Subsea Cable Repair in the EU: Digital and Energy

Joint Position Statement by ESCA and IMCA in response to the EU Action Plan on Cable Security

Introduction

The European Subsea Cables Association (ESCA) and the International Marine Contractors Association (IMCA) jointly recognise the critical role of subsea telecommunications and power cables in underpinning Europe's digital connectivity and green energy transition. With 99% of international data and increasing volumes of renewable power flowing through this infrastructure, timely and efficient cable repair capabilities are vital to European resilience.

The EU *Joint Communication to strengthen the security and resilience of submarine cables* (21st Feb 2025) and recent initiatives on subsea infrastructure are welcomed, and this statement describes areas where action will be beneficial to meet the Cable Action Plan and so enhance the resilience of subsea cables.

EU Action Plan on Cable Security

The four objectives of the Action Plan focus on prevention, detection, response and deterrence. The current repair ecosystems for telecom and power cables are very different, so efforts to strengthen Europe's capabilities are welcome – but they will only succeed through collaboration with industry.

Below are several points highlighting how industry can support and strengthen the Action Plan's goals, particularly by improving resilience in vessels, skills, equipment, personnel, and investment.

Overview of current repair systems and challenges

The subsea telecommunications cable repair ecosystem is long established and driven by the private sector, with dedicated vessels and personnel distributed across global maintenance zones. These commercial arrangements have enabled high standards, rapid mobilisation, and cost-effective service.

Challenges for telecommunications response and recovery capability include:

- Ageing vessels and equipment
- Maintenance and growth of a skilled workforce– with a focus on attracting personnel to offshore roles
- A need for streamlined licencing or pre-approvals to support a rapid repair response

Subsea power cable repair demand has increased more recently due to growing capacity and investment in offshore transmission and generation. There is a mix of state and private interest between transmission and generation assets and the emergence of offshore grid infrastructure.

Strategic drivers in the subsea power cable sector can affect different subsectors in distinct ways. Key challenges specific to power cables include:

- Procurement and availability of power cable vessels. Vessels are in high demand and may not be readily available when a repair is needed;
- Maintenance and growth of a skilled workforce– with a focus on attracting personnel to offshore roles;
- Regulatory delays – especially in securing emergency permits for rapid repair, even within EU member states;
- Lengthy repair operations due to complex technical requirements.

Across both sectors there has been a rise in delays to repair operations, including post repair protection, so efforts to improve resilience must include a review of regulations to make sure they facilitate and do not impede a timely repair solution.

Distinct Needs - Telecoms vs. Power Cables

Recognising the differences in physical characteristics as well as sectoral differences, including significant economic characteristics, the requirements for repair diverge significantly between subsea telecoms and power cables:

- **Telecommunications cables** benefit from mature repair agreements, lighter construction, and in some jurisdictions – more streamlined permitting regimes or specific pre-approvals or exemptions. In some jurisdictions emergency cable repairs are exempted from regulatory requirements or pre-approved, enabling vessels to mobilise immediately.
- **Power cables** (e.g. interconnectors and offshore wind export cables) can present more complex challenges for repair. They are heavier, technically more demanding to repair, and subject to inconsistent regulatory support between jurisdictions. For instance, post-repair protection measures like rock placement may be required – leading to further regulatory challenges in some cases.

Three themes for boosting the EU's response and recovery plan

1. Public–Private Cooperation and Investment

The EU Action Plan notes concerns around the availability and number of repair vessels. However there are other factors to consider, and the issues facing cable repair requires additional but crucial supporting capabilities.

A coordinated public-private partnership approach should consider:

- Targeted investment in the telecommunications repair ecosystem serving EU and adjacent waters—including vessels and other critical capabilities;
- Collaboration with subsea power cable owners to identify effective, sector-specific repair solutions;
- Harmonisation of regulatory processes across jurisdictions to minimise delays;
- Strategic stockpiling of essential spare parts and equipment to enable rapid response;

  Support for workforce development, including public funding to upskill personnel and promote high-skill offshore careers.

Engagement with the industry on these resilience topics (e.g. through the EU Cable Security Toolbox) provides a platform for necessary alignment between industry and governments.

2. Skills and Workforce: maintaining and growing capability

Subsea cable repair depends on a highly specialised workforce, including cable engineers, jointers, and vessel crew. There is a recognised challenge of an ageing workforce, and recruitment into the sector is a current priority – especially offshore.

Governments must ensure regulators, statutory consultees and advisory bodies are appropriately resourced and informed to be able to manage licence/permit applications to ensure the timely deployment and repair of subsea cables.

ESCA and IMCA jointly recommend:

- National programmes to train and retain specialist deck officers, marine engineers, cable engineers, and jointing specialists
- Integration of subsea repair roles into national resilience strategies (e.g. cross-training naval reserves) to support national capabilities

- Ensure regulators and licensing bodies have sufficient people, resources, skills and knowledge to manage the demand from industry as development increases

Without sustained efforts to attract and retain new skilled people, workforce shortages will become a bottleneck for repair response.

3. Policy Reform: Enabling Faster, Smarter Repair

Regulatory frameworks can either accelerate or obstruct cable repair. Policy that is designed for shipping, environmental protection, fishing or other areas unrelated to subsea cables can create challenges or barriers for rapid repair response. Well-designed exemptions or pre-approvals for emergency repair can significantly reduce delays.

ESCA and IMCA jointly recommend:

- Adoption of fast track permitting or exemptions across EU member states – particularly for telecommunications cable repair.
- Domestic or regional policies across the EU and member states must have an international focus – as subsea cables and the cable repair fleet are international in nature.
- EU or domestic policy in member states relating to subsea cable security and resilience must be outward facing and work with international partners to support common approaches.

For more information:

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