

# Cowboy traders blighting solar power industry

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MORE than 900 complaints about solar panel installations, worth \$7 million, have been lodged with NSW Fair Trading this year, as homeowners increasingly find themselves victims of faulty installations, unfinished work and unlicensed workmen.

The department has also suspended licences or imposed hefty fines on at least 35 solar panel installers, prompting the Fair Trading Minister, Anthony Roberts, to warn that the industry had become a "total magnet for cowboys".

"What we have seen is a lot of these cowboys have moved on from pink batts to solar panels and they are doing a dodgy job, especially in regional and rural areas, and leaving people with all sorts of problems," he said.

Mr Roberts said complaints ranged from panels not being supplied to shoddy work and incorrect installations.

"We have heard of cases where the contract has said someone would be given German-built panels or equivalent and the equivalent turns up and are cheap panels made in China."

He said each complaint that had been lodged with his department was worth about \$10,600.

"This is going to keep costing the taxpayer because we have all the Consumer, Trader and Tenancy Tribunal generated issues and the Fair Trading audit costs so, at the end of the day, we are involved in a mopping up exercise," he said.

A spokeswoman for the department said the number of complaints had been increasing each month since May, when the government released its first audit of panels in Port Macquarie which found problems with 16 of 55 installations.

A further audit in June revealed 122 homes in Baulkham Hills, Blacktown and Kellyville had major defects in their solar panel systems that could cause fires and another 418 homes had minor defects.

A Coogee resident, Bill Hayes, lodged a complaint with Fair Trading this month after the panels he had installed on his property in March last year were switched off by an Ausgrid inspector who deemed them a potential fire risk.

But when Mr Hayes attempted to have the problem rectified by the company he had used, he was told the installer contracted to the company was unlicensed and under investigation.

Mr Hayes was eventually forced to pay for another electrician to turn his solar panels back on.

"I was told by the company that it was not their responsibility, but the panels were turned off for at least a month, and in the end I gave up waiting and just asked a local electrician I know to come and turn them back on," he said.

Mr Roberts vowed to continue to crack down on unlicensed installers who should not be working in the industry.

"I am prepared to suspend licenses of electricians and name them if they have done dodgy work," Mr Roberts said.

"We had a sustainable industry that was working really well until the federal government, and the former NSW government, shovelled money into it and it just became another pink batts."