



Submission to Infrastructure Victoria's 30-Year Strategy (2025)

Wimmera Southern Mallee Development

Date: 28 April 2025

Wimmera Southern Mallee Development welcomes the opportunity to put forward a submission to Infrastructure Victoria's 2021-2051 Strategy. Please find in this document an outline of infrastructure investment priorities for our region to overcome existing barriers and to allow growth in the Wimmera Southern Mallee region.

Unlocking Regional Prosperity through Targeted Infrastructure Investment

"The Wimmera Southern Mallee (WSM) region is undergoing transformative change. Long recognised as one of Victoria's most productive and progressive agricultural landscapes, the region now finds itself at the intersection of emerging economic forces: agri-food processing, renewable energy, critical minerals mining, and strategic freight corridors.

Strategic, targeted infrastructure investment is essential to harness and amplify these forces. Without coordinated infrastructure investment, WSM risks becoming a site of extraction with limited local benefit which increases regional resistance resulting in stalled major projects and missed opportunity to build resilient, decentralised economic systems. With coordinated investment, WSM can serve as a hub of sustainable regional development, a national exemplar of inclusive, planned growth that delivers shared prosperity."

A coordinated infrastructure plan is vital to:

- Integrate infrastructure systems so that agri-food precincts, industrial zones, and housing developments are fully serviced with digital, energy, and freight access.
- Reduce disruption by co-locating infrastructure corridors and minimising the cumulative impact of fragmented development.
- Maximise return on investment by aligning infrastructure in energy, transport, housing, and services to ensure cross-sector efficiency.
- Accelerate economic transformation through streamlined investment in emerging industries such as advanced food processing and hydrogen production.
- Leverage state and national synergies by aligning WSM infrastructure planning with broader Victorian and Commonwealth growth agendas.

These strategic benefits underscore the necessity of a comprehensive infrastructure approach that supports the region's evolving economic base and ensures enduring prosperity for its communities.

The following key regional infrastructure investment priorities are highlighted as critical to enable growth:

Agri-Food Processing Precincts

Develop precinct-scale infrastructure for food manufacturing, energy, water, waste, and digital connectivity. This will catalyse regional economic growth by supporting high-value food industries, reducing supply chain risks, and increasing local employment.

Energy and Freight Corridor Integration

Plan for multi-purpose corridors incorporating transmission, freight, hydrogen, and connectivity infrastructure. These corridors are essential for boosting efficiency, reducing transport bottlenecks, and enabling regional industry to access growing national and export markets.

Local Renewable Energy Access

Enable local use of regionally generated energy via policy reform and infrastructure for microgrids and hydrogen industries. This will drive down energy costs, enhance industrial competitiveness, and support decarbonisation goals.

Workforce Housing and Community Infrastructure

Invest in housing-enabling works, regional health, childcare, education, and skills services. These investments are vital to attract and retain a skilled workforce and ensure inclusive regional population growth.

Circular Economy and Water Infrastructure

Establish industrial-scale circular economy hubs and integrated water systems. These systems will improve sustainability, reduce environmental impact, and enable resilient industry operations.

First Nations Infrastructure Participation

Economically support Traditional Owner-led infrastructure engagement through resourcing appropriate skills to enhance meaningful First Nations participation. This ensures inclusive development that respects Country and builds long-term Indigenous economic participation.

These investments are not just important for WSM—they are critical to Victoria's long-term success. By unlocking latent potential and removing barriers to industry development, Infrastructure Victoria can catalyse a decade of transformation in one of the state's most strategically positioned regions.

Overview of the Wimmera Southern Mallee Region and Growth Objectives

The Wimmera Southern Mallee (WSM) region, located in western Victoria, is home to approximately 54,000 residents across 24 towns. Horsham, the regional centre, anchors the area with over 16,000 people, supported by towns such as Stawell, Warracknabeal, Nhill, St Arnaud, Kaniva, Edenhope, and Donald. These communities form the backbone of a region long known for its global-scale agricultural productivity. Our region delivers 45% of Victoria's broadacre crops, and 89% of Victoria's lentil production.

The region is defined by its open landscapes, fertile agricultural land, and a growing array of infrastructure assets in energy, mining, transport, and food production. WSM's strategic geographic location places it at the crossroads of Victoria's major east-west and north-south freight and energy networks. Its strengths include grain, pulses, and oilseed farming, emerging energy generation zones, mineral sands deposits, and increasingly sophisticated food manufacturing.

Wimmera Southern Mallee Development (WSM Development) envisions a prosperous and growing region. It has set a bold but achievable population growth target of 61,000 residents by 2032. This reflects an ambition to shift from a narrative of population stagnation to one of proactive growth. Realising this ambition requires coordinated investment across infrastructure categories to support population retention and attraction, economic diversification, and climate-resilient development.

The goals of WSM Development include:

- Establishing the region as a national leader in agri-food value chains
- Advocating for energy access fairness for our region, which seems set to do the heavy lifting in renewable energy generation but which may not have access to the energy produced
- Creating enduring regional jobs through ensuring investment in energy and mining is undertaken in such a way as to enhance enduring regional benefits by advocating for local skills and training, employment and procurement
- Advocating for infrastructure investment in freight, housing, and other barriers to growth
- Building inclusive infrastructure that respects and integrates Traditional Owner leadership
- Supporting thriving, connected communities with world-class services and liveability

By investing in these strategic objectives, WSM can become a hub of innovation and resilience, providing lasting value to the Victorian and national economy.

Key regional infrastructure investment priorities in the Wimmera Southern Mallee Region

To achieve the region's ambitious goals, WSM Development has identified six core infrastructure investment categories.

These categories represent the pillars upon which the region's economic, environmental, and social transformation depends. Each category has been developed through regional consultation, economic analysis, and infrastructure planning.

The investment categories are designed to:

- Unlock the region's comparative advantages in food production, energy generation, and logistics
- Address long-standing infrastructure deficits that hinder population and industry growth
- Catalyse private sector investment and innovation
- Ensure infrastructure delivers enduring community benefit and climate resilience
- Reflect the values and aspirations of local communities, including Traditional Owners

These categories are not isolated priorities—they are interlinked and mutually reinforcing. Progress in one area, such as regional equality to energy access, supports growth in others, such as food manufacturing or circular economy initiatives.

The following sections outline each category in detail, highlighting the specific infrastructure investments required, their expected impacts, and the regional rationale underpinning each.

1. Agri-Food Processing Precincts

WSM has the potential to become a national centre for high-value agri-food processing and the regions strategic advantages are already being recognised by industry with multiple new value-add projects announced or at late stage planning but yet unannounced.

Agriculture has long been the foundation of the region's economy, contributing more than 20% of its gross regional product. It accounts for approximately 45% of Victoria's broadacre crop production, including globally competitive lentils, chickpeas, cereals, and oilseeds.

However, the region currently exports the majority of this produce in raw form, losing much of the potential value to processors located in metropolitan areas or overseas. At the same time, the cost of freight from farm gate to processing facility—and eventually to market—remains one of the largest financial and emissions burdens in the food value chain.

Developing regional agri-food precincts that process commodities close to where they are grown can significantly cut freight costs, reduce emissions, increase supply chain resilience, and retain more economic value locally. This also allows producers to better respond to global market volatility and consumer demand for high-quality, traceable, and sustainable food products.

Recent investments in pulse protein extraction, potato processing, and export hay have demonstrated WSM's potential. However, a lack of designated industrial land, energy and water access, and specialised infrastructure are major barriers to scaling these opportunities. Housing stocks in the region overall are ageing, to allow appropriate asset renewal and to support population growth it is estimated that 3,000 new homes are needed by 2032.

Strategic infrastructure investment is required to support both large-scale processors and emerging agri-tech innovators in realising this vision. Its globally recognised agricultural output in grains, pulses, and oilseeds provides a foundation for localised value-adding that reduces freight costs, increases employment, and supports food security. However, this opportunity hinges on precinct-scale investments in energy, water, waste, and transport infrastructure that can support modern manufacturing facilities.

Key Regional Infrastructure Investment Priorities:

- **Designated Industrial Precincts:** Enhance or establish food processing zones in strategic locations such as Horsham, Warracknabeal, and Nhill, co-located with major agricultural production areas.
- **Utility Infrastructure:** Ensure reliable energy (including renewables), high-speed digital, and three-phase power availability to support high-throughput processing facilities.
- **Water and Waste Systems:** Implement recycled water networks and waste treatment facilities to enable sustainable industrial operations.
- **Specialised Support Infrastructure:** Invest in cool storage, packaging, logistics facilities, and innovation hubs to enable market access and innovation.

WSM's agri-food potential is constrained by limited industrial infrastructure. Without investment, value-adding opportunities will continue to migrate to metropolitan areas or overseas. Strategic investment will reduce transport emissions, strengthen regional employment, and position Victoria as a global leader in decentralised food processing.

2. Energy and Freight Corridor Integration

WSM's geographic location makes it ideal for the development of shared freight corridors and has already been identified by State Government as a priority renewable energy production region. The WSM is set to do much of the heavy lifting for Victoria's renewable energy distribution and transmission infrastructure, with multiple large-scale wind, solar, and battery storage projects planned. As transmission networks expand across the region, it is vital that this infrastructure is planned in coordination with freight and road upgrades to minimise land-use conflict and long-term agricultural disruption and to maximise the overlooked opportunities to local industry by ensuring our region has access to energy.

The scale of infrastructure investment forecast for WSM creates a once-in-a-generation opportunity to build multi-purpose corridors that support not just energy transmission, but also the freight and logistics capacity required to sustain the region's economic growth. These corridors can deliver increased efficiency, economic return, and lower agricultural and environmental impact if designed from the outset as integrated infrastructure assets. These corridors will underpin the efficient movement of goods and electricity while minimising land-use impacts.

Key Regional Infrastructure Investment Priorities:

- **Horsham Bypass Completion:** Ensure HPFV-compatible bypass routing around Horsham for east-west freight and strategic national transport routes.
- **Intermodal Terminal Development:** Expand rail-freight capability at Horsham to connect road and rail logistics for improved east-west and north-south movement.
- **Horsham and Nhill Airport Development:** Upgrade Horsham Airport and explore development of Nhill Airport to support regional air freight, business travel, emergency response, and logistics capacity—boosting accessibility,

decentralising freight infrastructure, and enabling economic diversification across energy, agribusiness, and mining sectors.

- **Strategic Road and Bridge Upgrades:** Reinforce freight reliability by upgrading critical bridges and pavement to carry modern freight loads.
- **Multi-Use Corridors:** Coordinate infrastructure delivery (energy, freight, fibre, hydrogen pipelines) in planned alignments to reduce cost and agricultural and community impact.

Current infrastructure is fragmented and under-scaled for regional freight and local energy distribution growth. Without strategic planning, duplication and land-use conflict will hinder social licence for proposed projects. Integrated investment will reduce costs, streamline logistics, and support WSM's role as a statewide freight and energy gateway.

3. Local Renewable Energy Access

Despite WSM's abundance of proposed renewable energy generation and transmission projects, energy produced will be exported out of the region due to restrictive grid and market rules. The region is expected to carry a disproportionate share of the burden for Victoria's clean energy future—hosting wind farms, solar arrays, battery installations, and the transmission infrastructure required to deliver this power to the state's major population centres.

However, while WSM is targeted to produce this energy, local businesses, industries, and residents often remain unable to benefit directly from it. In fact, many WSM communities experience energy poverty, facing high electricity prices and limited access to affordable renewable power. This situation is both economically inefficient and inherently unfair.

Local people see massive infrastructure built in their backyards—transmission towers, substation expansions, and access easements—while being told they must pay retail rates or remain disconnected from the energy transition. This imbalance is eroding social licence and increasing opposition to projects that should be delivering shared prosperity.

Rectifying this inequity is critical. Unlocking local energy access is not just about affordability—it's about fairness, resilience, and building public trust in Victoria's renewable future.

Key Regional Infrastructure Investment Priorities:

- **Behind-the-Meter Enablement:** Reform regulations and network tariffs to allow shared-use generation between businesses within precincts.
- **Industrial Microgrids:** Develop demonstration projects in Horsham and Stawell to test scalable precinct-level microgrids with backup storage.
- **Hydrogen and Ammonia Facilities:** Plan and fund hydrogen and ammonia manufacturing and storage facilities near agricultural hubs.
- **Precinct Energy Design:** Create planning templates for energy-smart precincts that minimise peak load and use renewable supply effectively.

WSM is producing clean energy for the grid, yet local businesses face limited power supply and high retail power prices. Enabling local use of energy will attract new investment, enhance economic resilience, and support the decarbonisation of agriculture and manufacturing.

4. Workforce Housing and Community Infrastructure

Population and workforce growth in WSM is constrained by limited housing and essential services. This constraint is becoming more critical as major developments in energy, mining, and agri-food processing continue to increase local employment and housing demand. Despite projected population growth, there remains a severe mismatch between housing availability and workforce requirements across most WSM towns.

Barriers to Growth attributable to housing infrastructure in the WSMD Include:

- **Chronic undersupply of housing stock:** Rental vacancy rates remain near zero in Horsham and key surrounding towns, with minimal new stock entering the market.
- **Developer reluctance:** Low population density and limited infrastructure deter developers from investing without government-backed enabling infrastructure.
- **Aging and unsuitable stock:** Much of the available housing is outdated or not suited to modern workforce needs, particularly for families and migrant workers.
- **Strain on essential services:** Health, education, and childcare infrastructure is already stretched, limiting the region's ability to attract and retain professionals.
- **Transport and mobility limitations:** Many potential workers in surrounding areas face challenges commuting due to a lack of reliable intraregional public transport.

These issues directly impact workforce attraction for emerging industries, local government service delivery, and the liveability of regional towns. Without a significant uplift in housing supply and social infrastructure, economic and population growth goals will not be realised.

Key Regional Infrastructure Investment Priorities:

- **Housing-Enabling Infrastructure:** Provide upfront funding for roads, drainage, sewer, and water services to unlock housing-ready land in towns like Nhill, St Arnaud, and Kaniva.
- **Affordable Housing Models:** Support regional-scale partnerships for key worker housing and mixed-tenure developments.
- **Health and Education Facilities:** Upgrade GP clinics, childcare centres, and VET infrastructure to attract and retain families.
- **Public Transport and Connectivity:** Invest in intraregional transport to reduce workforce isolation and increase labour mobility.

Without adequate housing and services, industry expansion will stall due to labour shortages. Investment will catalyse new housing development, reduce rental market pressure, and underpin regional liveability.

5. Circular Economy and Water Infrastructure

WSM must prepare for future demands on water and waste management linked to industry growth. As food processing, energy generation, and mining sectors expand, the region will generate significantly more organic, industrial, and packaging waste. At the same time, water security is becoming more fragile due to climate variability, intensifying the need for recycling and efficient water management systems.

A circular economy approach—one that designs out waste, keeps materials in use, and regenerates natural systems—offers a pathway to reduce environmental impact while unlocking new economic opportunities. Investment in this space is crucial to support sustainable regional industry, meet government emissions targets, and align with private sector ESG priorities.

Without foundational infrastructure, industries will continue to face high waste disposal costs, limited options for reuse and recovery, and increased operational risks. Strategic investments will position WSM to become a national leader in sustainable industry development, while addressing regulatory expectations and environmental imperatives.

Key Regional Infrastructure Investment Priorities:

- **Bioenergy and Waste-to-Energy Plants:** Develop facilities co-located with food processing and agricultural operations.
- **Integrated Water Management Systems:** Build regional-scale infrastructure that connects industrial users with recycled water sources.
- **Resource Recovery Hubs:** Establish regional facilities for industrial waste, plastic, and organic processing.
- **Agricultural Symbiosis Zones:** Facilitate shared waste and input systems between processing plants and farms.
- **Water Infrastructure – West Grampians Pipeline** Deliver climate-resilient water security for Edenhope, Harrow and the high-value agricultural zones in the Western Grampians region.

Industry and population growth will increase pressure on water supply and waste systems. Without regional infrastructure, waste will be exported and water scarcity will constrain growth. Strategic investment will reduce emissions, lower operating costs, and create clean technology jobs.

6. First Nations Infrastructure Participation

WSM is leading the way in demonstrating what meaningful Traditional Owner participation in infrastructure looks like. But this can only occur when adequate financial resourcing of the skills required for meaningful engagement in the planning process is provided to already capacity stretched First Nations stakeholders.

An example of good outcomes when resourcing is provided to allow First Nations strategy development is the Barengi Gadjin Land Council Renewable Energy Roadmap which was developed through resourced consultation with Traditional Owners and partners to set out a culturally grounded, community-driven vision for renewable energy projects that deliver economic benefit, respect Country, and embed First Nations leadership in Victoria's energy transition.

Key Regional Infrastructure Investment Priorities:

- **Resourcing dedicated planning roles in First Nations Land Councils:** Resource a dedicated specialist role within First Nations planning organisations, such as the Barengi Gadjin Land Council, to empower Traditional Owners to participate fully and proactively in infrastructure planning processes. It ensures cultural, economic, and community priorities are represented from the outset—shifting engagement from reactive consultation to co-design. This internal capacity strengthens negotiation, enhances planning influence, and guarantees that Traditional Owner voices are not only heard, but embedded meaningfully in decision-making.
- **Cultural Landscape Mapping Tools:** Develop shared tools and frameworks for integrating cultural values into infrastructure planning.
- **Workforce and Enterprise Development:** Fund training centres and programs that align with energy, mining, and circular economy roles for First Nations peoples and the region as a whole.
- **Community-Led Energy Projects:** Support the establishment of Community Energy Collectives that allow Wotjobaluk Nations to generate and share renewable energy.
- **Renewable Ownership and Benefit Sharing:** Support projects that allow Traditional Owners to participate as equity

holders or developers.

Traditional Owners are central to the region's future. Without dedicated pathways, opportunities will be missed, and development risks disengagement. Meaningful participation builds long-term equity, skills, and shared prosperity across WSM.

Conclusion

The Wimmera Southern Mallee region is strategically positioned to lead Victoria's regional growth, food system resilience, and , shift to net zero via clean energy transition. With abundant natural resources, a globally recognised agricultural base, a critical geographic location at the intersection of freight and energy corridors, and a deepening commitment to inclusive development, WSM offers an unmatched opportunity for infrastructure investment to drive long-term prosperity.

The investment categories outlined in this submission are not speculative—they are targeted, evidence-based priorities that address critical infrastructure gaps and unlock transformational potential. By investing in agri-food precincts, integrated freight and energy corridors, local renewable energy access, housing and community services, circular economy systems, and First Nations leadership, Infrastructure Victoria will enable WSM to:

- Increase value capture from agriculture through local processing
- Improve logistics efficiency and energy reliability through shared-use corridors
- Ensure energy equity and fairness for regional industries and communities
- Provide housing and services needed to attract and retain skilled workers
- Build a sustainable industrial base with circular resource systems
- Embed Traditional Owner leadership in infrastructure and energy planning

With the right investment, WSM will not only meet its growth goals—it will become a model of equitable, sustainable, and future-focused regional development that benefits all Victorians.

Sincerely,



Wimmera Southern Mallee Development