

MEDIA RELEASE

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Utility Infrastructure Damage by Third Parties Costing Australia \$5 Billion Annually: BYDA Calls for Bold Reforms in Utility Risk Management

Before You Dig Australia (BYDA), the nation's leading not-for-profit organisation dedicated to utility safety, is calling for urgent national reforms to address \$5 billion in economic losses caused annually by preventable utility strikes. New research from BYDA reveals that most of these incidents stem from outdated regulations, low data standards, and insufficient workforce training, which together undermine Australia's utility infrastructure resilience, endanger workers, and escalate costs for construction projects across the country. To tackle this pressing issue, BYDA is advocating for comprehensive reforms in legislation, technology, and workforce training to curb this avoidable economic burden.

"\$5 billion a year in preventable damage is an unacceptable burden on the Australian economy. It's time for a national overhaul of how we manage utility risks," said Mell Greenall, CEO of BYDA. "Our research shows that with the right reforms, we can significantly reduce these incidents, protect workers, and save billions for the economy. This is a national issue that demands immediate attention and coordinated action."

BYDA's research underscores three essential reforms to prevent utility strikes and protect critical infrastructure:

1. Nationally Consistent Legislation for Underground Asset Management

Australia's current underground utility regulations are inconsistent and ineffective. Only New South Wales mandates asset registration with BYDA for electricity, gas, and oil under its Electricity and Gas Acts, while other states lack uniform requirements, leading to confusion, increased safety risks, and higher rates of utility strikes in construction and excavation projects.

BYDA calls for a uniform national policy that requires all utility owners—including electricity, gas, water, telecommunications, and local governments—to register their assets with BYDA and mandates the use of BYDA's service for any ground-breaking activities. Establishing a comprehensive, national underground asset register would close current safety gaps, reduce costly damage to infrastructure, and enhance project safety with minimal financial burden to government or industry.

2. Mandatory Digital Standards for Utility Location Data

Despite advances in digital technology, much of the utility location data used by the construction sector remains outdated, inaccurate, and is often distributed in PDF format. This inefficiency contributes significantly to the \$5 billion annual cost from utility strikes. Additionally, the lack of adoption of digital standards is often blamed on legislative requirements, including those within the Security of Critical Infrastructure Act.

BYDA is ready to develop a secure, modern digital platform that provides verified construction users with high-quality, precise utility data that meets cybersecurity standards. International models, such as the UK's National Underground Asset Register, have shown how secure digital systems can reduce errors, prevent delays, and minimize utility strikes. Australia must embrace these digital standards to ensure safer, more efficient infrastructure projects and improve productivity across the construction sector. BYDA calls on government and industry leaders to support the creation of a national digital utility asset register, which could yield billions of dollars in economic benefits.

3. Mandatory Utility Risk Management Training for Construction Workers

Currently, Australia lacks formal requirements for construction workers to be trained in managing risks associated with underground utilities. This knowledge gap contributes to over 1,100 utility strikes each month, with more than 60% of these incidents involving the construction industry. Such strikes not only put workers' safety at risk but also result in costly project disruptions and broader community impacts.

BYDA advocates for mandatory utility risk management training within vocational education and trades qualifications. Countries like the UK and Canada have successfully implemented mandatory utility training, leading to significant reductions in utility strikes. By partnering with the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA) and industry bodies, Australia can equip its workforce with the skills needed to safely manage these risks, improving safety outcomes and reducing economic losses.

A Call to Action: Coordinated Effort for National Change

"We have the tools to fix this—better data, stronger laws, and a skilled workforce," said Mell Greenall, CEO of BYDA. "It's time to create a safer, smarter future for Australia's utility infrastructure. We need leaders from the utility, construction, and government sectors to come together and support these reforms. BYDA is ready to lead the charge, but we need the full backing of industry to make these necessary changes a reality."

BYDA is calling on policymakers, industry leaders, and regulators to rally behind these initiatives and implement the legislative and educational reforms needed to safeguard Australia's utility infrastructure.

Through collaborative action, Australia can reduce utility strike risks, protect its critical infrastructure, and save billions of dollars in preventable costs each year.

For more information on BYDA's research, please contact Mell Greenall at 0407 166 706 or mell.greenall@byda.com.au.

About BYDA: Before You Dig Australia (BYDA) is a national not-for-profit organisation dedicated to utility safety and damage prevention. Through its comprehensive services and industry-endorsed solutions, BYDA works to protect Australia's utility infrastructure, supporting safe work practices and preventing utility strikes.

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