

# Tech Brief

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## Line Pigging

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### Summary

Line pigging is an internal pipe-cleaning process used to remove biofilms or other foreign matter from the inside of water pipes. If performed correctly, line pigging will renew the flow rates to restricted piping systems and reduce pumping pressures. This Tech Brief discusses some of the techniques and processes used in cleaning waterlines in distributions systems.

### Line Pigging

Line pigging (or line swabbing, as it sometimes known), is the process of cleaning distribution lines by inserting a small device known as a pig into the lines and pushing it through them. The term “pigging” originated in the gas and oil industry, where metal discs connected by a rod were moved through the oil pipelines to remove buildup of paraffin wax on the internal wall of the pipe. The action of metal on metal made a squealing noise like a pig and the name stuck. More and more, pigs are being used to clean pipelines in all types of industry including waterlines in municipal distribution systems.

Pigs range in size from 2- to 48-inches in diameter and can be made to order in varying lengths, styles, and configurations for specific applications. Not only are pigs used for cleaning but also for inspecting the inside of pipelines and determining interior dimensions.

### Is pigging waterlines really necessary?

States and municipalities typically do not require regular pigging or swabbing of distribution lines in water systems. Some may only require pigging after initial construction of a new line to remove any debris left in the line because flushing alone will not always clean the dirt and debris out of the line.

### What is a pig?

A pig is the object, usually bullet shaped, that is pushed by the water in the pipe in the direction of normal flow. The pig can be made of different materials (foam, steel, plastic, polyurethane), but generally is food-grade silicon, which is tough yet flexible and safe to be in contact with drinking water.



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A photo of a 4 x 4 that was pushed out of an 8" water line. It took several pigs to finally get it out, and it came out in pieces, but they finally pigged it out.

Photo courtesy of Girard Industries, [www.girardind.com](http://www.girardind.com)

One reason to pig a waterline is that all distribution lines tend to have a biofilm coating the inside of the pipe. The bacteria are dormant until certain conditions activate the bacteria, causing problems. Regular flushing will not eliminate this biofilm. Regular pigging with flushing will reduce or eliminate biofilms.

A second reason to pig a line is inadequate water flow. More flow (volume) of water may be needed to support development or a growing population in the water system or to provide adequate water for fire fighting. In areas of water systems where increased development has caused water demand to surpass the flow output of an existing line, the system will usually need to replace the existing waterline with a line that can support the demand needed. If the existing flow is restricted due to excessive deposits, however, pigging may be the solution to the problem.

Third, most states require a minimum of a 6-inch diameter waterline when connecting a fire hydrant to provide adequate flow. After years of service, the inside of the pipe can become

restricted with deposits making the fire hydrant less effective if not useless for its intended job. If fire flow is needed, the solution in the past has been to replace the whole waterline, which is very costly and time consuming. Pigging may restore adequate flow for fighting fires at a fraction of the time and cost.

Finally, pigging waterlines may lessen complaints from water customers regarding the very same deposits that have or can restricted fire flow. These deposits are unwanted foreign matter such as iron oxide (red water), alum, calcium carbonates, barium sulfide and sediment. Pigging, in most cases, provides a solution. Cleaning these deposits can also reduce pumping pressures in areas of water systems that have booster pump stations. Increased pumping pressures can result in line leaks and pipe failures.

### Procedure

The procedure starts by determining if the waterline can be pigged. Not every water line is a candidate for line pigging. Is the water line so corroded that pigging can cause failure?

Does the waterline have reducers (i.e., the line getting smaller) that can cause the pig to get stuck? Does the line have increased pipe diameter sizes where the water pressure would be insufficient to move the pig?

One of the main things to look at is the condition of the interior of the pipe. If the pH of the water is low, the interior of the line could be so corroded that pigging could result in failure. If in doubt about the condition of the line, refer to past line repairs or talk to operators who have worked on any repairs of the particular line.

Much of this information can be obtained from as-built drawings or operators who have fixed leaks or installed the original water line. The line will have to be dug up to launch the pig. At that time, a visual inspection should be done to determine if pigging is possible. Another option is to use a low density foam pig in any unknown line and examine the foam pig for wear patterns, tears, or gouges. This may even help determine if the line can be successfully cleaned with a pig.

Before the pigging begins, it's useful to have information about the line:

1. Locate and mark all valves and meters.
2. Approximate all elbows and fittings in the line (again, refer to the as-built drawing if available).
3. Know the pressure and flows in the lines. This will also help determine if any flow increase and possibly pressure decrease was achieved by the pigging.

The more you know before you start, the fewer surprises you'll encounter once you start pigging.

Once the line has been inspected and appears suitable, the actual pigging begins. A pig is inserted into the line to be cleaned by means of a launcher. This is simply an oversized barrel with a reducer mating to the existing line. This allows for easy insertion of the pig, because the pig's outer diameter is larger than the pipe's internal diameter to maintain a good seal. Once in the launcher, clean water is introduced to send the pig on its way. This is usually the same water that is in the line from a nearby flushing hydrant or fire hydrant, or a tanker truck. The pig's path is determined by direction of flow and by isolating the line to be cleaned by closing valves to laterals, if present.

If the waterline is in service, you must notify your customers about the water interruption and possible dirty water after bringing the line back in service. If the water line has a lot of unwanted deposits, it may be wise to pull all water meters just before the pigging process starts and flush at the connection at the end of the process before you replace the meters. Foreign matter could stop-up the meter or cause the meter to malfunction. The debris could also get into the customers' plumbing and cause problems such as plugging the aerators on the faucets, dishwashers, or washing machines.

If the waterline to be pigged has severe scaling (tuberculation) due to iron oxide (red water), alum, calcium carbonates, barium sulfide, or sediment, a progressive or stepped approach must be taken to avoid getting a pig stuck or losing a pig. This approach is simply using a smaller diameter pig at first and working your way up incrementally to the inside diameter of the pipe. The stepped technique will minimize the risk of the pig getting stuck or large amounts of debris plugging the line by cleaning a little bit at a time.



Articles about locating distribution lines and valve exercising programs are available on the National Environmental Services Center Web site at [www.nesc.wvu.edu/ndwc](http://www.nesc.wvu.edu/ndwc).

## Smart Pigs

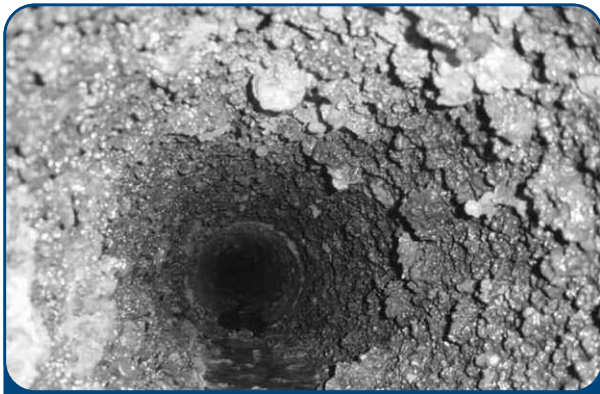
There are many different types and sizes of pigs. For waterline use, some nonstandard pigs include:

- Gauging pigs are mainly used after constructing the pipeline or before pigging an old line to determine if there are any obstructions in the pipeline.
- Profile pigs are gauging pigs with multiple gauging plates used to help map the inside condition of the pipe walls.
- Magnetic cleaning pigs are used to pick up ferrous debris left in the pipeline.
- Transmitter pigs or detector pigs are used to map out the location of pipeline or help locate a stuck pig.
- Spheres are round for ease in negotiating short radius 90-degree elbows, irregular turns, bends, and sweeps.

## Dealing with a Stuck or Lost Pig

If a pipeline has not been pigged on a routine basis or has never been pigged, a pig can get stuck. If a pig becomes stuck, the first priority





A pipeline prior to line pigging.

Photo courtesy of Girard Industries, [www.girardind.com](http://www.girardind.com)

is to find and retrieve it, but you must identify the cause. Usually one of two conditions exists when a pig is stuck: fluid bypassing around the pig (not pushing the pig) or a blockage of the flow.

In water distribution systems that have loops and multiple tee connections a pig can find its way out of the work area and get lost. It is important to locate all valves and close off the lines that are not being pigged and know the direction of water flow.

If you lose a pig, a smart pig such as a detector pig or transmitter pig can be launched to help find the lost pig. A transmitter can also be installed in the cleaning pig so that a second pig does not have to be launched to help locate it if it should get lost or stuck. Sometimes a pig gets stuck because of a broken or shut gate valve.

Procedures for dealing with a stuck pig or fluid going around the pig:

1. Increase the line pressure and flow rate, but do not exceed the safe limits of the pipeline allowing for age and/or condition of the line. The flow rate and pressure can be increased with a pumper and tanker fire truck.
2. Release pressure from the line and drain the line back toward the launcher. Releasing pressure allows the pig to relax to its normal shape and may even cause the pig to back up in the line. After pressure has dissipated completely for several minutes, re-pressurize the line in an attempted to drive the pig through the restriction. This may be repeated two or three times.
3. For a bypass situation, run a soft swab in behind the stuck pig to try and create

a positive seal, stopping the bypass. Repeat step one above.

4. Back the pig up by applying pressure from the opposite end of the waterline using a pump or possibly a pumper fire truck.
5. If a foam pig is used and gets stuck a super-chlorinate mixture (3,000 to 5,000 ppm) in a slug form can be used to dissolve the pig. The line must be flushed and tested to be sure the chlorine residual is allowable limits after the super chlorination.

Water systems are advised not to undertake line pigging on their own. Shop around and find a reputable company with experience in line pigging with water lines. Start with an area of the water system that the line location, size, type, and condition are all known and the lines can be dug up easily if needed.

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