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A shortcut along the edge of a gravel-pit pond proved deadly for the owner of an excavating company hired to dig test holes for a client who was evaluating the site for potential construction. The man had dug one exploratory hole to determine soil content and was driving his 73,000-pound excavator to the other side of the gravel pit to dig another hole when his excavator overturned and fell into the water. The 49-year-old victim had taken a shortcut along a snow-covered bank with a 20-degree slope. As he drove, the bank sheared away and the machine tipped over into the pond. Co-workers later discovered the machine submerged in the mud and water, and although an extensive rescue effort was attempted it was too late. The worker died as a result of cardiac arrest caused by hypothermia.

The victim had extensive experience operating heavy equipment, but he took risks including traveling along a downhill slope with the cab door exposed to the water. This made escape and a timely rescue impossible. Equipment operators should plan their travel route to ensure they can exit from the cab quickly and safely if necessary. When traveling on slopes, the bucket should be positioned in the uphill direction and in the lowest position possible.

Source: Michigan Fatality Assessment and Control Evaluation (FACE) Program, Case Report 05MI024