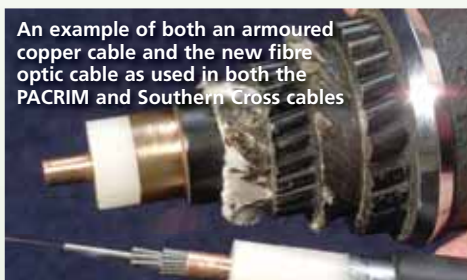


# FISHING FOR CABLES PROVES COSTLY

BY KEITH INGRAM



An example of both an armoured copper cable and the new fibre optic cable as used in both the PACRIM and Southern Cross cables



Delicate fibres carry the majority of the nations communications traffic



An example of a fouled grapnel and the damage it can cause.

After all the publicity about the risk of hooking or damaging submarine cables around our coastal waters over the past few years, one would think the message may have gotten through. But not so, it would appear. Hooking a cable can be a frightening and expensive experience for any skipper of a small vessel and yet we still do it. Why?

The recent court case involving the owner and master of the vessel *Friday Freedom* raises a number of issues now worthy of comment. In this case, the owner of *Friday Freedom* escaped prosecution due to a legal technicality involving the uncertainty of who was in control of the vessels management. It would appear that even the SSM company was uncertain and could not clearly demonstrate, in its systems management procedures, whether it was the owner's or master's responsibility. In this case, the court accepted that the delegated authority rested with the master in charge.

The outcome left the master, Keith Hammond, no option but to plead guilty. After all, he was in command of the vessel when he anchored within a "no anchoring – no fishing" cable area across clearly marked and important submarine cables.

Justice Cunningham said the reason boats are not permitted to anchor or fish in a cable area is because nothing must touch the seabed in the event that the cable could be damaged. The judge pointed out the maximum penalty was a fine of \$100,000 and the seriousness of this offence was between \$20,000 to \$25,000 was the starting point. He accepted there was significant risk to the country if the Southern Cross cable was lost.

We are told that the Southern Cross cable carries 90 percent of all electronic communications in and out of New Zealand. This includes; internet traffic, telecommunications by voice or fax, television broadcasts, news updates and e-commerce transactions. Departing through the Hauraki Gulf cable protection area zone are both the Southern Cross fibre optic cable, which is about as thick as a mans thumb and the older, and a bit thicker, PACRIM East cable, both of which head to Hawaii.

Clearly, judges are now recognising the serious nature of anchoring or fishing in cable protection areas and the risk it poses to New Zealand's security and economy. They are coming down hard on those offenders brought before the courts.

However, in this case the judge, recognising the offender's personal circumstances and that he accepted his responsibilities, fined Hammond \$6,000 plus costs.

We now understand there are a number of other cases under investigation involving both fishing vessels in Cook Strait and social cruise vessels in the Hauraki Gulf. Unfortunately, a number of prominent charter vessels were caught anchored in the zone during the recent Louis Vuitton Pacific Series held on Auckland's Waitemata Harbour.

Unfortunately, it would appear that it is not only professional

skippers who are transgressing. While they should know better and the Courts are coming down harder on them, we are also seeing an increasing number of pleasure craft anchoring and fishing in the cable areas. In this respect, we note that the tendency towards leniency on recreational craft is waning and, given the amount that has been spent on educating the recreational sector, a stronger more pragmatic view is now being adopted by the cable owners and authorities.

The situation is not helped when we see the North Shore City Council terminate their sewage outfall and diffuser right on the edge of the cable area. You guessed it, as soon as this diffuser is functioning and attracts fish, it will soon attract recreational fishermen who will start anchoring in the cable protection areas because these boaties will have no idea where the lines are. Dumb aye!

Looking further south, we have the Taranaki gas pipeline and in Cook Strait, there are some seven active cables plus a number of disused or sleeping cables. We are told that, even where cables have been buried, seabed movement in many cases uncovers the cables, leaving them quite vulnerable, hence the reason now for a more tougher approach. With the Cook Strait cables we are told that, contrary to popular belief, power is flowing from north to south most of the time to protect lake levels and only in peak times is the flow reversed.

If a power cable is damaged, the cost of repair could be around \$60 million with only two ships in the world capable of doing these deep cable repairs. This means that once the ship is booked and leaves its last job, it could be up to a year before the cable is repaired. Not only is it the cost of repairs but the loss in GDP to the country would be huge. For telecommunications using fibre optic cable, the situation is slightly different but the costs of repair are just as real. Fortunately the world's fibre optic cable owners maintain a number of service and repair ships. One is based in the South Pacific as a safeguard for the Southern Cross cable, such is its importance to world communications. Even though the cost of repair to this type of cable is still in the millions of dollars, to lose this cable for say three weeks, the loss to the nation's commerce would likely run into billions of dollars.

Obviously, there is an ongoing cost in preventative maintenance to ensure fishermen and boaties don't damage the cables. This, we are advised, runs into many millions of dollars annually. The upshot of maintaining a patrol presence both on the water and in the air over the past two years has given rise to a huge change in the behaviour attitudes of small craft skippers. Patrollers advise that they frequently see both commercial fishing and charter vessels fishing along the edges of the cable areas. Hopefully this behaviour will flow onto the recreational sector. To be caught doing otherwise can, and will, prove to be expensive as ignorance is no excuse in the eyes of the law.