

# BoM's \$886m consultant 'gravy train' wraps up

The bill for the Bureau of Meteorology's seven-year tech overhaul is \$866 million and there are fears it could rise further, despite the agency's CEO declaring the project complete on Wednesday and having already brushed off reports of a \$1 billion price tag.

The bureau this week issued a statement declaring the ROBUST IT program "formally closed" in June, hailing it a critical upgrade for weather services relied on by governments, industry and the public.

Triggered by security breaches a decade ago, ROBUST is the BoM's most ambitious project ever. It includes a new supercomputer alongside an overhaul of IT and security systems and major upgrades to observation systems and forecasting platforms.

But it has been plagued by delays and cost overruns, pushing back new forecasting methods and heaping pressure on BoM chief Andrew Johnson to explain.

Dr Johnson has clashed with media and the Senate on ROBUST, [challenging reports in May](#) that the project would cost nearly \$1 billion and refusing to give Senators details on the role of consultants in the work.

"CEO Andrew Johnson has continually refused to answer questions about this from the Senate," Greens Senator Barbara Pocock told InnovationAus.com. "If he thinks he can brush off these concerns by putting out a media release declaring the project is complete, I'm afraid he's mistaken.

"Dr Johnson wants to draw a line under this embattled project declaring a definitive cost which is almost triple the original allocation, but there are many more questions still to be answered about this project which was outsourced to a range of consulting firms, including Deloitte and Accenture.

Senator Pocock has led scrutiny of the troubled project and in March secured a Senate order to have the BoM produce its progress reports for management and committees throughout the project.

But the government has sought extensions to produce the reports, telling the Senate it needs more time for the agency to sift through thousands of pages.

In the meantime, the BoM has declared the project done and revealed a funding figure for the first time. From 2017 to June this year, ROBUST costs have totalled \$866 million. A BoM spokesperson told InnovationAus.com the figure represents the complete cost to the program and its transition to business as usual operation.

The BoM had previously been reluctant to disclose the costs, saying it could compromise Cabinet advice. But it released the figures after seeking legal advice and having already confirmed ROBUST [complete last month](#).

"This vital investment in our nationally critical capabilities ensures the Bureau maintains its position as one of the world's foremost and most respected hydrological and meteorological agencies," Dr Johnson said in a statement on Wednesday.

Senator Pocock said there are still serious questions about whether the heavy use of consultants in ROBUST had delivered taxpayers value for money.

“Contracts for this project were extended time and again without a competitive tender process so we have no way of knowing whether the cost increases were justified or who was at fault for mistakes that led to the delays and overruns,” she said.

“The Australian public deserves much greater transparency, especially when government spending goes off the rails as it clearly did in this case.”

As the project is declared closed, InnovationAus.com can reveal consultants have squeezed more work and another \$26 million from ROBUST in its final days.

One of Deloitte’s contracts with the BoM – an initial \$4 million deal to run an integration centre — was extended in July. The extension added \$10 million and meant the original agreement had more than quadrupled to almost \$20 million.

Accenture, which was brought into the project in 2019 under a \$31 million contract to provide a platform to deliver meteorological information, also had its contract extended in [late July](#).

The ninth and latest amendment is the biggest yet at \$16.6 million, more than double any of the prior eight. It pushes the deal to more than \$75 million and an end date of 2027.

A BoM spokesperson declined to provide details on the reasons for the amendments but suggested Accenture and Deloitte’s contracts may now include running costs for ROBUST.

“More detailed financial information for individual projects and streams of work within the program will continue to be protected on national security grounds,” the spokesperson said.

“Detail about individual contracts is commercial in confidence however amendments to contracts contribute to the ongoing running costs of capability delivered by those vendors.”

Senator Pocock said the lucrative amendments raise doubts about the true final cost of ROBUST.

“And can we take Andrew Johnson at his word when he claims that spending on the Robust project has been completed when we can see on AusTender that two more contracts with Accenture and Deloitte worth a total of \$26 million were awarded in July? You’ve got to ask, where does this gravy train actually terminate?”

In July, the BoM told the Senate several elements of the ROBUST program had run over budget but several others had come in under. It said it does not include penalty clauses in contracts with consultants because they are “unenforceable under contract law”.

The contracts do include remedies like liquidated damages, but no ROBUST vendor had ever been financially penalised because “the performance of vendors has been consistent with their commitments under each respective contract”.

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