

Final decision: United Energy (distribution) 2016–20

We have made a final decision for United Energy, one of five electricity distribution network operators in Victoria. Our final decision allows United Energy to recover \$2106.1 million (\$nominal) from its customers over five years commencing 1 January 2016.

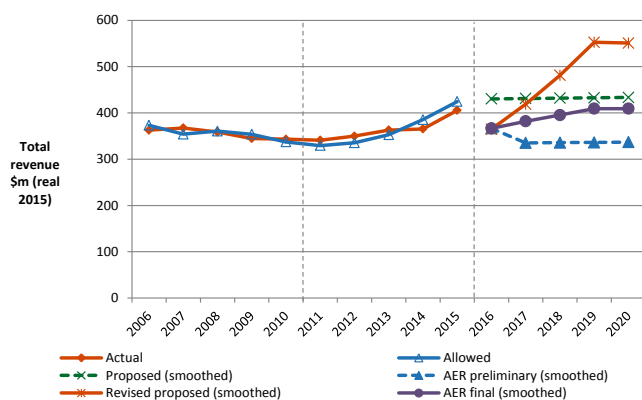
Overview

The Australian Energy Regulator (AER) regulates the revenues of United Energy by setting the annual revenue requirement it may recover from its customers.

Our final decision allows United Energy to recover \$2106.1 million (\$nominal) from its customers over five years commencing 1 January 2016. If we had accepted United Energy's revised proposal, it would have been permitted to recover \$2551.2 million (\$nominal) over the 2016–20 regulatory control period. Our final decision is for 17.4 per cent less revenue than United Energy's revised proposal.

The figure below shows the difference between United Energy's proposed revenue, and what we have allowed for each year of the final decision.

United Energy's past and proposed total revenue and AER final decision revenue allowance (\$million, 2015)



Note: Revenues relate to standard control services only.

In October 2015, we published our preliminary decision for United Energy which took effect on 1 January 2016. Our preliminary decision formed the basis for approving prices for the first year of the regulatory control period (2016).

The revenue we determine affects the distribution component of a customer's electricity bill. Distribution charges may make up approximately 24 per cent of the bill for one of United Energy's typical residential customers.

Other components of customer bills include the cost of generation, transmission, network charges and retailer costs. The AER does not set retail prices.

Estimated impact on customer bills

We estimate the expected bill impact for United Energy's customers by varying only the distribution and metering charges covered by our final decision. This isolates the effect of our decision on electricity prices, since other components of customer bills (such as wholesale energy generation or retail costs) are not affected by this decision.

We estimate that average annual residential bills for residential customers decreased by \$91 (or –5.4 per cent) in 2016 as a result of our October 2015 preliminary decision. We expect that our final decision will cause annual bills to stay almost flat in 2017 (decrease by \$4 or –0.2 per cent). We then expect that bills will increase in 2018 (+\$17) and 2019 (+\$19) before staying almost flat in 2020 (+\$5).

For small business customers, we estimate that average annual bills decreased by \$121 (or –3.4 per cent) in 2016. We expect that annual bills will increase slightly in 2017 (by \$24 or 0.7 per cent). We also expect increases in 2018 (+\$39), 2018 (+\$44) and 2020 (+\$13).

These are indicative average impacts only, and individual customers' actual bills will depend on their usage patterns, chosen retail tariff structure, and any changes in costs for other components of electricity bills. You can read more about what makes up the energy prices on customers' bills at: www.aer.gov.au/Consumers

Key elements of our decision

We based our assessment of United Energy's proposed revenue on a number of components. These include expenditures to maintain and operate the network, and the return to shareholders on their investment. Together, these determine the revenue United Energy may recover from its customers.

Three components of our final decision drive most of the difference between United Energy's revised proposed revenue and our final decision: rate of return, operating expenditure (opex) and capital expenditure (capex).

We discuss each of these below.

Rate of return

Significant investment is required to build a distribution network. The return United Energy must pay lenders and investors is referred to as the rate of return. Even a small difference in the rate of return can have a big impact on revenues.

Our final decision sets the allowed rate of return at 6.37 per cent for 2016. We have not accepted United Energy’s revised proposed rate of return of 8.70 per cent.

The investment environment has improved since our previous decision in 2010, which was made during the period of uncertainty surrounding the global financial crisis. This is reflected in a lower rate of return in this decision. We consider that United Energy has sought a rate of return that is higher than necessary given the current investment environment.

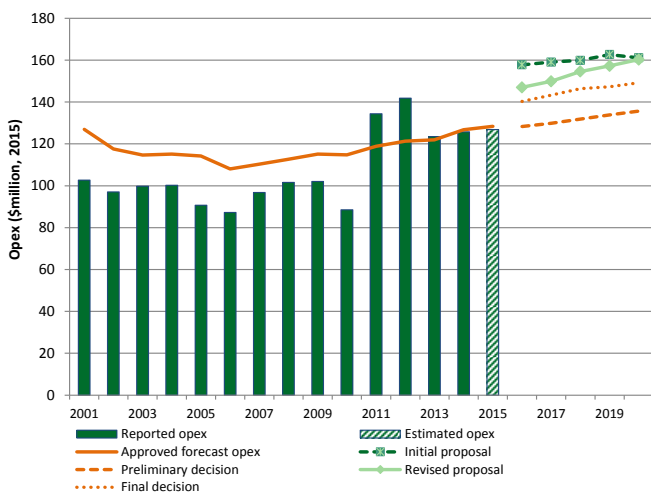
We have not accepted the methodology proposed by United Energy to set its rate of return. Instead, we have used the methodology we developed through extensive consultation during our Better Regulation program in 2013. We consider that our approach provides for a rate of return that better reflects the allowed rate of return objective.

Operating expenditure

Opex includes forecast operating, maintenance and other non-capital costs incurred in the provision of distribution network services. It includes labour and other non-capital costs that United Energy is likely to require during the 2016–20 regulatory control period for the efficient operation of its network.

Our final decision allows United Energy to recover \$726.3 million (\$2015) for opex. This is 6.2 per cent lower than the \$774.8 million United Energy proposed.

AER final decision compared to United Energy's past and proposed opex (\$million, 2015)



The National Electricity Rules require us to be satisfied that the level of opex proposed by United Energy reflects the opex criteria: the costs that a prudent operator—with efficient costs and a realistic expectation of demand and cost inputs—would need to operate its network safely and comply with its obligations and service standards.

In recent years, we have expanded our regulatory toolkit to

make greater use of benchmarking—particularly for opex. Benchmarking is a way of determining how well a network business is performing against its peers and over time, and provides valuable information on what is ‘best practice’.

Our opex benchmarking results show United Energy has been operating efficiently compared to other service providers in the National Electricity Market. We therefore have used United Energy’s revealed (past actual) costs as the starting point for forecasting efficient opex.

We then assess the prudence and efficiency of forecast cost increases going forward. Overall, we consider that United Energy has proposed more revenue than is required to operate its network prudently and efficiently.

Capital expenditure

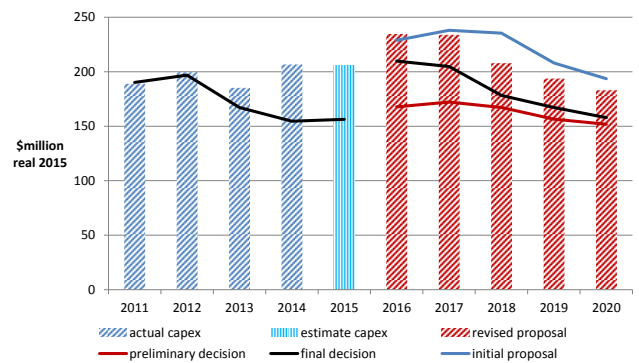
Capex refers to the cost of building new facilities or replacing existing infrastructure. Factors that influence our required level of capex include the age and condition of existing assets.

As with opex, we must be satisfied that the level of capex proposed by United Energy reflects the capex criteria: the costs that a prudent operator—with efficient costs and a realistic expectation of demand and cost inputs—would need to operate its network safely and comply with its obligations and service standards.

We have estimated total forecast net capex of \$917.8 million (\$2015) for United Energy’s 2016–20 regulatory control period. This is 12.8 per cent lower than the \$1053.0 million United Energy proposed.

Our capex allowance includes additional expenditure from new safety obligations arising as a result of the recommendations of the 2009 Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission.

AER final decision compared to United Energy's past and proposed capex (\$million, 2015)



For more information:

More information on our final decision can be found on our website: www.aer.gov.au.