



# Watchdog puts energy retailers on notice

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Australia's energy retailers have been put on notice that the way they treat retail customers struggling with financial hardship will come under close scrutiny in the face of soaring power prices.

The comments by Australian Energy Regulator chairman Paula Conboy follow the release of figures this week that revealed a rise in the number of electricity disconnections and higher levels of energy debt held by those customers not in a formal hardship program.

The AER is pushing ahead with an investigation into disconnection practices and hardship programs run by the electricity retailers amid signs consumers are struggling with electricity prices that have doubled in the past decade and continue to rise as wholesale power prices soar.

Ms Conboy said retailers' compliance with their hardship

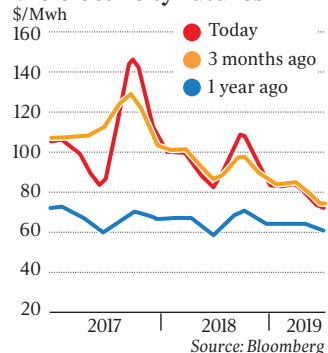
obligations would get "close attention" from the AER in the coming year.

"We are reviewing retailer hardship policies to ensure that all retailers are identifying, engaging with and providing appropriate assistance to customers," Ms Conboy told *The Australian*.

"Hardship policies need to provide real assistance to more consumers. We will use all the tools available to us to ensure

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## Vic electricity futures



## Energy regulator puts retailers on notice on hardship policy

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retailers are meeting their obligations to customers in this very important area," Ms Conboy added.

Her comments come as a report by UBS found wholesale electricity prices in the December quarter to date are running at 34 per cent above the same time last year. Wholesalers are receiving \$65.22 per megawatt hour, up from \$48.66 a MWh this time last year. UBS said they were primarily driven by a Victorian wholesale prices, which have surged 128 per cent in the wake of the closure of the Hazelwood coal-

fired plant.

The findings also come ahead of a meeting of state and federal energy ministers tomorrow to consider progress on measures to reduce electricity and gas prices.

The federal government is hoping to build support from the states for a National Energy Guarantee that it claims will save \$120 a year on household electricity prices by requiring retailers to buy mandated shares of energy from both renewable and ready-to-use sources.

Ms Conboy said the Energy Security Board — formed by the federal government to co-ordi-

nate activities by Australia's three peak energy bodies, including the AER — hoped to get support from the states to further develop the National Energy Guarantee. "We need to get going on this. Lets roll up our sleeves," Ms Conboy said.

She said the AER had been given extra resources to investigate the retailers' hardship programs and disconnection practices, as well as to improve customer awareness about options for dealing with higher energy bills: "Consumers need to be in no doubt that are actively monitoring the market and that we will take action where businesses fail their obligations."