RMCG

VNI West Community Reference Group

Meeting Minutes – Tuesday 19 August 2025, 5:30pm to 8:00 pm

Charlton Park Complex, Charlton

ATTENDEES 5:30PM TO 6:15PM CRG ONLY

CRG members

Max Fehring, Barry Batters, Bryan Pederson, Jon Whykes, Colin Fenton, Cr. Jenny Greenberger (Northern Grampians Shire Council), Brett Hosking.

Claire Flanagan-Smith (Chair) and Meg Caffin (Secretariat).

ATTENDEES 6:30PM TO 8:30PM CRG, TCV, GUESTS AND OBSERVERS

CRG members

Max Fehring, Barry Batters, Bryan Pederson, Colin Coates, Jon Whykes, Colin Fenton, Cr. Jenny Greenberger (Northern Grampians Shire Council), Brett Hosking.

Online**:** Claire Grant.

Claire Flanagan-Smith (Chair) and Meg Caffin (Secretariat).

TCV

Claire Cass (GM Victorian Network Services and Delivery), Mick Douge (Program Director), Mark Gledhill (Senior Project Manager), Amy Pepper (Lead, Engagement and Social Performance), Ali Driscoll (TCV Senior Advisor Engagement), Colin Homes (TCV Lead, Environment and Planning).

TCV online: Evan Morris (Engineering Lead).

Certified B Corporation

Observers

Cr. Alan Getley (Mayor, Buloke Shire Council), Daniel McLoughlan (Buloke Shire Council), Geoffrey Caine (VicGrid).

Observers online: Chris Sounness (Wimmera Southern Mallee Development), Geoff Rollinson (Gannawarra Shire Council).

APOLOGIES

CRG member apologies

Cr. Justine Hide, Paul Haw, Stephen English, Carly Noble, Rachel Lloyd, Daniel Bolitho (Gannawarra Shire Council), Glenda Watts.

Observer apologies

Brent McAlister (Northern Grampians Shire Council), Lincoln Fitzgerald (Loddon Shire Council).

1 Members only pre-meeting session

This session is only open to Community Reference Group (CRG) members, the Chair and Secretariat. The group focussed on understanding the upcoming agenda and preparing a list of items for general business in the full meeting, amongst other matters. The particulars of discussions during this session are confidential.

2 CRG meeting

2.1 WELCOME AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

Buloke Shire Council Mayor Alan Getley welcomed attendees and made an Acknowledgement of Country. The Chair opened the meeting, introduced new attendees, listed apologies and provided an overview of the meeting agenda.

2.2 NEW VNI WEST PROGRAM DIRECTOR

Mick Douge (TCV Program Director) introduced himself and outlined his background in civil engineering and large infrastructure projects. Having been in the role for just over a month, Mick shared his focus on listening to staff, stakeholders and the community to understand the VNI West's current position and future direction.

2.3 PROJECT UPDATE

Mick provided an update on the project.

- Minister Lily D'Ambrosio reaffirmed the importance of VNI West and new transmission projects.
- The Environment Effects Statement (EES) process is underway, with public submissions expected mid-2026. Community and landholder input on environmental and social outcomes is a priority.
- Over 80% of easement offers have been delivered, and around 70% of landholders engaged.
- TCV is finalising a development partner to manage design, construction, ownership, and operation. Contract closure is expected in the coming months.
- Stakeholder feedback has led to changes including:
  - Introduction of a Landholder Benefit Payment (separate from compensation)
  - A more favourable position for landholder for insurance and liability. Increased access payments (from $10,000 to up to $50,000)
  - Ongoing advice from the Social Value Reference Group on benefits.
- The CRG remains a key forum for shaping decisions that benefit landholders and the community.

Discussion

CRG question: Are there any Australian companies under consideration for the development partner role?

- **Program Director response:** Specific details cannot be provided at this stage as the project is still in the tender process. A range of partners is under consideration, including some Australian companies. The nature of the project means lots of Australian companies will be engaged, particularly in construction.
- **CRG member response:** The member noted a concern that the assets will not be Australian owned, with profit going overseas.

CRG question: There is a lot of opposition to the project, how do you see a way around this opposition?

- **Program Director response:** While TCV respects that everyone is entitled to their opinion, it will keep having conversations with as many people as possible to understand all the intricacies of the project and find a way forward. TCV values feedback, some of which has led to changes in project design, such as repositioning of 258 towers.

CRG statement: Insurance remains an unresolved issue. We maintain that farmers shouldn't bear new insurance risks from the infrastructure. The [Offer for Easement] pack should confirm government indemnity for landholders and unless it is malicious damage.

TCV response: TCV has already taken CRG feedback on board and made changes so that the TNSP [Transmission Network Service Provider] will have a greater risk profile than landholders. TCV believes the current arrangement represents a fair deal for landholders. The liability limit is designed to limit any additional liability beyond any that currently exists. If landholders' legal advisors are saying the clauses are not fit for purpose, then TCV is willing to improve the wording with landholders.

CRG question: Can we all provide feedback on the Offers for Easement as a group, and get advice rather than each landholder signing individual contracts?

- **TCV response:** TCV is willing to engage with landholders however if they prefer, including groups. The next step is for landholders' legal advisors to come together with TCV advisors to agree on outcomes.
- **Comment from another CRG member:** Unsure if landholders are at the stage of being ready for this. I think the gap is so large that more work is needed.
- **TCV response:** This process is what brings parties closer to agreement.

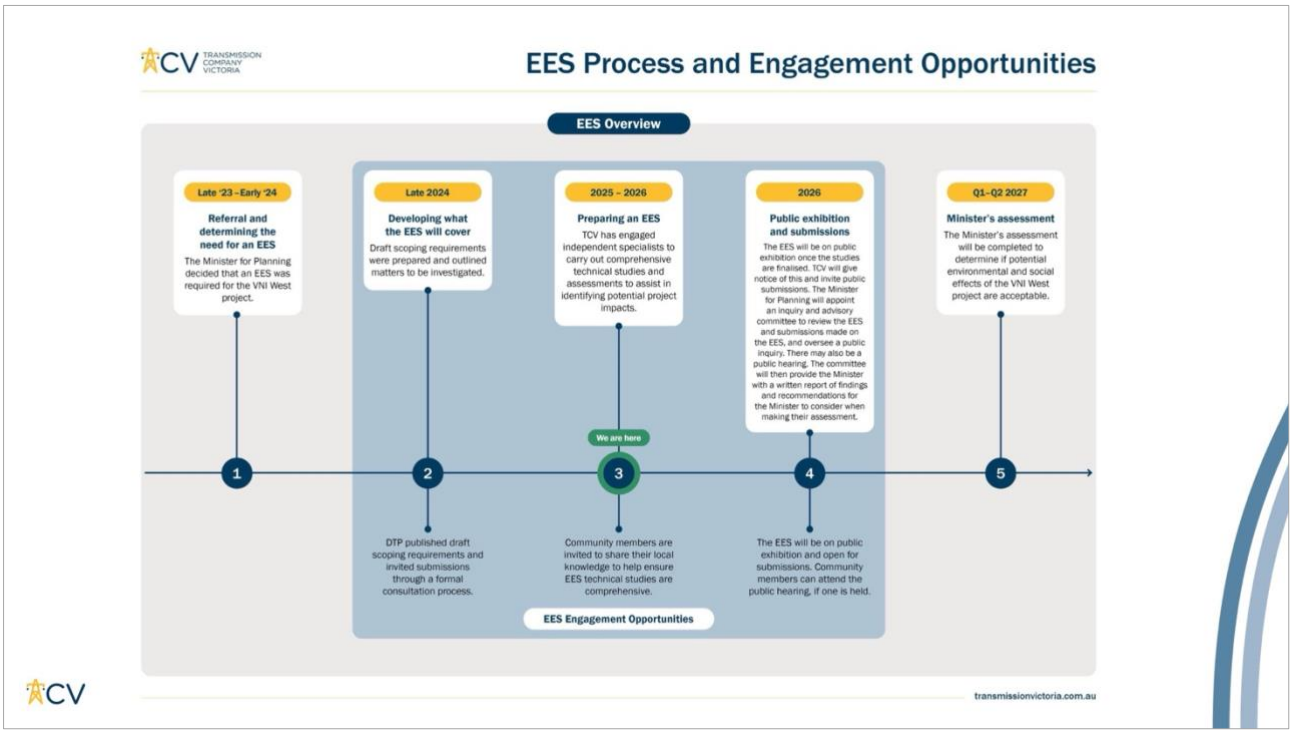
ACTION: CRG members to reach out to TCV regarding flaws in the contract identified with their legal advisors. This may be done individually or collectively with other landholders.

2.4 ENVIRONMENT EFFECTS STATEMENT (EES) DISCUSSION

GENERAL EES PROCESS

Colin Homes (TCV Lead Environment and Planning) led a discussion on the EES process, now in its mid-stage of documentation. Once finalised, the EES (including technical studies and a <25-page summary) will be exhibited for about 30 business days, with public submissions invited.

The Minister's assessment is expected in early 2027. The process is run by the Department of Transport and Planning under the *Environment Effects Act 1978*. The EES is not an approval, but an impact assessment that informs regulators, who may accept the project, or require major changes or reassessment.



Discussion

CRG question: Land access will be critical in the coming month, particularly for on-site surveying. However, TCV currently has less than 1% access. Does TCV intend to use section 93 (Electricity Industry Act 2000) for compulsory access?

- **TCV response:** It is something we are thinking about but want to avoid as much as possible. TCV is working with DEECA to minimise assessment requirements for properties where the likelihood of access is lower and are looking at surveying only where is it necessary. There are ways to deal with not having access, however it does push risk onto the project and cause delays to construction.

CRG question: What does compulsory access look like for landholders?

- **TCV response:** At the current point in time, it involves the issuing of a notification of compulsory access. Transmission companies are bound by the Land Access Code of Practice, this mandates that TCV must ensure all landholders know their rights and responsibilities in relation to compliance with land access requirements.

CRG question: Where can individuals get more information from TCV about the EES? It sometimes feels like a one-way process, when it should really be a two-sided affair.

- **TCV response:** TCV wants to engage and is open to pathways to talk with landholders and community members wherever and whenever suits them. TCV can also bring specialists to have discussions and answer any questions. We understand that public forums may not be some individuals' preferred avenue for engagement, and TCV is happy to engage in one-on-one meetings where preferred. We want to make it as easy as possible for individuals to engage and are happy to facilitate this in a way which works for people.

ACTION: Amy Pepper (TCV Lead Engagement and Social Performance) to call CRG member to discuss details of the EES with him, and the details he wants to know. Specialists can also be available to provide info.

EXPERT STUDIES

Specialist studies are being undertaken to meet scoping requirements. They are prepared by experts, reviewed by the Technical Reference Group appointed by the Minister, and independently peer-reviewed before public exhibition.

The EES allows new information to be added at any stage, so issues raised by landholders can be considered. Engagement with landholders and community members is integral, with multiple avenues available for input.

Studies cover regional matters (e.g. greenhouse gases, climate change) and site-specific topics. Agriculture and ecology are key areas, aimed at understanding existing conditions to avoid, mitigate or offset project impacts.



Discussion

CRG question: Does the overall assessment weight any particular EES study higher than another or are they equal?

- **TCV response** All studies contribute to the Minister's overall assessment, which is made at a holistic level. The key question is whether project impacts can be avoided, minimised or offset to an acceptable standard. However, during scoping the Minister categorises matters as low –, medium – or high-order risks. High-order studies for this project include land use, agriculture and ecology. These carry greater weight in the Minister's consideration, but all studies must demonstrate that risks have been identified and appropriately managed.

CRG question: Where is the independence in the EES process?

- **TCV response:** Technical studies are carried out by independent specialists. The Minister for Planning oversees the process, and all submissions during exhibition go directly to the Department of Transport and Planning, not to TCV. In addition, the independent Technical Reference Group appointed by the Minister reviews the studies and ensures they meet the scoping requirements.

TCV question: Our role is not only to build infrastructure but to identify and mitigate adverse impacts. We are counting on people like the CRG for support in these areas. Would all the CRG members be willing to engage in interviews for the agriculture study?

- **CRG member response:** Many landholders do not wish to engage directly.

CRG question: Is it possible for TCV to finance landholders to employ their own consultants to person to do on-site assessments for the EES?

- **TCV response:** Yes, TCV will support landholders engaging their own qualified experts, provided the expert meets the required standards and follows the EES scoping requirements. Landholders must contact TCV first to receive the scope and methodology, which ensures the correct processes are followed and allows an accurate quote to be obtained.

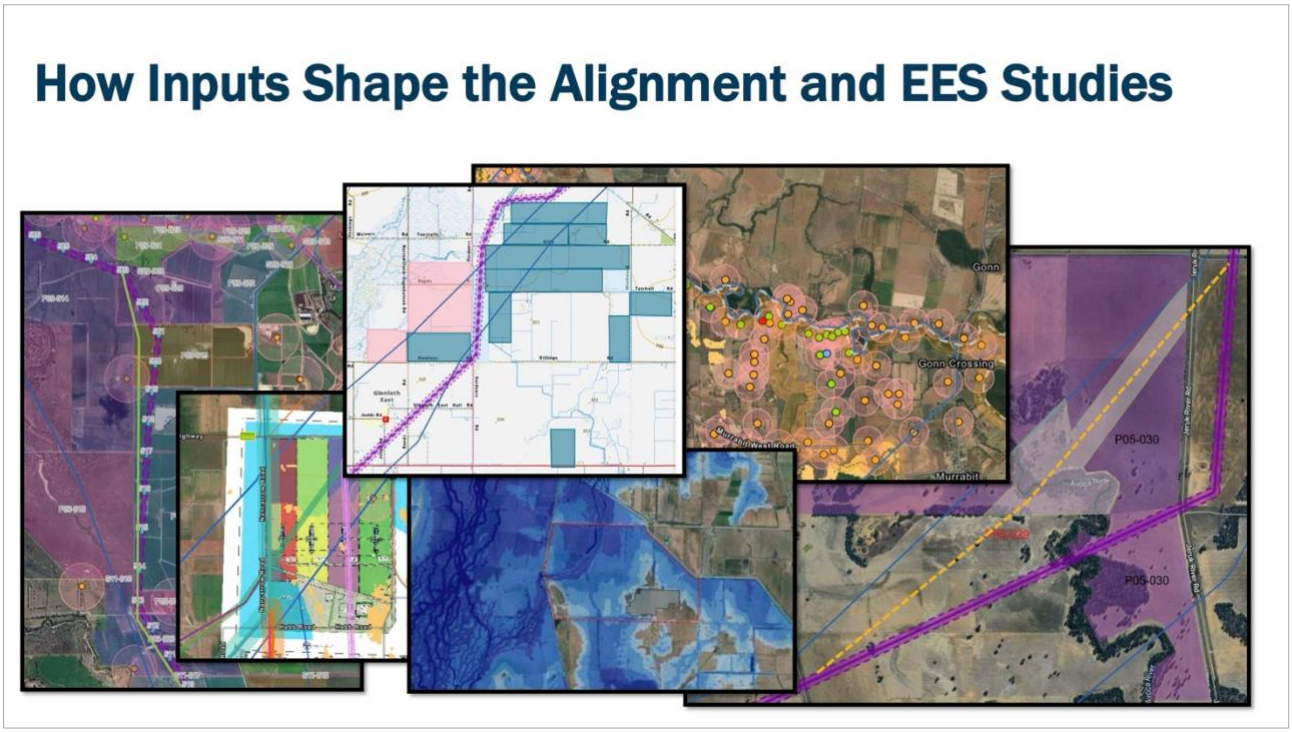
ACTION: TCV to investigate options for supporting landholders to commission independent experts (e.g. ecologists) for site-specific input to the EES.

CRG question: Does the EES consider impact of other projects or proposed projects?

- **TCV response:** The EES cannot assess future developments that are not yet defined. However, it does consider cumulative impacts from other projects that are built, underway, or progressing through approvals.

INPUT SHAPING OUTCOMES

TCV provided some examples of how input and feedback from landholders have helped to achieve better outcomes for them and the project, particularly in relation to the preliminary layout and tower placements.

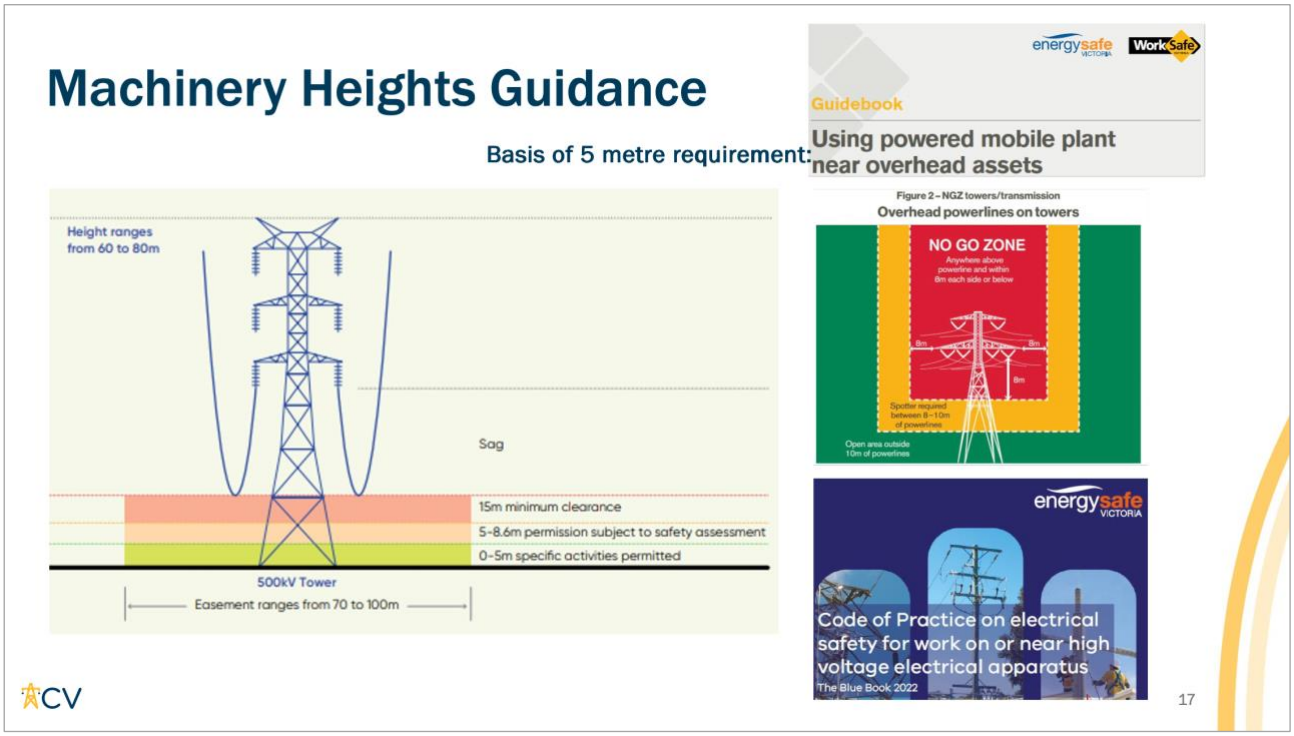


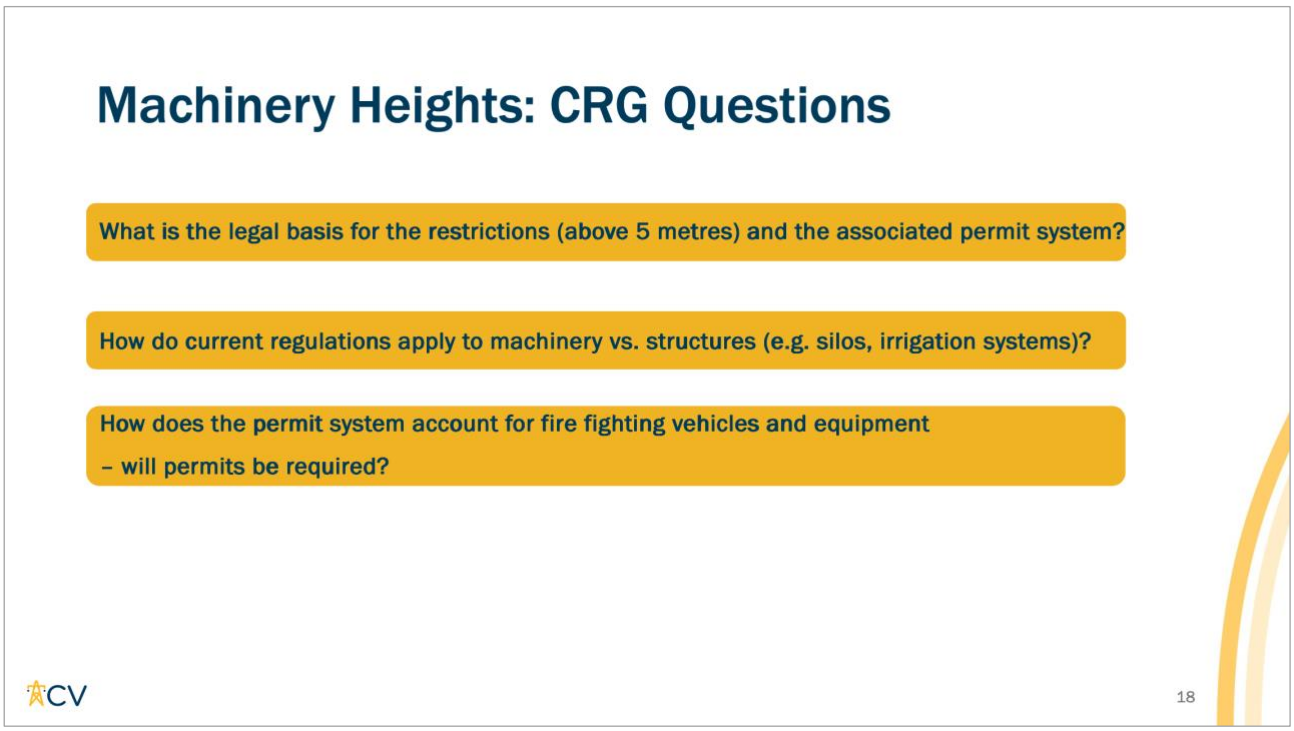
CRG comment: A member commented that although landholder feedback had informed changes to the transmission line route, they had heard of multiple other examples of elements of the project changing without affected landholders being first consulted or informed by TCV. This included firsthand personal experience, although the member agreed that the referenced instances were at the beginning of the project and had not happened recently.

2.5 MACHINERY HEIGHTS ANSWERS

Specific question from the CRG relating to machinery heights were collated out of session by the Secretariat and addressed by Evan Morris (TCV Engineering Lead) and Mark Gledhill (TCV Senior Project Manager).

Evan began by reminding the group of the overarching machinery heights guidance.





TCV response to question 1: The height is based around Energy Safe Victoria (ESV) Guidelines which specifies the minimum distance from conductors that machinery is permitted to operate. The 5 metre height restriction is driven by the 10 metre minimum distance from powerlines.

TCV response to question 2: ESV regulations are primarily around vehicles, plant and performing work, distances for structures are defined by Australian Standards (AS7000). In general structures such as sheds are permitted subject to a safety assessment and height restrictions. Buildings and dwellings are not permitted.

TCV response to question 3: As fire fighting vehicles are under VicRoads vehicle height requirements, they will be within the 5m height requirement and therefore able to pass freely through the easement. Permit is only required for heights over 5m. In general, the asset owner will require a 5m buffer between vehicles and towers, to reduce risk of impact.

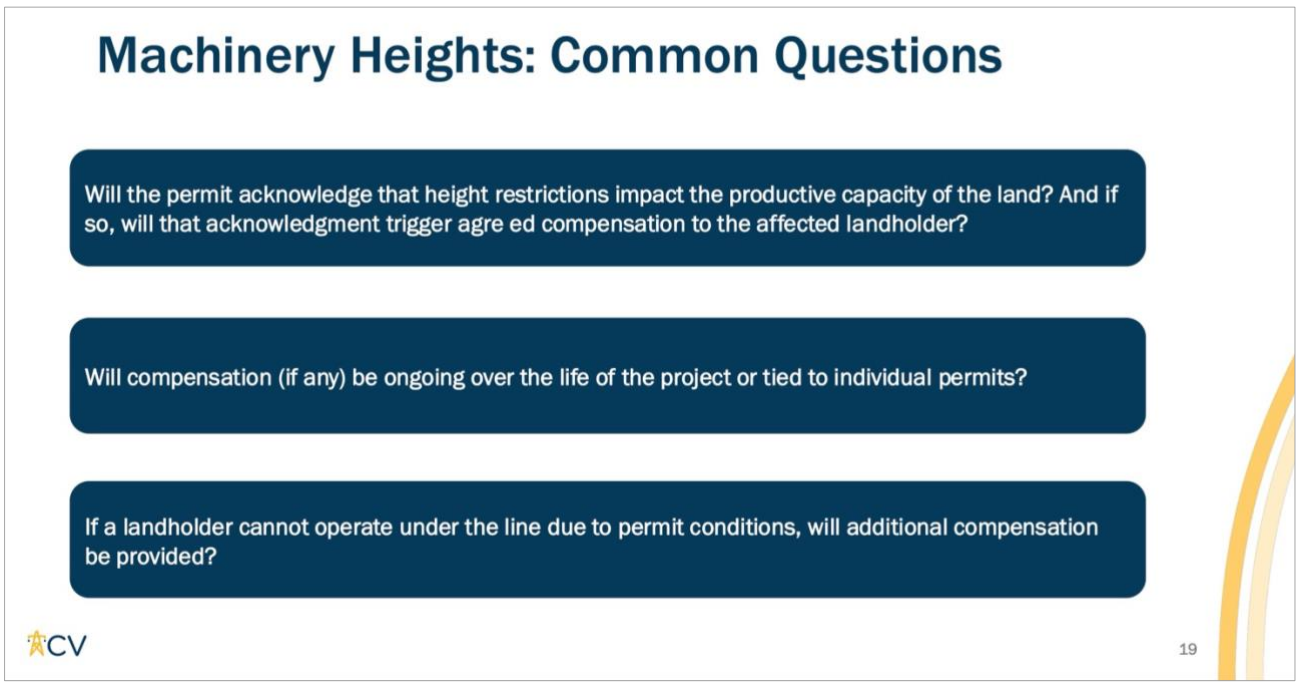
Discussion

CRG question: Will the line always remain at the specified minimum height regardless of changes in temperature?

- **TCV response:** Yes, it's going to be in as a specification or specified design requirement for the life of the asset that the asset owner needs to maintain the lines to always ensure that requirement is met. Therefore, most of the time it will actually be a bit higher.

CRG question: How difficult would it be to build the line a metre higher, as there is already exceeding machinery exceeding height requirements for operation under the line?

- **TCV response:** In specific scenarios where we know an extra metre is required, depending on the design, there may be scope, but that's at a detailed design level.



TCV response to question 1: There will be no compensation tied to permits themselves. Independent advice should be sought from professional services, as outlined in LEAP packages and talk to your Land Liaison or TCV about individual circumstances.

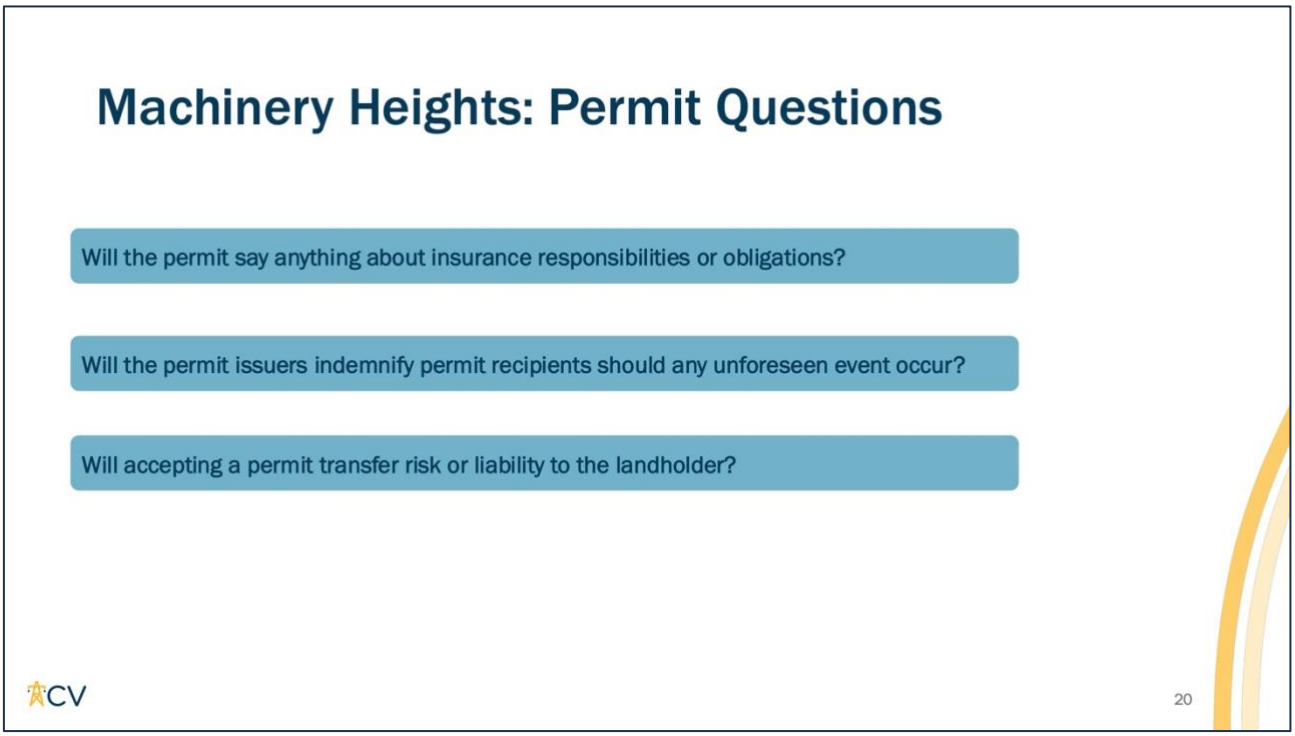
TCV response to question 2: Discussions relating to compensation need to be raised with a landholder's Land Liaison and it is recommended that independent professional advice is sought.

TCV response to question 3: TCV is interested to speak to any landholder who is concerned that their farming operations will be restricted or curtailed due to the line height restrictions. The concerns are individual.

Discussion

CRG question: What will happen if there are future changes to the height requirement, precluding what was previously allowed? I know of two instances where operating have changed and now they need a permit?

- **TCV response:** That was for existing assets set up in a different time. For VNI West, it will be a contractual requirement to maintain the line above the 15 metres assuring a 10 metre working clearance to 5 metres above ground. As these requirements are based on electromagnetic field standards and the laws of physics, they are therefore highly unlikely to change.



TCV response to question 1: The permit won't make any comment on insurance. The permit is around safe operation, it won't be tied to insurance obligations.

TCV response to question 2: No, the liability arrangements will not be changed by the permit issuer as the permit is about safe work. As discussed in previous CRG meetings, the Option for Easement agreements is where releases and indemnity terms regarding liability will be agreed between TCV and the landholders.

TCV response to question 3: No. The primary purpose of the permit is safe work near the electrical apparatus. It does not transfer risk of liability to a landholder.

Chair Question: We have outstanding questions about how the permit system will be issued and governed. Specific queries included: Who will issue permits? Accessibility of permits? Required information? How long will it take to obtain a permit? Fees and charges? Time/location restrictions? Renewal conditions? What happens if there is a breach?

- **TCV responses:** The transmission network service provider (TSNP) will have a strict permit system – they will operate under their own permit system, meaning that they will issue permits to their own teams and to subcontractors who are performing maintenance.
- The issuing of permits is something that will be routine and will occur on a regular basis, weekly if not daily.
- For routine activities, where farmers will be driving within the restricted area on a regular basis, farmers likely to be able to obtain a long term permit, which will have a review period.
  It is unlikely that there will be a charge.

- The delivery agreement for the permit system is at least 12 to 18 months away.
- For the finer details of the permitting system, TCV is interested in getting feedback from landholders about how the permit system should operate while we have influence over the permit system including the ability to incorporate operational requirements into the contract.

ACTION: TCV to reach out to landholders mid-2027 to establish a working group or feedback mechanism for CRG members to provide input into the operational requirements of the permit system.

2.6 VNI WEST VISUALISATION TOOL

Amy Pepper explained that TCV is in the process of developing a VNI West augmented reality tool that landholders will be able to use to visualise the VNI West infrastructure.

Noted that it would be good to get the CRG involved in trialling this technology.

ACTION: Chair to organise out of session with CRG to run through the VNI West visualisation tool.

2.7 GENERAL BUSINESS

Questions which had been raised out of session were presented by CRG members.

COMMUNITY BENEFIT

A CRG member queried a figure of $10 million for community benefits. TCV clarified that the minutes had referred to “tens of millions,” with the final amount still to be determined as a percentage of overall project costs (noting the project is smaller than the $7 billion figure raised, which relates to both the NSW and VIC components). While the final figure will far exceed $10 million, TCV stressed that the more important focus is how the money will be spent to deliver long-term, meaningful benefits.

CRG members expressed concern about the scale of benefits relative to the project and the burden placed on landholders and communities. TCV acknowledged this, emphasising the need for benefits that endure over the project’s 80-year lifespan. The Chair noted that clarity on the scope of the fund is critical so the CRG can provide constructive suggestions.

TCV noted that the Social Value Reference Group is the current mechanism to help advocate for and guide investment in communities through co-development of a Social Value Strategy for VNI West. The CRG can feed into this group through Amy Pepper and some of the CRG members who are in the group.

LANDHOLDER PAYMENTS AND TAX

CRG Question: Has there been any progress surrounding tax on landholder payments (Action 47)?

- **VicGrid response:** There has been progress on this from the State with the tax commissioner. ViGrid is investigating the matter further and needs to provide some scenarios of how the tax implications of compensation and benefit payment will affect landholders, noting that there would need to be significant incentive for payments to be tax free.

ENVIRONMENT EFFECTS STATMENT

CRG question: When the EES documents are put on public exhibition can the CRG get a lawyer to look at EES documents to help provide guidance? Also, the time period needs to be more than 30 days to allow for all technical detail to be assessed.

- **TCV response:** The Minister has capacity to extend public exhibition timelines, not TCV, so the CRG would need to ask for an extension through that mechanism. TCV will look into what support can be provided to the CRG to study the EES.
- **CRG question:** Is there a possibility for the documents to be provided early by TCV?
- **TCV response:** No, TCV must need to get permission to exhibit.

ACTION: Chair to work with the CRG to request an extension from the Minister to review the EES material.

ACTION: TCV to investigate what support can be provided to CRG to assess the EES material.

The CRG noted that they would like Claire Cass (GM Victorian Network Services and Delivery) to continue to attend meetings whilst Mick Douge (Program Director) is still relatively new to his role. Claire agreed to attend the next meeting.

FOLLOW UP ON ACTIONS

The Chair summarised the progress of actions in the register. See Table 3-1 of actions for detail.

2.8 OBSERVER COMMENTS

None.

2.9 PREVIOUS MINUTES

The June meeting minutes were approved with no objections. The minutes will go up on the TCV website.

2.10 UPCOMING MEETINGS

The date of the next CRG meeting will be confirmed.

Meeting closed at 8:33 pm.

3 Action register

Table 3-1: Action register

ACTION #	DATE RAISED	ACTION ITEM	OWNER	DUE	STATUS
CRG 42	14/05/2025	TCV to investigate the need for neighbouring agreements to ensure clear liability and insurance protocol for damage to property that may influence adjacent landholders.	TCV	Aug–25	In progress
CRG 46	24/06/2025	TCV to provide context for why $20m public liability insurance has been set as the requisite level for landholders. Is this based on any sort of precedent?	TCV	Sep–25	Complete *The requirement to maintain $20m public liability insurance is in line with other similar projects in Victoria. Both TCV and the landholder are required to maintain this amount of coverage.*
CRG 47	24/06/2025	TCV to provide updates where available on whether landholder payments will be tax free.	TCV	Sep–25	Complete (ongoing) *TCV encourages and strongly recommend landholders to seek independent advice from a financial adviser or accountant about how tax will be applied to their individual circumstances. TCV will cover the costs for this advice.*
CRG 48	24/06/2025	Chair to follow up with CRG members seeking interest regarding their involvement in the Social Value Strategy specifically to: 1. To interpret community consultation results about scoping up potential projects? 2. To be involved longer term in evaluating the Strategy's success?	TCV to provide information Chair to share	Jul–25	In progress
CRG 49	24/06/2025	Chair to follow up with CRG members who wish to ask specific questions regarding machinery heights under powerlines. Define specific questions and direct them to TCV.	Chair	Jul–25	Complete
CRG 50	19/08/2025	CRG members to reach out to TCV regarding flaws in the Offer for Easement identified with their legal advisors. This may be done individually or collectively with other landholders.	CRG members	-	Noted as a recommendation only

ACTION #	DATE RAISED	ACTION ITEM	OWNER	DUE	STATUS
CRG 51	19/08/2025	Amy Pepper (TCV) to call CRG member to discuss details of the EES with him, and the details he wants to know. Specialists can also be available to provide info.	TCV	Aug–25	New
CRG 52	19/08/2025	TCV to investigate options for supporting landholders to commission independent experts (e.g. ecologists) for site-specific input to the EES.	TCV	Dec–25	New
CRG 53	19/08/2025	TCV to reach out to landholders mid 2027 to establish a working group or feedback mechanism for CRG members to provide input into the operational requirements of the permit system.	TCV	Jun–26	New
CRG 54	19/08/2025	Chair to organise out of session with CRG to run through the VNI West visualisation tool.	Chair	Dec–25	New
CRG 55	19/08/2025	Chair to work with the CRG to request an extension from the Minister to review the EES material.	Chair / CRG	Dec–25	New
CRG 56	19/08/2025	TCV to investigate what support can be provided to CRG to assess the EES material.	TCV	Dec–25	New

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Document review and authorisation

Project Number: #1871

Doc Version	Final/ Draft	Date	Author	PD Review	BST Review	Release approved by	Issued to
1.0	Draft	05/09/2025	M. Caffin E. Buchanan	C. Flanagan-Smith	J. Longford	C. Flanagan-Smith	CRG
2.0	Final	12/02/2026	M. Caffin E. Buchanan	C. Flanagan-Smith	L. McKenzie	C. Flanagan-Smith	CRG

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