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Lighthouse vandals face tough jail terms

By Phillip Hudson, Canberra
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VANDALS face 10 years in jail for damage to lighthouses or other crucial navigation aids under tough new maritime laws aimed at preventing a "shipping catastrophe".

The maximum penalty of a \$220 fine has been dramatically increased by the Federal Government because it was not seen as a deterrent.

The Government has also been warned that shipowners might not be liable to pay compensation for an oil spill if broken navigation aids were to blame.

Transport Minister Warren Truss said vandalism at historic lighthouses around the country ranged from graffiti to more serious crimes such as people stealing or damaging solar panels and breaking into lighthouses to damage equipment.

In some cases guns have been fired at the optical equipment, which has "put out" lights.

"This has the potential for a shipping catastrophe," Mr Truss said.

"Australia's first-rate network of maritime navigational aids is a vital factor in preventing the tragic loss of life and oil pollution that can result from a serious shipping incident caused by navigational error."

The deliberate damage of a lighthouse or navigation aid will carry a maximum jail term of 10 years. Damage caused by reckless conduct will have a seven-year sentence, while damage from negligence will carry a penalty of up to \$22,000.

"The current penalty levels are grossly inadequate for the serious implications for safety of life at sea and protection of the marine environment if a shipping incident occurred due to interference with a marine navigational aid," Mr Truss said.

"It is appropriate that penalties be increased to represent a meaningful punishment and hence deterrence."

He said coastal communities also highly prized their historic lighthouses for their heritage and cultural value. Some are also tourist attractions.

The shipping industry pays a levy to repair damage and it is passed on to the community through higher transport costs, he said.

But shipowners have the ability under international convention to limit their liability to pay compensation for an oil spill or other damage if the navigation aid was broken.

"This is a serious concern for government, which would have to bear the potentially high costs of the pollution response and clean-up effort," Mr Truss said.

The new laws cover 430 navigation aids such as lighthouses, unlit beacons, radar, radar transponder beacons, tide gauges, automatic identification system base stations and bases for differential global positioning systems. Many are in remote areas.

Victoria's Port Lonsdale lighthouse is operated by the Port of Melbourne Corporation.

A spokesman said it was a communications centre for safe navigation. "It's a significant asset and its recent refurbishment by the port reflects this ... we would welcome any measures that would prevent or deter any malicious damage."

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