

**Botany Bay cable project and seagrass impacts**  
**Response given to St George Sutherland Shire Leader**

**Can you explain the NSW Department of Planning and Infrastructure's monitoring role in the AusGrid cable burial project off Kurnell, and the impact of this project on the protected Silver Beach seagrass bed?**

*Department of Planning and Infrastructure - initial response:*

Former contractors for the former EnergyAustralia (now Ausgrid) began laying submarine electricity cables across Botany Bay last year as part of a project to replace existing 132kV feeders between Canterbury and Bunnerong sub-transmission stations.

The department was notified of two incidents. In the first incident, in June 2010, a trial trench was dug without the correct approvals being in place. In the second incident in July 2010 the cable was allegedly laid on the bed on the incorrect alignment (following this incident the cable remained on the bed until recently).

The original alignment had been chosen to minimise impacts on seagrasses, in particular off Silver Beach at Kurnell.

Following the commissioning of new contractors by Ausgrid, the department required Ausgrid to commission an independent aquatic ecologist to advise the department and work with the project's marine biologist and Seagrass Management Reference Panel. Ausgrid has had its own aquatic ecologists providing expert advice.

The department issued an enforceable direction to Ausgrid on 31 October 2011 to follow specified procedures for burial of the cables and rehabilitation of any seagrass damaged during the trenching process. The trenching and rehabilitation process is currently underway.

The rehabilitation procedures have involved a team of divers clearing sand which was deposited onto the seagrasses beside the trench during the trenching process. Further rehabilitation will involve replanting seagrass along the filled trench – this seagrass was harvested from the trench line before the burial of the cables.

The whole process is being closely monitored by both Ausgrid's and the department's aquatic ecologists.

The ecologists are also checking whether the two incidents mentioned above have resulted in greater than anticipated impacts on seagrasses.

Ausgrid has further indicated it will conduct a monitoring program of the seagrass beds for three years beyond project completion.

*Department of Planning and Infrastructure - further response:*

Yes, the trial trench damaged a section of the main seagrass bed comprising primarily *Posidonia australis* but also *Helophila*. Up to 180 square metres of mixed seagrass may have been lost, damaged or smothered during the unauthorised trial.

It is too early to say whether more seagrass has been impacted than was predicted. The amount of impact from the recent cable burying is still being calculated - that is one of the things the divers and our independent aquatic ecologist are currently assessing. However

the damage from the unauthorised trial is obviously over and above predictions.

In regard to the divers, it was always anticipated that divers would be undertaking the role they are now undertaking to remove sand from adjacent seagrasses as the trenching process was underway. In other words, it's not possible to say there are now more divers.

The key benefit of the enforceable direction given by the department recently was that it:

- Required Ausgrid to rectify the impacts to the seagrass bed from the two incidents; and
- Inserted an independent aquatic ecologist reporting to the department into the project's management on a day to day basis, to provide greater expert oversight of the trenching process in light of the previous two incidents.

Rehabilitation of the trial trench area has included additional planting of posidonia (posidonia was collected prior to the trenching within the impacted alignment- this was specified as part of the direction). The rehabilitation process includes collecting the seagrass fruit when it's released and germinating it at the Port Stephens fisheries institute then returning it to the Botany Bay seabed.