

European Subsea Cables Association position statement on post cable lay trawl sweeps

It is the position of the European Subsea Cables Association (ESCA) that submarine cables, buried or otherwise, can present a potential entanglement risk or hazard to fishermen. Fishing over cables is also a potential hazard to cables and can cause damage to cables. We would strongly advise against any type of fishing, whatsoever, where there is a known and charted cable.

Information on submarine cables around the UK and Northern Europe can be downloaded for all types of fishing plotters free of charge at www.KIS-ORCA.eu. ESCA strongly advises that all fishermen should ensure that up to date cable data is installed on their fishing plotters. We also urge all regulators and marine authorities to advise the same.

It is against UK, EU and international law to wilfully damage a submarine cable (Submarine Telegraph Act 1885, UNCLOS). The execution of such action, such as that outlined below, resulting in damage to a submarine cable carries the risk of vicarious liability for the person requesting, approving or supervising such action, and direct liability for the fisherman or other person actually carrying out such action. In both cases it would be a defence to show that the cable owner had given its informed consent prior to such action being taken.

Trawl Sweeps

Trawl debris clearance, or trawl sweeping as it is more commonly referred to, is a method of making an area of sea bed that could potentially be hazardous to fishermen safer. It is commonly used within the oil and gas industry when decommissioning oil fields and their associated infrastructure, or after the installation of large diameter pipelines.

Items of debris that are commonly dropped on the seabed in oil and gas field areas generally consists of scaffold poles or small sections of grating displaced during storms. Large deposits of clay may be present after pipeline removal or installation.

These are cleared by undertaking a bottom trawl with apparatus such as in the picture below.



Whilst ESCA acknowledges that there may be a need for such operations within the oil and gas sector, this operation does not transpose to the cables sector.

It is the position of ESCA that post cable lay trawl sweeps are not required and there has been no clearly stated reason why trawl sweeps should be carried out over a cable.

Consequently, agreement to undertake such an operation would suggest that it is safe to fish over a cable and ESCA would never condone such an action.

Information on Cable Burial

The overwhelming majority of submarine cable installation is undertaken using a submarine cable plough. Various types of plough for various ground conditions exist, but they operate on the same principle. Towed from a cable ship the plough cuts a wedge of soil through the seabed. The cable is then fed through the plough and the wedge of soil replaced as cover over the cable. The simultaneous lay and burial of the cable is then achieved as the cable ship progresses forward and the cable plough buries the cable as described above. Depth of burial is controlled by varying the position of the hydraulically controlled skids.

The controlled operation by which cable ploughs work, “displacing” the sediment into which the cable is lowered, followed by the natural backfilling of the trench, ensures that soil disturbance is kept to a minimum.

An alternative to plough burial is the use of an ROV to bury the cable through water injection liquefaction of the seabed directly under a cable in suitable sediment conditions. Where the conditions allow, this method allows the cable to sink under its own weight when water is injected into the seabed sediment. Subsequently hydraulic pressure and normal seabed process allow the sediment to consolidate again over the cable, achieving burial dependent on the sediment type.

More information on ESCA can be found at www.escaeu.org.