

Vic planning minister fast-tracks Western Renewables Link build

Victoria's Planning Minister is powering ahead with construction of the 190km Western Renewables Link transmission project, making major planning amendments.

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Landholders have been battling to stop the WRL for seven years. Picture: David Caird

The Carroll government has forced through planning amendments this week that fast-track construction of the 190km Western Renewables Link from Sydenham to Bulgana by stripping councils of their planning powers.

Planning Minister Sonya Kilkenny introduced the GC209 amendment on Wednesday, which grants her the power to “exempt the project from requiring a planning permit” from any of the six councils along the route.

[Ms Kilkenny stated the amendment made her “the responsible authority](#) for administering and enforcing the provisions of the Ballarat, Hepburn, Melton, Moorabool, Northern Grampians and Pyrenees planning schemes as they relate to the use and development of land for the Western Renewables Link”.

It means WRL proponent AusNet can quickly set up accommodation for workers building the transmission line, develop terminal station sites and the route, as well as a raft of other activities, without having to seek council planning permits.

The move comes despite Premier Ben Carroll's mid-September decision to pause compulsory acquisition of private properties along the route and launch an independent review into its \$4bn cost.

Community advocate Vicki Johnson, who has campaigned against the project, said it appeared Labor was in disarray as the Premier talked about reassessing the project, while the Planning Minister was doing all she could to roll out WRL.

The minister's powers apply to all land parcels, including those that may only have the smallest section of a block covered by the WRL easement.

Ms Johnson said some of the "parcels were very large and only had a tiny bit of the proposed easement in them.

"It's a land grab so that AusNet can shift the route around and then put the 'final' design to the Minister for approval," she said.

[Section four of the incorporated document that implements the amendment states:](#) "No planning permit is required for and no provision in the planning scheme operates to prohibit, restrict or regulate the use or development of the (WRL) project land."

That development includes "utility installations, including a new terminal station, upgrades of existing terminal stations and new transmission line infrastructure", plus any building or works or associated infrastructure activities, earthworks, kerbs, channels, water quality and soil treatment structures or works, retaining walls, noise and screening barriers, cuttings, batters and fill.

Tourella potato grower Katherine Myers, whose family's property is set to be carved up by the 500kV WRL transmission line, said "at every step the government has removed this project from the normal checks and balances".

"First from the requirement to follow national energy law, [second to require a completed environmental effects statement prior to compulsory acquisition](#) and now affected councils," she said.

Opposition energy spokesman David Davis said Ms Kilkenny's actions showed "an arrogant planning minister had yet again intervened to tear away the powers of local councils and the community".

Even ancillary activities that are required to build WRL have been exempted from planning permit requirements, including:

USE and development of laydown areas for construction purposes.

TEMPORARY workforce accommodation, workshops, storage, administration and amenities buildings.

REMOVING, destroying and lopping trees and vegetation, including native vegetation and dead vegetation.

DEMOLISHING, removing or relocating buildings and infrastructure.

CONSTRUCTION or carrying out works for excavation, stabilisation, mounds, landscaping, the salvage of artefacts, water treatment, water storage and flood mitigation.

RESTORATION and reinstatement works.

ROADWORKS and constructing and using temporary access roads, diversion roads and vehicle parking areas.

TEMPORARY stockpiling of excavation material.

CONSTRUCTION of fences, temporary site barriers and site security (including security lighting).