

‘Secret deals’: Farmers demand probe into \$4bn WRL

Victorian farmers have demanded the Carroll government’s Royal Commission be extended to investigate the Western Renewables Link’s cost blowout from \$1.5bn to more than \$4bn.

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Landholders want the Big Build Royal Commission to investigate Labor’s handling of the Western Renewables Link project. Picture: Zoe Phillips

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Farmers are demanding the Royal Commission into Victoria’s Big Build investigate a secret government deal on AusNet’s 500kV Western Renewables Link and determine why its cost has blown out from \$1.5bn to more than \$4bn.

Members of the Western Victorian Community Alliance, whose properties are set to be carved up by the 190km transmission line, have already lodged a submission with the Royal Commission asking it to “examine whether any corruption, criminal conduct or serious misconduct affected its procurement, contractual arrangements, construction costs or oversight”.

Alliance spokesman Steve Harper said one of the key issues was [the government signing off on the WRL environmental effects statement last month, based on a cost of \\$1.53bn](#).

He said the low-ball costing was used despite the transmission line developer Brookfield Infrastructure, AusNet’s largest shareholder, releasing its 2025 calendar year financials in March that stated WRL was a “\$4bn 500-kilovolt transmission augmentation project”.

“If the government was aware of the \$4bn cost of the WRL in March 2026, why did the government allow the EES to be released with a cost of \$1.53bn?”, Mr Harper said.

The alliance has also asked the commission to investigate if the WRL was uprated by Labor to provide more construction work for Labor-aligned unions.

Premier Carroll has promised an independent review into the cost of WRL.

But Victorian Energy Policy centre director Bruce Mountain “it may be more appropriate that these matters also be referred to the Royal Commission”, arguing the government and its transmission planner VicGrid had withheld the true cost of WRL from the public.

“WRL has not been subject to a credible economic assessment; evidence of this serious withholding of critical information.”

Professor Mountain said former premier Jacinta Allan even “referred to Victoria’s transmission expansion as the next ‘big build’.”

The government has also excluded the Australian Energy Regulator from having oversight of AusNet’s expenditure and maximum revenue from WRL.

[In June, S&P Global released a research update on AusNet’s credit rating that stated “once WRL is commissioned, we expect a long-dated, consumer price](#)

[index-linked annuity](#) should reduce the company's earnings volatility given it is not subject to regulatory resets".

Mr Harper said it "exposes more of the government's 'secret WRL strategy' and a 'hidden funding deal' with AusNet.

"(It's) a further blatant example of Labor doing 'back room' deals for a major project which are not disclosed, to circumvent normal regulatory oversight and to hide the true cost of the WRL from public view".

Last month Opposition Upper House member for Western Victoria [Bev McArthur called on the government "disclose the commercial payment arrangements underpinning the Western Renewables Link"](#).

"Indeed the Australian Energy Market Commission has expressly noted that Victoria's contestable transmission contracts are confidential, meaning there is no publicly available information about the costs or other conditions of successful bids or how they compare with a regulated alternative," she said.

"It identified WRL as the only major transmission project then being delivered through this Victorian contestability model."

Energy Minister Jaclyn Symes refused to comment on the Royal Commission examining the WRL, but did say "we've also put additional oversight in place, using the state's regulatory and contractual powers to oversee project costs and delivery".