RMCG

VNI West Community Reference Group

Meeting Minutes – Wednesday 14 August 2024
Charlton Hall, Charlton

ATTENDEES

CRG members

Andrew Borg, Barry Batters, Brad McDonald, Brett Hosking, Bryan Pedersen, Claire Grant, Colin Coates, Glenda Watts, Glenden Watts, John Wright, Jon Whykes, Max Fehring, Rachel Lloyd and Claire Flanagan-Smith (Chairperson) and George Warne (Secretariat).

TCV

Samantha Smith (Manager - Project Community & Stakeholder Engagement), Phil Coyne (Senior Stakeholder Advisor – VNI West Project) and Amanda Coulson (Senior Specialist - Health Safety Environment and Wellbeing)

Guests

Claire Cass (General Manager Victorian Network Services), Meryn York (Executive General Manager – System Design)

Observers

Geoff Caine (VicGrid) and Beth Gibson (Wimmera Southern Mallee Development).

APOLOGIES

CRG Members

Dan Bryce, Daryl Warren, Marcia McIntyre, Miles Parry, Sophia Herrington and Vaughan Toose.

Observers

Roger Griffiths and Geoff Rollinson (Gannawarra Shire Council), Lincoln Fitzgerald (Loddon Shire Council), Wayne O'Toole and Cr. Alan Getley (Buloke Shire Council), Brent McAlister (Northern Grampians Shire Council), Chris Sounness (Wimmera Southern Mallee Development).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the Country that we work on throughout Australia and recognise their continuing connection to land, waters and culture. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present, and we acknowledge emerging leaders. Moreover, we express gratitude for the knowledge and insight that Traditional Owners and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people contribute to our shared work in Australia.

We pay respects to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. We recognise that Australia was founded on the genocide and dispossession of First Nations people and acknowledge that sovereignty was not ceded in this country. We embrace the spirit of reconciliation, working towards self-determination, equity of outcomes, and an equal voice for Australia's First People

1 CRG only session

This session was only attended by CRG members and the Chairperson and Secretariat.

1.1 WELCOME AND OPEN MEETING

The Chair:

- Opened the meeting welcoming attendees and acknowledging Traditional Owners
- Explained that the first part of the meeting was scheduled without the usual observers to allow time for the CRG to discuss and review the operation of the CRG to date. Whilst the second part of the meeting, would include AEMO, TCV and observers from VicGrid and Wimmera Southern Mallee Development.

1.2 AGENDA ITEM 2: REVIEWING THE CRG

As this was a CRG member-only session, notes were recorded in confidence.

ACTION: Matter of council membership to be resolved by Chair via phone calls before the next meeting.

2 Whole group session

Observers joined the meeting at this point and the meeting continued with all listed attendees.

2.1 PROGRAM UPDATE AND DISCUSSION WITH AEMO

Claire Cass (General Manager Victorian Network Services), Merryn York (Executive General Manager – System Design) and Samantha Smith (Manager Project Community and Stakeholder Engagement) from AEMO provided a background presentation, program update and answered questions.

Key background points presented included:

- Appreciation for the time and commitment to engaging with AEMO/TCV on the project
- Recognition of the real and significant impact of the project on communities, and the concerns of those who will host transmission easements
- That the project is not discretionary; it is critical infrastructure needed to keep the lights on
- That it is the objective and the responsibility of the VNI project team to find a route for transmission that, as far as possible, minimises impacts on people, farming and the environment
- AEMO and TCV look forward to continuing to work with the CRG as a key aspect of their engagement approach.

Key project update information presented included:

About TCV

- In Victoria, AEMO has a unique role in delivering the Transmission lines as well
- AEMO was asked to accelerate the energy transition and needed to get started and establish the initial works packages quite quickly. To enable this, AMEO created an entity – TCV – that could progress planning, capture information and undertake early works
- TCV is a 100% subsidiary of AEMO

- TCV is currently progressing the VNI West project through development phase activities including environmental planning and approvals
- As part of the planning and approvals phase of the project, TCV will undertake extensive studies on ecology, agriculture, cultural heritage and social value, in addition to geotechnical assessments across the draft corridor.

Land Access Agreements

- TCV continues to obtain agreed access to private land with landholders for surveys
- Access agreed for over 100 properties in the draft corridor to date, and access discussions continue with a number of additional landholders across the corridor
- *CRG question: If people won't allow land access, how can you conduct EES studies?*
  Answer: Land access is important to inform the project and ensure issues are mitigated. Some aspects can be done offsite, by using LIDAR, satellite etc. Compulsory access is a last resort. More certainty about compensation and process may assist more landholders to agree to allow an easement.

TCV transmission licence application

- TCV has submitted an application to the Essential Services Commission (ESC) for an electricity transmission licence
- CRG members will receive an update via RMCG when the Essential Services Commission opens its independent public consultation process.
- CRG member asked if TCV are seeking the licence in order to gain powers to access land. TCV said that while that is not the primary reason, it will give TCV those powers. Applying for a licence is normal and will support TCV to find the best partner to deliver and to operate the project (one that might not yet hold a licence for this geographic jurisdiction). TCV's licence will ultimately be transferred to the new delivery partner.
- *CRG question: What confidence is there that the TNSP will be fit to hold the licence?*
  Answer: A TNSP's fitness to hold a licence is determined by ESC. The ESC has the power to impose conditions on a transmission licence.

Environment Effects Statement (EES) scoping requirements

- Draft scoping requirements will be developed by the Victorian Department of Transport and Planning (DTP) in consultation with TCV and the Technical Reference Group (TRG) convened for VNI West
- It is anticipated the draft scoping requirements will be open for consultation via DTP in September 2024 and EES studies will commence in October
- A meeting to brief the CRG on the EES draft requirements is to be scheduled.
- *CRG question: Why aren't community representatives, such as a CRG member, on the TRG?*
  Answer: TRG membership appointed by the Department of Transport and Planning was outlined. The EES primary aim is environmental (in the broadest term) and will include an assessment on a range of fronts from native vegetation to agriculture. It includes a social impact assessment. The Victorian Department of Transport and Planning run the statutory EES process independently from TCV and AEMO.

Route refinement

- Work is underway to refine the current draft corridor to a proposed easement of around 100m in September 2024
- There will be a major communications effort to advise landholders and communities along the easement once draft corridor is refined. This is expected to take place in September- October.
- The CRG will be advised of the preferred easement as a priority.

Transmission Network Service Provider (TNSP) tender

- AEMO has started a tender process to select a partner to work alongside TCV to continue to develop the VNI West project, assist with the completion of the early works, and eventually build, own and operate VNI West.
- The Tender is to select a partner to help complete the development phase activities, finance the project, deliver the infrastructure (build phase) and operate the line
- This infrastructure project will be contestably sourced, and the TNSP will separately award contracts for construction and maintenance.
- The aim is to maximise local/regional participation.
- *CRG question: What* percentage *of our power bill pays for this?*
  Answer: In terms of your retail electricity bill, transmission costs are about 10% of total power bill costs. All distribution is about 40% of a power bill.

2.2 RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE TO AEMO FROM THE CRG

The AEMO staff answered questions from the CRG including the following:

CRG MEMBER QUESTIONS	AEMO ANSWERS
What is the compensation figure in the budget and breakdown for farmers and the community?	▪ We recognise any compensation package needs to be attractive or else landholders won't agree to grant TCV easements on their land ▪ Properties with a transmission easement will be eligible for compensation from TCV as well as the Victorian government ▪ TCV Compensation may include assessments of: – Loss in market value as a result of the easement – Loss suffered to operations as a result of the easement – Payment for reasonable costs incurred for independent professional advice – Landholders are able to get their own assessment of compensation as assessed by a professional such as a valuer. Reasonable costs associated with this advice will be paid ▪ On top of that, the Victorian government will make an annual payment of $8,000 per linear kilometre for 25 years (CPI indexed)
Why doesn't VNI West have any lifetime rental components similar to that offered to those who will host wind or solar generation?	▪ We appreciate that the compensation offered for transmission differs from the compensation offered for turbines or solar farms ▪ Wind turbines and transmission projects are not directly comparable due to things like the size of the infrastructure, impact to land, how they're funded and approvals requirements
Living near an AEMO facility causes a financial loss estimated at 15%. Are AEMO projects under costed? Why isn't there enough compensation for neighbours?	▪ We can and are working with the Victorian Government on neighbour payments ▪ VicGrid is developing guidance to set clear expectations for managing impacts on neighbouring landholders that are 'significantly impacted' by nearby transmission projects. ▪ The VNI West project will comply with the guidelines and will consult with impacted neighbouring landowners on how to best minimise impacts on them.
Has the loss in agriculture been factored into the overall cost?	▪ As part of the EES there will be an agricultural impact assessment undertaken by a specialist, which will include an economic loss section looking at the easement as a whole.
Is the net benefit still there?	▪ Yes, it's still there
Trust in the project is low. Winning trust back from the	▪ We acknowledge that we made mistakes in the beginning

CRG MEMBER QUESTIONS	AEMO ANSWERS
community will be difficult. We do not want power lines, so why do you still want to build them?	▪ We acknowledge the trust issues are real for some community members in the region and need to be addressed and will be addressed. ▪ We don't expect you to agree that it's the best option, but do not agree that there are better alternate routes, or better sources of energy. ▪ We will work with you to make sure this is done in the best way possible.

Other CRG discussion

CRG Question: How can we be confident that the route is the right one given the assumptions in the PACR [VNI West Project Assessment Conclusions Report]?

Answer: This is a long-standing question that has been answered many times now. We are an independent planner, working with the best information available. The choice of Option 5A was based on independent decisions using the best evidence. AEMO is prepared to provide this information again if required. This project is going ahead. AEMO is determined make steps to ensure communities to will be better off with this project. The CRG can assist design these steps.

ACTION: Provide a summary of the PACR to the CRG

Additional Comment in meeting: A CRG member reported being approached by multiple wind turbine developers with commercial offers to host generator infrastructure on their property. The member has concerns that locating transmission infrastructure on his property could be incompatible with generation infrastructure and if it were, would they be eligible for compensation for lost income.

TCV Response

Landholder liaisons are talking to impacted property owners and neighbours adjacent to the easement about the implications of the preferred easement on their day-to-day activities, their properties and about fair and reasonable compensation.

A generation project's compatibility with VNI West, as well as its feasibility, maturity and the commercial arrangements between landowners and developers will determine whether compensation is applicable.

Landholders will be able to get their own legal and valuation advice. Reasonable costs associated with this advice will be paid to landholders, in consultation with their landholder liaison.

Some CRG members raised a concern with the AEMO staff about the cost of de-commissioning the powerline and the need for this not to be borne by the landholder.

2.3 COMMUNITY PROGRAMS, SOCIAL PROCUREMENT AND SPONSORSHIP

Claire Cass of AEMO discussed opportunities for the CRG to help TCV understand community priorities in order to be able to set things in place that will create lasting community benefits. For example, this could include improving power reliability, telecommunications infrastructure or housing.

Some CRG members agreed that power reliability is a core benefit that should be improved as a result of the project.

TCV will be asking for two CRG members to take part in the social procurement consultation session with TNSP tenderers to provide advice on community priorities and help inform their approach to community

benefits in their tender submission. Once selected, the TNSP will continue to develop, deliver and operate VNI West.

ACTION: More information on the opportunities for CRG members to engage in the social procurement consultation session and the sponsorship and donations program, to be circulated to the CRG.

2.4 NEXT MEETING

- The Chair suggested that the next meeting should be held online on 10 September with a focus on reviewing the EES scope. Note that this date is tentative, pending advice from DTP on EES scoping.
- An October face-to-face meeting was also proposed.

2.5 PREVIOUS MINUTES

Minutes from the meeting held on the 7 May 2024 were accepted as an accurate record of the meeting.

ACTIVE ACTION REGISTER – STATUS AS OF 22 JULY 2024

ACTION #	DATE ACTION RAISED	ACTION ITEM	ACTION OWNER	DUE DATE	STATUS
CRG6	27/11/23	Arrange for an insurer to present to the CRG on what is likely to be covered and other insurance considerations.	RMCG	Early 2024	*In progress.* The insurance Council of Australia has advised a representative can present. Held over until late 2024 to allow attendance by AEMO executive.
CRG17	14/2/24	Write a letter to DTP requesting that someone who understands rural communities is appointed to the TRG for the VNI West EES.	Chair	20/5/2024	*Complete* Letter written to DTP and reply from DTP circulated to CRG.
CRG18	7/5/24	Arrange a meeting with the CRG to discuss and provide feedback on the draft scoping requirements, once they are available.	TCV	Awaiting draft scoping document	TBC Awaiting draft scoping document
CRG19	7/5/2024	Contact ESV and request access to the scientific research that informs their recommended firefighting distances from the transmission lines.	Chair/ Secretariat	August 2024	Complete, response from ESV provided to CRG members by email21/8/2024
CRG20	7/5/2024	Provide feedback to VicGrid that their upcoming engagement should include a site in this part of the state.	Chair/ Secretariat	20/05/2024	Complete
CRG21	7/5/2024	VicGrid VTIF workshop dates to be distributed to CRG members with the minutes.	Secretariat	13/05/2024	Complete
CRG22	14/08/2024	Matter of council membership of CRG to be resolved by Chair via phone calls before the next meeting.	Chair	28/08/2024	New
CRG23	14/08/2024	Provide a summary of the Project Assessment Conclusions Report (PACR) to the CRG	TCV	28/08/2024	Complete, see August minutes
CRG24	14/08/2024	More information on the opportunities for CRG members to engage in the social procurement consultation session and/or in the sponsorship and donations discussions program to be circulated to the CRG.	Chair/ Secretariat	28/08/2024	New

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2.0	Final	19.12.2024	G. Warne B. Hermans C. Flanagan-Smith	C. Flanagan-Smith		C. Flanagan-Smith	CRG members and observers