

**MEDIA RELEASE (for immediate release)**

## **Australia Lags International Best Practice on Costly Underground Utility Strikes; Next Outage or Fatality Will Be a Choice, Not a Surprise**

Government reform is urgently needed to meet international standards for ‘before you dig’ services to avoid costly and potentially fatal underground utility service strikes.

Based on available data, more than 15,000 underground utility strikes occur each year in Australia, costing the national economy \$4.6 billion through project delays, service disruption and productivity loss; exposing workers and communities to serious risk. Most of these incidents are preventable.

New research from Before You Dig Australia (BYDA) examines why these incidents persist and identifies practical reforms – including a national mandate - that governments can implement to significantly improve safety, infrastructure resilience, and project productivity.

“Australia is well behind comparable jurisdictions such as France, Canada and the United States in the legal and regulatory frameworks governing excavation safety,” BYDA CEO Mell Greenall said.

“The problem in Australia is systemic rather than behavioural. While responsibility for preventing strikes often sits with frontline workers, the power to improve underlying conditions rests with governments, regulators, and asset owners.

“What we’re talking about is a 40-year-old system in a high-risk digital age. It is a fragmented information ecosystem that remains largely static and document-based, yet one with consequences for all.”

In short, the evidence shows that the current system is no longer keeping pace with the scale and complexity of Australia’s infrastructure program, Ms Greenall added.

**Case study: [flights, banks, ATMs, businesses all hit by interstate utility strike outage](#)**

### **International leaders leave Australia well behind**

Legal requirements, the availability of industry guidance and codes of practice, and enforcement mechanisms and penalties in countries such as France, Canada and the USA are all much more advanced than what we currently have available here in Australia.

By contrast, France has a comprehensive legal regime mandating ‘before you dig’ notifications at the national level, while Canada has shared responsibility embedded in law while the US equips federal regulators with powers to reinforce or address violations of pipeline safety over and above state responses.

### Where government leadership can make a difference

BYDA's research consistently identifies several policy areas where government action can materially improve safety outcomes and reduce costly service disruptions, including:

1. **Nationally mandating a BYDA enquiry before excavation** within WHS, Electricity and Gas Regulations governing hazardous work. NSW is currently the only state that mandates the BYDA referral service.
2. **Improving the quality and accessibility of underground asset data**, including minimum standards and digital data sharing, which **could save \$782 million a year**.
3. **Using national data insights to support regulators**, enabling targeted enforcement, education, and industry improvement initiatives, consistency of legislation that **could save \$322 million pa**.

"These reforms do not require building a new system. Rather, they involve strengthening the legal and regulatory environment so the existing ecosystem can operate effectively. This is an immediate opportunity for government leadership," Ms Greenall said.

"We must act now, before a major service outage or fatality event. The research in this report highlights an unavoidable situation: incremental improvement will not be enough. Decisions must be made now to prevent what we see as an inevitable serious incident involving an underground service strike.

"If nothing changes, the next fatality or outage is not a surprise - it's a choice."

### For further information or requests to interview BYDA CEO Mell Greenall, contact:

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#### About Before You Dig Australia

BYDA is a not-for-profit, industry-led organisation that operates Australia's national "before you dig" referral service. Each year we facilitate more than 2.7 million requests for underground utility information from contractors, engineers, councils and the public. Our role is to connect those planning excavation with the asset owners responsible for critical infrastructure to prevent damage, disruption and injury.

#### About the research

*Australia's Underground Utility Safety Reckoning* draws on extensive evidence, including stakeholder interviews, national surveys of asset owners and service users, academic research, and an international review of regulatory frameworks. Download the full report [here](#).