the organization with the familiar “Call Before You Dig” messaging.

“There were notification companies in other provinces like Ontario and Alberta. Companies that crossed over borders really saw the value in having a notification service in Saskatchewan, too,” says Shawn Fairman – General Manager, Distribution Customer Services, and Vice-President of the new Sask 1st Call Board of Directors.

“It made sense for SaskEnergy to be a part of it because we have a lot of underground infrastructure and because safety is a core value for our company.”

Sask 1st Call enhances safety for people and businesses doing construction in Saskatchewan. They can request a line locate free of charge, either by calling a 1-800 phone number, or submitting a request online, and within three business days any underground infrastructure will be marked using flags, stakes, or paint. If an area is marked, this is a clear signal to not dig in or obstruct the area.

Likewise, Sask 1st Call is a beneficial service for subscribing companies that have underground facilities, helping ensure those facilities are protected.

“Sask 1st Call enables dependable, cost-effective communication between subscribers and those intending to disturb the ground,” says Shannon Doka - Executive Director, SCGA. “This service greatly enhances public safety, as many facilities may exist underground that landowners are unaware of.”

With this mission of safety for both users and subscribers, Sask 1st Call has grown over the years. It began when SaskEnergy saw the need as underground facilities continued to grow in complexity and worked to build the organization throughout 2002. In April that year, it was lauded in the provincial Legislature as a “valuable service to pipeline companies.”

“This is another example of the people of Saskatchewan’s public industry serving the public good and helping to encourage more investment and expansion in our province,” Member of the Legislative Assembly Keith Goulet stated at the time.

When it launched eight months later, Sask 1st Call had just two registered member companies — SaskEnergy and TransGas. Others quickly joined and, today, Sask 1st Call has more than 120 subscriber companies!

In the early years, “Call Before You Dig” was the primary option for Sask 1st Call. However, people could also request a locate by fax machine! In the service’s first year, more than 49,000 fax requests were received.

SaskEnergy’s Customer Service Representatives (CSRs) answered the toll-free calls. They then consulted a screening database to determine which subscriber companies had infrastructure at the customer’s location. In early 2020, a Master Services Agreement with Utility Safety Partners (formerly Alberta One Call Corporation) provided for a more consistent approach to the one call service.

In August 2004, conveniently, online requests became an option. That year, there were more than 97,000 online locates requested and the service had grown to include 20 subscriber companies.

Also in 2004, SaskTel joined Sask 1st Call — the first non-oil and gas company to become a member.

Five years later, another Crown Corporation, SaskPower, signed on to Sask 1st Call. By 2010, line locate requests had grown five-fold.

Online requests continue to grow – 147,155 in 2023, and the accuracy of the maps included tends to be higher, though users can still phone in their locate requests. Since the transfer of operations, updates have been done to both the Sask 1st Call website (www.sask1stcall.com) and to the Before You Dig Partners website (www.onecall.beforeyoudigpartners.com). These updates include making both websites more mobile friendly, educational, and easier to use.

Over the years, the organization continued to expand its reach and support its mandate of public safety and damage prevention.

In 2014, a Safety Patrol program was launched with the goal of reducing incidents in new urban neighbourhoods in Regina, Saskatoon, Moose Jaw, and suburban communities of Regina.

In vehicles decorated with Sask 1st Call branding, the contracted patrollers actively checked in with people in the new areas. When landscaping, building a fence or deck, or pouring a new driveway, people were asked if they had completed a line locate. The program contributed to a steady decline in third-party line hits.

Nowadays, technology makes it more convenient to request line locates.

“Over time we try to make it as easy as possible and promote the online requests instead of calling in. We have found that far fewer incidents happen when requests are made online instead of by phone,” says Shawn.

“It’s really about making sure the customers are safe,” Shawn adds. “Many times, there are high voltage power lines or gas lines, and it’s in everyone’s best interest when we’re doing the projects in our yard that we’re being safe.”

Twenty years after it was launched, Sask 1st Call introduced a change to make things more efficient and convenient for customers and subscribers: The line locate expiry date was extended from [10 business days to 30 calendar days](#).

This change aligns Saskatchewan with other provinces and jurisdictions that already had a 30-day window for line locates.

“All parties agree this change will safely help deal with the unexpected, such as weather-related delays, equipment breakdown and needed crew downtime,” says Shannon.

The most recent substantial change took place in June 2023, when the SCGA began managing the service.

"The SCGA is a good fit to oversee the service" , adds Shawn, "as a non-profit organization that shares SaskEnergy’s dedication to public safety, environmental protection and damage prevention".

As a newly formed non-profit corporation, Sask 1st Call now has a Board of Directors — appointed by the SCGA — to provide strategic direction to the business and governance.

The Sask 1st Call Board of Directors are:

James Cameron, Crescent Point Energy, Calgary - President

Shawn Fairman, SaskEnergy, Regina - Vice-President

Bryan Abel, BH Telecom/Flex Networks, Kitchener - Secretary-Treasurer

Kyle Schmalenberg, SaskTel, Regina

Kevin Lalonde, SaskPower - Saskatoon

Jodi Long, Kingston Midstream - Estevan

Kim Brady, Whitecap Resources - Weyburn

Jennifer Wilkinson, City of Weyburn – Weyburn

“Establishing Sask 1st Call was a great initiative, and it’s grown over the years to something that’s going to be a legacy for SaskEnergy,” says Shawn.

Since June transfer, the membership of SCGA has grown to over 100 members, and new subscribers continue to join Sask 1st Call every month. One notable addition to Sask 1st Call is the Shaw assets (now registered under Rogers Communications), which were uploaded to Sask 1st Call's mapping in March of this year.

In addition to the new board, Sask 1st Call also has a new Director to manage the service and day to day operations. Lisa Kosolofski started in this role in October.

“Lisa brings a lot of experience to promote and provide customer service to Sask 1st Call users and subscribers,” says Shannon. “The SCGA and Sask 1st Call are looking forward to what the next 20 years will bring!”

For more information on Sask 1st Call, visit www.sask1stcall.com or email firstcalldirector@scga.ca.

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