RMCG

# VNI West Community Reference Group

Meeting Minutes – Tuesday 1 April 2025 6:00 – 7:35 pm
Charlton Park Complex, Charlton

## ATTENDEES 6:00-6:30 CRG ONLY

**CRG members**

Barry Batters, Cr. Justine Hide, Andrew Borg, Bryan Pederson, Claire Grant, Max Fehring, Stephen English, Brett Hosking, Colin Coates, Jon Whykes, Paul Haw and Claire Flanagan-Smith (Chairperson) and Brooke Hermans (Secretariat).

**Observer**

Cr. Jenny Greenberger (Northern Grampians Shire Council).

## ATTENDEES 6:30-7:35 CRG, GUESTS, TCV AND OBSERVERS

**CRG members and observers – as above**

**Guests**

Alistair Parker (VicGrid CEO), Ilsa Colson (VicGrid Executive Director of Communications and Engagement), Tony Mahar (Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner), Carolyn Francis (Assistant Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner).

**TCV**

Merryn York (AEMO Executive General Manager – System Design), Claire Cass (TCV Victorian Network Services and Delivery), Samantha Smith (Manager – Project Community & Stakeholder Engagement), Shondelle Mathews (Principal Stakeholder Engagement), Mark Gledhill (Senior Project Manager), Amy Pepper (Principal Performance).

**Observers**

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

## APOLOGIES

**CRG Member apologies**

Rachel Lloyd, Glenda Watts, Colin Fenton, Brad McDonald and Dan Bryce

**Observer apologies**

Geoff Rollinson (Gannawarra Shire Council), Cr. Dan Bolitho (Gannawarra Shire Council), Lincoln Fitzgerald (Loddon Shire Council), Cr. Miki Wilson (Loddon Shire Council), Wayne O'Toole (Buloke Shire Council), Brent McAlister (Northern Grampians Shire Council), Carly Noble

# 1 CRG only session

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

## 1.1 DISCUSSION

While the particulars of this meeting are confidential, it can be reported that this session focussed on preparing a list of questions for the guests attending the meeting from 6.30 pm.

Cr Justine Hide request approval for Cr Jenny Greenberger to also attend the CRG meetings as a member to ensure consistent coverage across meetings. Members agreed with this approach.

# 2 Whole group session

TCV, guests and observers joined the meeting at this point and the meeting continued with all listed attendees.

## 2.1 WELCOME AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

Cr. Alan Getley, Mayor of Buloke Shire Council, welcomed attendees and acknowledged the Traditional Owners of the land where the meeting was held.

## 2.2 WELCOME AND OPEN MEETING

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

Chair noted that CRG member Carly Noble is standing for the Senate in the upcoming federal election, and as such is standing down from full membership of the CRG until the election is over, but is welcome to attend as an observer.

## 2.3 VICGRID TRANSITION

VicGrid CEO, Alistair Parker provided an update on the VicGrid transition explaining:

- Later this year legislation will be introduced to the Victorian Parliament to establish VicGrid as a government-operated state business corporation with a board of directors.
- As part of its new role, VicGrid will take over the role of the Australian Energy Market Operator's (AEMO) Victoria's planning activities including TCV, making VicGrid the sole transmission planner within Victoria.
- AEMO and TCV will have no further Victorian responsibilities, meaning the TCV organisation, role, staff and existing commitments will transition to VicGrid.

## 2.4 INTRODUCTION AND ROLE OF THE COMMISSIONER

Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner Tony Maher, introduced himself, explaining:

- The Commissioner's role is independent of government.
- The Office of the Commissioner has a team of seven staff.
- The role of the Commissioner is to address complaints and concerns about large energy infrastructure across Australia and bring those challenges to the attention of stakeholders.
- The Commissioner works closely with the Victorian Energy and Water Ombudsman.
- A key focus for the role is addressing concerns and driving the adoption of recommendations from the Community Engagement report, completed by the previous Commissioner Andrew Dwyer.

## 2.5 QUESTIONS FROM THE CRG

Using a list of questions compiled by CRG members, CRG and guests contributed to a discussion as documented below.

**CRG question:** Can you please elaborate on the proposed Syncline Community Cable and claims by Syncline Energy owner Phil Galloway? Including:

- Will it remove the need for VNI West (as currently proposed) between Wooroonook and Bulgana?
- Will it remove or delay the need to build the southern half of VNI West?
- Will it delay the need to build Western Renewables Link (WRL)?

**Answer from VicGrid:**

- VicGrid is currently considering a proposal from Syncline Energy for the Syncline Community Cable for inclusion in the Victorian Transmission Plan which is due to be published in 2025.
- If VicGrid were to accept the proposal, if the characterisation of the project put forward by the proponent is correct and if the project were to go ahead, it would remove the need for the southern half of the VNI West transmission line. However, it may not delay or remove WRL.
- There are some questions about the proposal that VicGrid is working through with the proponent including queries about cost estimates, the suitability of its alignment with the Calder Freeway and concerns about the ability to connect renewables along the length of the Direct Current (DC) underground cable.

**CRG question:** Where along the VNI West transmission line will proposed renewable energy projects be able to connect? Will connections be limited to Kerang and Bulgana or are other connection points planned?

**Answer from VicGrid:**

- The Victorian Access Regime will help coordinate renewable energy capacity limits and connections within Renewable Energy Zones. This detail will be included in the draft Victorian Transmission Plan which will be finalised in 2025.
- Once the Victorian Transmission Plan is published, a process to determine the location of connection points for renewable energy along the VNI West transmission line will be undertaken.

**Further response from CRG member:** Stephen English expressed significant opposition to the easement's proximity to Spectacle Lake, and a desire for the southern easement option in that area to be removed. Stephen explained his concerns that the corridor had been developed through misrepresentation of Local Traditional Owners, and that local Barapa Barapa, Traditional Owners of the Country, had not been consulted on the VNI West Project. He said that it was causing significant hurt within the community. He also expressed concern that the desktop cultural heritage investigations for the project had been inadequate, given that it failed to identify the significance of Spectacle Lake. Stephen posed the following question:

**CRG question**: Why is the proposed route going over deep sand ridges, sites of significant birdlife and within a couple of hundred metres of an Aboriginal burial site, and why is this happening without representation from local Aboriginal people? Local Aboriginal people should have real support from TCV.

**Answer from TCV:**

- We acknowledged the member's concerns and agree that it is important to engage properly with Barapa Barapa and to support them. In selecting the easement, we have considered a variety of criteria including known cultural heritage sites and undertaken discussions with Traditional Owners.
- In some cases, we are considering alternatives, for example, to address issues of cultural heritage and minimise impacts. We are willing to explore alternatives for this section and extend our engagement with Traditional Owners.

**Further response from CRG member:** Further frustration was expressed by Stephen English about the path of the easement near Spectacle Lake, expressing that the line should not be located in that area. Another CRG member also highlighted that there is significant biodiversity in the area in question.

**CRG question:** How is all this being financed? How are the costs distributed among the government, taxpayers, communities, and other factors that comprise the business case?

**Answer from TCV and VicGrid:**

- The overall energy transition is funded by both the Commonwealth and State governments and through network charges, which are regulated by the Australian Energy Regulator under the arrangements set out in the National Electricity Rules.
- VNI West will be largely financed by the Transmission Network Service Provider. Those costs will be recovered through network charges once the line is in service, which are a component of energy consumer electricity bills, to a level determined by overall project cost and a revenue-collection period (at this stage 30 years). Some financial support may also be provided during construction by State and Commonwealth government.
- TCV explained that they are assessing tender responses from potential Transmission Network Service Providers for VNI West, including their capacity to finance all elements of the project, and that the process is now at the shortlisting stage. TCV thanked CRG members who have participated in the process.

**CRG question:** How is the mental health impact of this project on communities being considered?

**Answer from TCV:** We acknowledge that the project is having an impact on the communities involved and we take that very seriously. We have appointed a 24/7 confidential community support service Finwell Support (part of the Rural Financial Counselling Service), who offer free mental health support to communities and individuals. Services include farm visits, telephone calls and attendance at some of our events.

**Further CRG discussion:** CRG members advised that a person stressed by the project is unlikely to visit a TCV pop-up or event.

Cr. Jenny Greenberger expressed that TCV should consider local mental health service providers such as Grampians Community Health.

**ACTION:** Investigate other trusted mental health providers in the region, such as Grampians Community Health

**CRG question:** Is there potential for compensation for small towns?

**Answer from TCV:** Yes. However, this will need to be tailored to individual communities. We have established a Social Value Reference Group, including CRG members Andrew and Max, to provide advice on appropriate approaches. More information on social value and examples of potential investments will be presented to the CRG at an upcoming meeting.

**TCV question:** Is there potential for compensation for small towns?

**CRG member answer:** Yes, but not at the expense of government walking away from its usual responsibilities. This has to add value into communities.

**CRG question:** What is happening about planning for worker accommodation during construction?

**Answer from TCV:** We have coordinated an expression of interest process for landholders close to the easement seeking the provision of locations for laydown areas and temporary accommodation and are in the process of reviewing submissions. The intention is that the locations will be included in the Environmental Effects Statement process so that they are subjected to the same level of rigorous impact investigation as the rest of the project.

In parallel, with local government and the Social Value Reference Group, we are investigating alternative housing options with the potential to leave a legacy in impacted communities. Further information and discussion on accommodation will occur at an upcoming CRG meeting.

**CRG question:** Has anyone solved the insurance issues relating to transmission and generation infrastructure on agricultural land?

**Answer from VicGrid:** VicGrid and TCV have been investigating relevant insurance issues. For transmission infrastructure, we can include obligations on the Transmission Network Service Providers requiring them to cover insurance related damage or issues, excluding wilful or reckless damage. For renewable energy generation projects, we are exploring putting requirements on developers within Renewable Energy Zones to maintain satisfactory coverage for neighbours and communities, excluding wilful or reckless damage.

**TCV advised** that further discussion with the CRG about the Transmission Network Service Provider proposed easement terms and conditions will be discussed at an upcoming CRG meeting.

**CRG question:** If VicGrid are considering the cost of the Syncline proposal and comparing it to the VNI West project, doesn't this mean you can tell us the exact cost of the VNI West Project?

**Answer from VicGrid and TCV:** The Transmission Network Service Provider tender will help to inform the cost of VNI West. Currently, cost estimates are based on previous projects of this type. From previous projects, we do understand the cost differences between underground and aboveground transmission.

**ACTION:** 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

## 2.6 PREVIOUS MINUTES

There were no objections to approving the February meeting minutes. The Chair proposed that members who had not yet read the minutes should be given an additional 48 hours to raise any objections, this was agreed to by CRG.

## 2.7 UPCOMING MEETINGS

TCV will hold a workshop on the 29 April to which all CRG members are invited. This is not a CRG meeting. The next CRG meeting will be held in June. Date to be confirmed. Meeting close 7.45pm.

# Action register

| ACTION # | DATE ACTION RAISED | ACTION ITEM | ACTION OWNER | DUE DATE | STATUS |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| CRG 36 | 10/12/2024 | Send meeting minutes to Energy Minister | Chair/ Secretariat | Dec-24 | Complete |
| CRG 37 | 25/02/2025 | TCV or Chair to provide contact details for individual support on the portal to CRG members. | Chair/ Secretariat | Mar-24 | Complete |
| CRG 38 | 25/02/2025 | TCV to provide a response to the question of who covers insurance if towers fall over in a storm. | TCV | Mar-24 | Complete |
| CRG 39 | 25/02/2025 | TCV to develop a methodology and framework for benefits and test with the CRG at a future meeting. | TCV | Mar-24 | In progress |
| CRG 40 | 1/04/2025 | Investigate other trusted mental health providers in the region, such as Grampians Community Health | TCV | Jun-25 | New |
| 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/VicGrid | Jun-25 | New |

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|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1.0 | Draft | 7 April 2025 | B. Hermans<br>C. Flanagan-Smith | C. Flanagan-Smith | B. Gravenor | C. Flanagan-Smith | TCV |
| 2.0 | Draft | 10 April 2025 | C. Flanagan-Smith | C. Flanagan-Smith | N/A | C. Flanagan-Smith | CRG |
| 3.0 | Final | 20 May 2025 | C. Flanagan-Smith | C. Flanagan-Smith | N/A | C. Flanagan-Smith | TCV website |