



**ENERGY
CONSUMERS
AUSTRALIA**

A Suite 2, Level 14, 1 Castlereagh Street
Sydney NSW 2000

T 02 9220 5500

W energyconsumersaustralia.com.au

TW @energyvoiceau

in /energyconsumersaustralia

f /energyconsumersaustralia

ABN 96 603 931 326

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Energy networks move to support consumers hit hard by health and economic shocks

The decision by energy networks in New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia to shield consumers in financial hardship from energy bill pressure during the COVID-19 pandemic is positive and now requires further work in consultation with consumers.

Energy Consumers Australia CEO Lynne Gallagher last week called for energy companies to move swiftly to enact measures that meet the Australian Energy Regulator's statement of expectations for the sector.

"This is a significant, coordinated initiative by investor-owned networks that reflects the extraordinary health and economic shocks that have hit Australian households and businesses.

"Network charges make up nearly half of the average energy bill, so we welcome this decision to waive and defer costs for affected consumers for a three-month period.

"We stand ready to work with the networks and energy companies on issues around eligibility, timing and how it fits together with other measures to support consumers.

Ms Gallagher acknowledged that governments in Western Australia, Tasmania, Queensland and the Northern Territory had swiftly introduced assistance packages so that people, including small business owners, could pay their energy bills and keep the power on.

Ms Gallagher said that the energy industry needed to work together and with governments and other stakeholders to ensure consumers could continue to access essential energy services without anxiety about being disconnected.

"While we hope the pandemic can be contained - and the economy restarted - as quickly as possible, we need to be prepared to scale-up and extend support to meet the need.

"Commitments by some retailers in recent days to scale-up their hardship programs and not disconnect consumers doing it tough is positive.

"Strong leadership and a whole of sector response is needed to ease the pressure on households and small businesses now and protect them from bill shock after the storm passes."

Media Contact: Tim O'Halloran 0409 059 617