

underground construction

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Energy Growth Fuels Large HDD Rig Boom

By Jeff Griffin, Senior Editor | [Sneak preview from September's issue](#)



Horizontal directional drilling (HDD) as it relates to utility construction usually is dated from the late 1980s when the first compact drill units became commercially available.

As directional drilling proved its value for installing underground power and communications cable and small-diameter water and natural gas pipe, sales of directional drills increased steadily -- 1,415 units sold in 1995, 2,371 in 1998 and peaking in 2000

with 3,990 drill rigs sold, most of them with 100,000 pounds of pullback or less with the greatest number in the 30,000- to 50,000-pound pullback range.

However, the roots of the HDD industry date back to the 1960s, and the first successful HDD machines were big ones for pipeline construction. These machines borrowed and adapted established oil field technology to make horizontal bores that could be directionally guided. It is generally agreed the first HDD river crossing was in 1971 when a drill unit developed by industry pioneer Martin Cherrington bored under the Pajaro River near Watsonville in Northern California.



As HDD markets expanded during the 90s, work included many projects that required big rigs, and American Augers and Vermeer marketed models that could make long, deep bores to install large-diameter product in amazingly-difficult conditions.

It is generally accepted that now is a boom time for big

rig directional drilling as pipeline companies specify HDD in situations where open-cut construction is difficult or impossible. A relatively small group of HDD contractors with the experience and equipment to meet these challenges routinely complete HDD installations that a dozen years ago would have been considered impossible.

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Shale driving market

Much of the newer energy projects developed in the United States are in shale fields, including Bakken in North Dakota and Montana, Eagle Ford in South Texas and the Marcellus shale play in the northeast. HDD is being widely used on Marcellus projects because much of the construction is in developed areas, and there also are environmental considerations and restrictions affecting excavation.

This report is the first in a series and will focus on projects completed by Utility Services Authority LLC (USA), Belleville, MI.

Directional drilling in Marcellus shale involves many challenges, observes Chris Lamb, USA general manager. On many projects, accessing the drill site is difficult.



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