RMCG

VNI West Community Reference Group

Meeting Minutes – Tuesday 13 May 2025, 6:30–8:00 pm

Charlton Park Complex, Charlton

ATTENDEES

CRG members

Barry Batters, Bryan Pederson, Claire Grant, Max Fehring, Colin Coates, Jon Whykes, Paul Haw, Glenda Watts, Colin Fenton, Carly Noble and Claire Flanagan-Smith (Chairperson) and Brooke Hermans (Secretariat).

TCV

Claire Cass (Victorian Network Services and Delivery), Samantha Smith (Manager – Project Community & Stakeholder Engagement), Francis Meehan (Lawyer), Mark Gledhill (Senior Project Manager) and Amy Pepper (Principal Performance).

Observers

Cr. Alan Getley (Mayor, Buloke Shire Council), Geoff Caine (VicGrid), Chris Souness (Wimmera Southern Mallee Development) Daniel Bolitho (Gannawarra Shire Council).

APOLOGIES

CRG Member apologies

Andrew Borg, Stephen English, Rachel Lloyd, Brett Hosking, and Cr. Justine Hide & Cr. Jenny Greenberger (Northern Grampians Shire Council).

Observer apologies

Geoff Rollinson (Gannawarra Shire Council) and Georgia Steven & Nicole McCutcheon (Energy and Water Ombudsman (Victoria)).

Certified B Corporation

1 Welcome and acknowledgement of Country

Cr. Alan Getley, Mayor of Buloke Shire Council, welcomed attendees and acknowledged the Traditional Owners.

Independent Chair Claire Flanagan-Smith opened the meeting, introduced new attendees and provided an overview of the agenda.

2 Land easement and access package discussion

Prior to the CRG meeting, the CRG members had taken part in a workshop run by David Capps from Alchimie on the land easement and access package. As the discussion on that topic, CRG members and TCV agreed to amend the CRG agenda to allow the group to complete their conversation.

During this agenda item, TCV sought feedback on two scenarios relating to the distribution of the easement and access packages to landholders, including:

- When landholders have declined engagement
- When no response was received from the landholder.

Discussion

TCV question: If there is no response or return contact, is it appropriate for the package to be posted to the landholder? Is there a better alternative that we have not considered?

- **CRG member response:** Suggest bringing in an intermediary, for example a lawyer, accountant, or ombudsman to provide an introduction. Also, make sure that the first document is as good as it can be because it is the chance that TCV have to get landholders engaged.
- **Response by another CRG member:** It is a noble idea but challenging. TCV referencing compulsory acquisition aggravates people. Where is the integrity in that?
- **TCV response:** Talking about compulsory acquisition demonstrated integrity, we are not shying away from it and pretending it does not exist.

CRG member question: Are there many landholders that do not want to be engaged?

- **TCV answer:** There are some landholders who have asked not to be contacted. This can be broadly split into three groups, those who do not want to be contacted without an offer, landholders who do not want to sign a land access agreement and landholders who wish to never be contacted. The question is concerned with the landholder who say they wish to never be contacted. TCV wants to understand what can be done in that scenario to empower those individuals to understand what the easement and access package involved.
- **TCV comment:** This is a pivotal time for the project and landholders – talking about the easement, risk management and mitigation of impacts – and is likely where they can have the biggest influence.

CRG member statement: The draft package shown today is not ready – it is not enough compensation. There has been a lack of clear information and landholders do not feel included in determining what the package includes.

CRG member statement: There is a need for consistency, fairness and equity. Concern that post-pandemic individualism is undermining a sense of community. A more collective approach could help build social licence. It would be good to bring people with shared circumstances together, with a mediator, to build trust, rapport and support negotiation.

CRG member statement: There is a need for holistic approach, wind farms, solar farm and powerlines need to be discussed around the same table. There is not an overarching understand of how all these things are interconnected.

- **TCV response:** We are considering how they can better support independent advisors to assist in the process. There are individual differences which will arise, but common advisors can be a way to help build the support network for landholders. We encourage landholders to have these conversations with valuers, lawyers to calculate what reasonable compensation would mean and help us to understand that.

TCV question: Should the specific monetary values included (for activities relevant to specific agricultural enterprises) be included in the document? Is the initial figure worth including?

- **CRG member response:** If that represents the lowest figure, then this needs to be stated. It needs to be written down in this document as this is what landholders will refer to.
- **TCV response:** Agree that this needs to be clearly articulated where landholders have the ability to determine values rather than prepopulate.

CRG member question: What is the urgency in getting things done? It requires time and effort to get people back onboard.

- **TCV response:** There's no immediate urgency – the statutory acquisition process wouldn't begin for 12 to 18 months. The aim is to allow as much time as possible for voluntary negotiations. Signing the land easement and access package signals agreement and triggers a payment to the landholder, initiating the negotiation for the Option for Easement.
- **CRG member statement:** More time is not necessarily a good thing, some young farmers are making decisions or putting their life on hold awaiting outcomes.
- **CRG member question:** When is construction planned to commence?
- **TCV response:** It is subject to planning approval, the earliest it would start is next year (2026). Ideal situation is to have all the options for easement in place before construction commences. The last resort is compulsory acquisition.

Summary of discussion

- While compulsory acquisition remains an option, it is not the preferred approach
- CRG members suggested the use of independent advisors as intermediaries to contact landholders who have declined engagement with TCV
- There is potential to bring landholders together with these advisors in a more collective approach
- It is important to identify and engage specific advisors, providing them with appropriate support and training
- Rebuilding trust and re-establishing relationships with disengaged landholders will require time and sustained effort.

2.1 RISK AND LIABILITY

In the risk and liability session, Claire Cass and Francis Meehan from TCV gave an overview of recent work on risk and liability for landholders and asked for CRG feedback and questions.

TCV outlined their plan to implement an approach to minimise risk for landholders who have transmission infrastructure on their property. This will include development of a Property Management Plan (PMP), that will identify key property features (e.g. exclusion areas), outline construction management and remediation planning. The PMP will document the total impact of the construction on operations, not just the footprint that the construction is on.

TCV explained that the draft contracts include exclusions for consequential loss.

Discussion

CRG member statement: Compensation is separate to legal liability. It is important that legal liability for the infrastructure is not imposed on the agricultural business or landholder.

CRG question: From a biosecurity perspective (weeds, contamination, soil and water), activities from the project could significantly impact the future of a farm. In terms of risk mitigation and liability, how long does compensation last for?

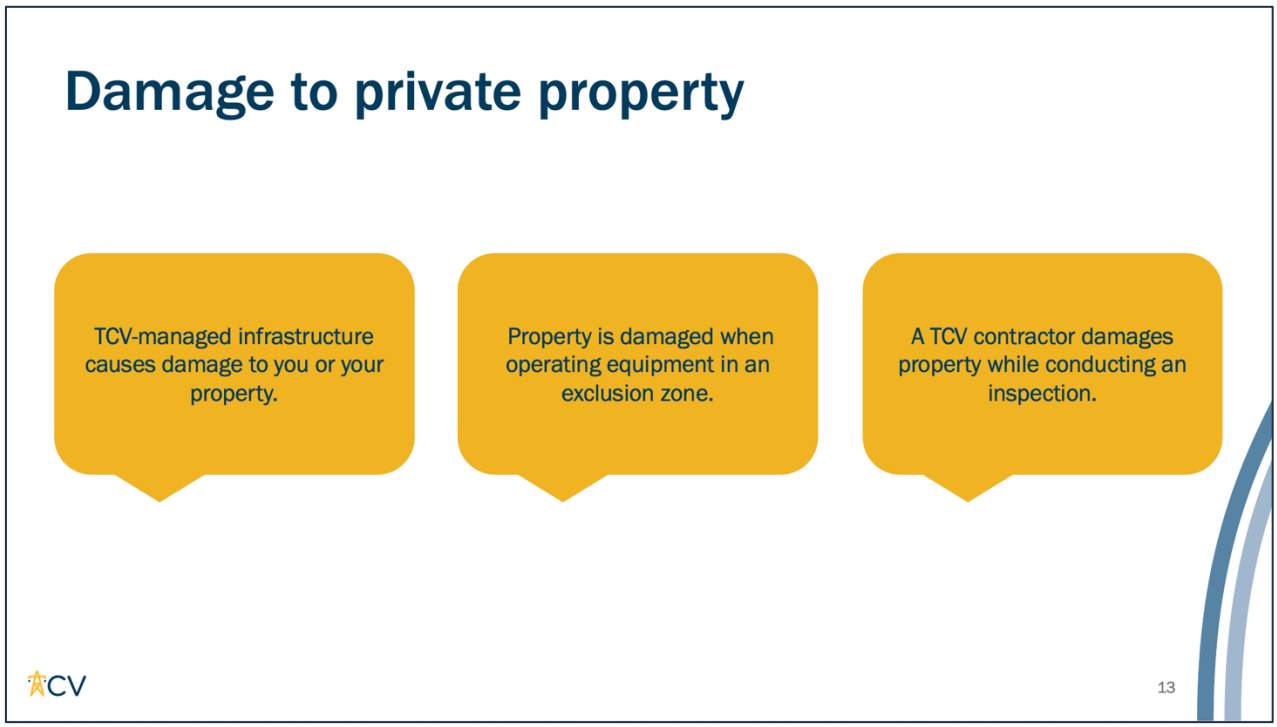
- **TCV response:** Where there is a fair line of causation from the project doing the wrong thing and liability can be determined, then it will lead to discussions surrounding the extent of the damage. This will be in the terms and conditions.

CRG member statement: TCV should be responsible for any issues within the easement area that are not caused by the landholder. This includes clarifying who is responsible for maintenance – such as weed control. Concern was raised about broadacre farmers needing to detour via public roads if they can't cross their own properties.

- **TCV response:** Risk will be higher in the presence of the power line, currently there is no risk because the transmission line is not on the property. What we are aiming to do is minimise, and eliminate as far as reasonably possible, the financial impact of that for landholders.
- **CRG member statement:** We will not accept any liability for the line on our properties, as the risk would not exist if it had not been constructed there. This needs to be clear in the terms and conditions.

2.2 RISK AND LIABILITY SCENARIOS

TCV presented scenarios to the CRG to provide clarity on the drafted risk and liability terms and conditions, with discussion occurring throughout the presentation.



Discussion

TCV statement: If the landholder is operating equipment in an exclusion zone and an incident occurs, liability will sit with the operator of the equipment, and then it becomes a scenario for insurance to respond to.

- **CRG response:** CRG members expressed strong concerns about landholders being exposed to liability or financial risk due to transmission infrastructure on their land. They argued that landholders should have no liability for accidents or damage unless caused deliberately, and that the infrastructure should bear all risk.

CRG statement: Concerns about insurance not covering indirect impacts, like delays in sowing.

- **TCV response:** We acknowledge the complexity and are exploring changes to insurance arrangements with VicGrid to find the most reasonable position that can be put to landholders in regard to how the transmission network service provider (TNSP) insurers respond to such events. Note that there does become a point where the landholder will be responsible (e.g. wilful damage), and it takes time to work through this with insurance.

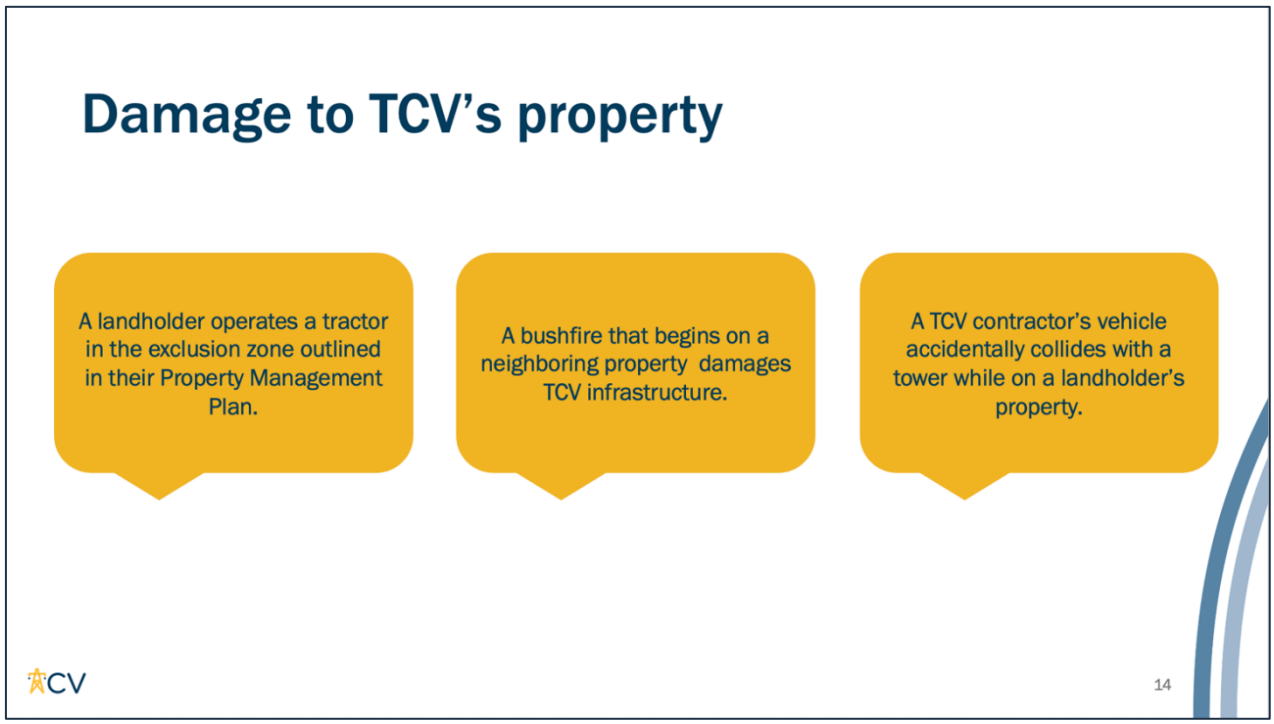
CRG member question: Is it worth having a neighbouring agreement for accidental damage between landholders adjacent to TCV? For example, if the pipeline is damaged by TCV on my land which also connects to the farm next door.

- **TCV response:** The question was taken on notice.

ACTION: TCV to investigate the establishment or need for neighbouring agreements to ensure clear liability and insurance protocol for damage to property that may influence adjacent landholders.

Summary

- CRG members want landholders to have no liability for any risk presented due to the powerlines being located on their land. TCV understand this is what landholders want and are still exploring the best option that can be offered.

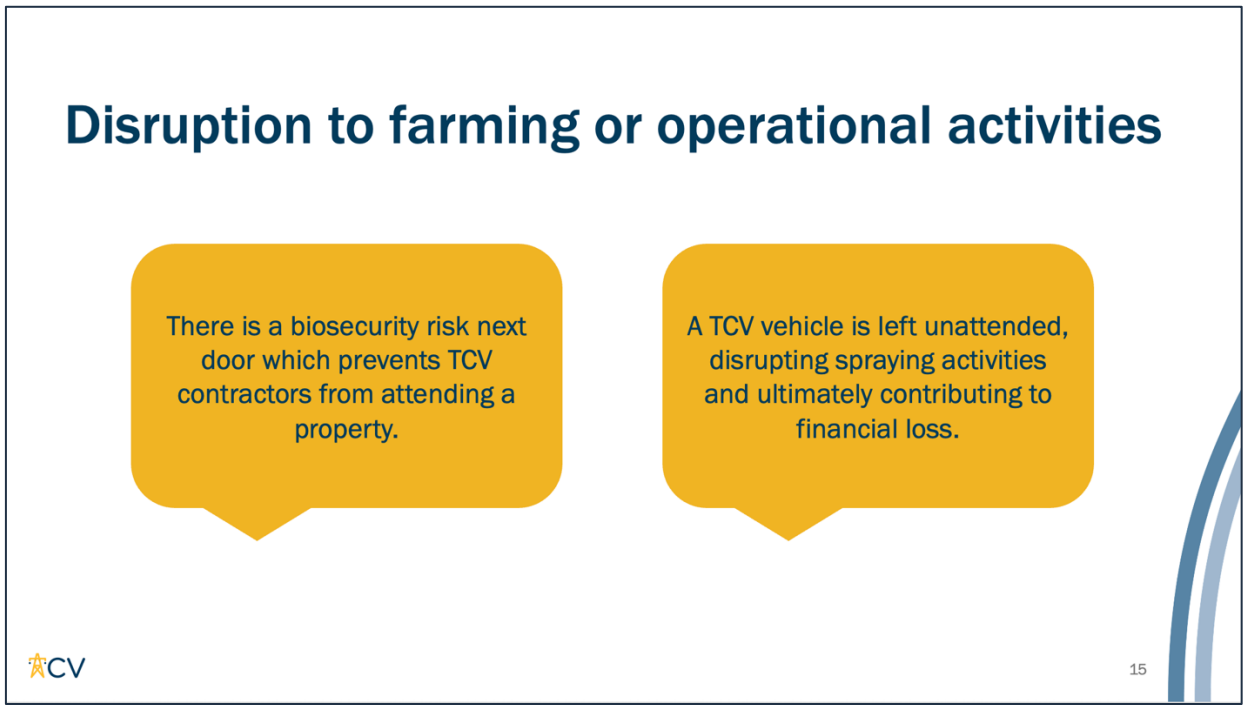


Discussion

TCV explanation: In a bushfire situation, neither party (landowner nor project owner) has a liability against each other, it is a third party (property owner that caused the bushfire).

CRG member question: What were the legal consequences in situations like Black Saturday?

- **TCV response:** In that situation, the landholders' insurance companies paid for the rebuild. The landholders' insurers then sought payment from Powercor's insurers.



Discussion

TCV comment: If TCV do something that is contradictory to the PMP then they would be liable for that, and landholders will be compensated for any losses.

CRG member question: CRG members noted that farming operations are often affected by unpredictable factors like disease outbreaks or weather, which may conflict with planned TCV works. They requested that the PMP include conditions allowing flexibility to accommodate urgent or time-sensitive farm activities. The Chair emphasised the need for TCV flexibility so farm businesses can meet critical operational windows.

- **TCV response:** Recognise this as important and will look at how this can be included as a clause in the PMP. TCV explained that for any planned maintenance they should be working with the landholder to ensure appropriate timing. In the rare case that there are urgent or unplanned works, the landholder should be compensated for the loss.

ACTION: TCV to consider what clauses can be put into the PMP to allow for flexibility from landholders who may need to conduct crucial farm business operations.

CRG member comment: Concern that these issues regarding disruption to crucial farming operations have been previously raised with RMCG, this was a strong point that should have been assessed and considered. Landholders need to be listened to, and this needs to be reflected.

- **TCV response:** This is acknowledged. Short form land access agreements can be established to allow for urgent survey works, typically one or two month agreements to complete small amounts of work. This allows landholders to avoid longer term agreements. This approach is not suitable for all landholders but could work for some.

CRG member question: The use of drones in land surveys was brought up at a previous meeting. Is this something that has been considered?

- **TCV response:** Some forms of surveying can be done this way, but critical ecology cannot be determined using this method.

2.3 GENERAL BUSINESS

Environment Effects Statements

TCV advised that the Environment Effects Statements (EES) is in progress. The Department of Transport and Planning (DTP) has published on their website that they are expecting TCV to submit in 2026. Final scoping requirements are also published on the website.

CRG member question: Has the proposed route of VNI West been shifted or will it stay where it is?

- **TCV response:** There are still two options on the table. Once we have surveyed the properties, we will have the data to determine what route will have the least impact.

FOLLOW UP ON ACTIONS

The response to actions 40 and 41 were circulated, which were about trusted mental health providers and the updated construction cost estimate (see action register). In regard to the cost estimate, TCV is investigating an approach for the provision of the information request and an updated plan for the June meeting.

CRG member question: Can you please explanation why the answer to Action 41 isn't simple, "Provide the updated construction cost estimate for VNI West that is being used to compare the project to Syncline. Include summary of the assumptions and method used to estimate project costs."

- **TCV response:** The answer is that the information is commercial in confidence information, it cannot be provided.

CRG member statement: A member requested that the minutes note their prediction that whoever eventually owns TCV will be overseas owned, and all profits will be internally directed to a low tax environment overseas so will be no direct benefit to any Australian tax payer. The member looks forward to being proven wrong.

Outside meeting action: Community benefits

Between meetings, a paper was circulated by CRG Member Bryan Pederson about concerned about the lack of information and debate about community benefits to flow from the proposed VNI West project and all energy transition projects more generally.

- **TCV comment:** TCV are appreciative of the submitted thought paper, and it highlighted some important considerations. The work and assistance provided should be highly commended.
- **TCV comment:** There has been some public discussions and media surrounding community benefit funding for the project. We'd like to be clear that there has never been a quantum investment shared publicly by the project. The intent is that the CRG will be some of the first within the broader community to hear this information.

Outside meeting action: Social value strategy process presentation

A CRG member requested permission to give an update on the social values strategy process. The Chair noted that the June meeting will include a presentation and discussion around social value and community benefit approach for the project.

- **TCV statement** We note that participation in the social value reference group is not, and has never been, an indication of support or endorsement for the project. Rather, it is advocacy on behalf of the communities that will be impacted by VNI West. We encourage CRG members to reinforce this if it does arise in discussions within their own communities.

Machinery heights

- A CRG member has looked into current regulatory requirements associated with machinery heights aiming to determine the evidence base for the current 5 metre guidance given by TCV.

  A CRG member questioned the basis for the 5-metre machinery height guidance, noting legislation appears to allow only 3 metres. TCV explained the 5-metre clearance is a design decision based on safety standards and temperature variations, and that AusNet has committed to 5 metres (8 metres with a permit) for the Western Renewables Link. The CRG requested assurance that this height will be maintained.
- **CRG chair question:** How can the community be confident that the 5 metre height will stick even when ownership changes?

ACTION: TCV to review and advise how the 5-metre clearance commitment will be formalised so it is not changed under new ownership.

TCV ownership

CRG member question: How long will TCV own the project for? And can we have that in writing?

TCV response: TCV will continue to own the project. TCV itself will not be owned by AEMO in the future, it will be owned by another entity. AEMO and VicGrid are currently going through the process to appoint a development partner, and the intention is that they will take ownership of TCV and be the owners and operators.

ACTION: TCV to provide a written answer to how long AEMO will own TCV and what the transition looks like with the move to VicGrid and the TNSP procurement.

Minutes sent to the Minister for Energy

The Chair confirmed that the minutes of the April meeting were sent to the Minister for Energy. VicGrid advised that the Minister's office has seen them and, while no specific request for follow-up was made by the Chair, VicGrid confirmed that follow-up is currently underway.

2.4 OBSERVER COMMENTS

Victorian Transmission Plan

The VicGrid observer provided an update on what is coming up with the Victorian Transmission Plan. This is to be released on Friday and consultation open for about six weeks.

2.5 PREVIOUS MINUTES

Two requests for change of wording were made prior to the meeting were tested, these changes were agreed by the CRG members.

The April meeting minutes were approved with no objections.

2.6 UPCOMING MEETINGS

The next CRG meeting will be held on the 24th June.

Meeting closed at 8.40pm

3 Action register

Action #	Date raised	Action item	Owner	Due	Status
CRG 32	10/12/2024	TCV will talk to the Government about considering an Ombudsman	TCV	Feb-25	In progress
CRG 40	1/04/2025	Investigate other trusted mental health providers in the region, such as Grampians Community Health	TCV	Jun-25	In progress
CRG 41	1/04/2025	Provide the updated construction cost estimate for VNI West that is being used to compare the project to Syncline. Include summary of the assumptions and method used to estimate project costs	TCV	Jun-25	Cancelled due to answer given in CRG #10
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	New
CRG 43	14/05/2026	TCV to consider what clauses can be put into the Property Management Plan to allow for flexibility from landholders who may need to conduct crucial farm business operations.	TCV	Aug-25	New
CRG 44	14/05/2027	In relation to machinery heights, TCV to review and advise CRG how the 5-metre clearance commitment will be formalised, so it is not changed under new ownership.	TCV	Aug-25	New
CRG 45	14/05/2027	TCV to provide a written answer as to how long TCV will be around and what the transition looks like in VicGrid and with TNSP.	TCV	Aug-25	New

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Document review and authorisation

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1.0	Draft	20/05/2025	B. Hermans E. Buchanan	C. Flanagan-Smith	M. McIntosh	C. Flanagan-Smith	TCV
2.0	Final	27/05/2025	C. Flanagan-Smith	C. Flanagan-Smith	J. Longford	C. Flanagan-Smith	CRG