VNI West Community Reference Group

Meeting Minutes – Tuesday 16 December 2025, 5:30pm to 8:00 pm

Charlton Park Complex, Charlton

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

CRG members

Attendees: Barry Batters, Colin Coates, Max Fehring, Cr Justine Hide, Cr. Jenny Greenberger, Paul Haw, Stephen English, Carly Noble, Colin Fenton, Cr. Dan Bolitho, Rachel Lloyd, Claire Flanagan-Smith (Chair) and Melissa Ludeman (Secretariat).

Online**:** Claire Grant.

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

CRG members

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Online**:** Claire Grant.

VicGrid

Attendees: Mick Douge (VNI West Program Director), Mark Gledhill (VNI West Senior Project Manager), Amy Pepper (VNI West Lead, Communications, Engagement and Social Performance), Ali Driscoll (VNI West Senior Advisor Engagement).

Online: Geoff Caine (Regional Director North West, VicGrid)

Observers

Daniel McLoughlan (Buloke Shire Council)

APOLOGIES RECEIVED

Bryan Pedersen, Jon Whykes, Brett Hosking and Cr Alan Getley

1 Members only pre-meeting session

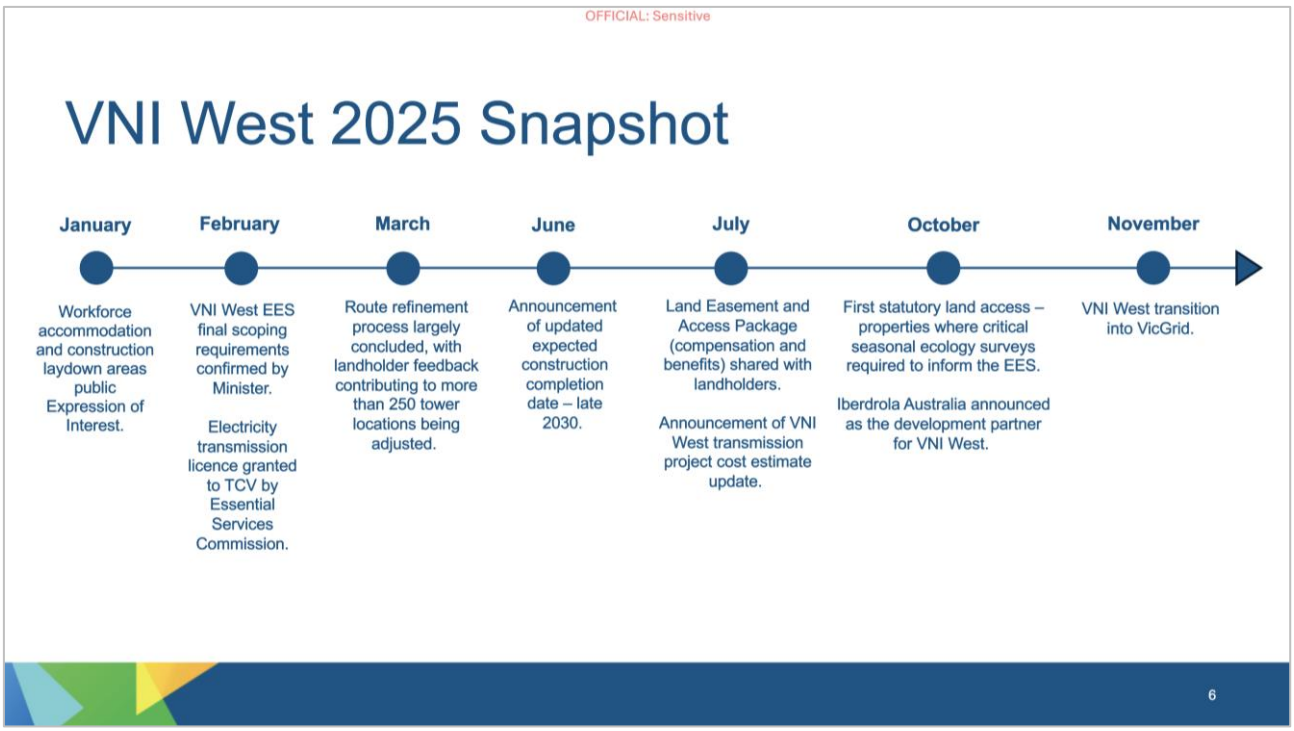
This session is only open to Community Reference Group (CRG) members, the Chair and Secretariat. The group focussed on understanding the upcoming agenda and preparing a list of items for general business in the full meeting, among other matters. The particulars of discussions during this session are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

2 CRG meeting

2.1 WELCOME AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

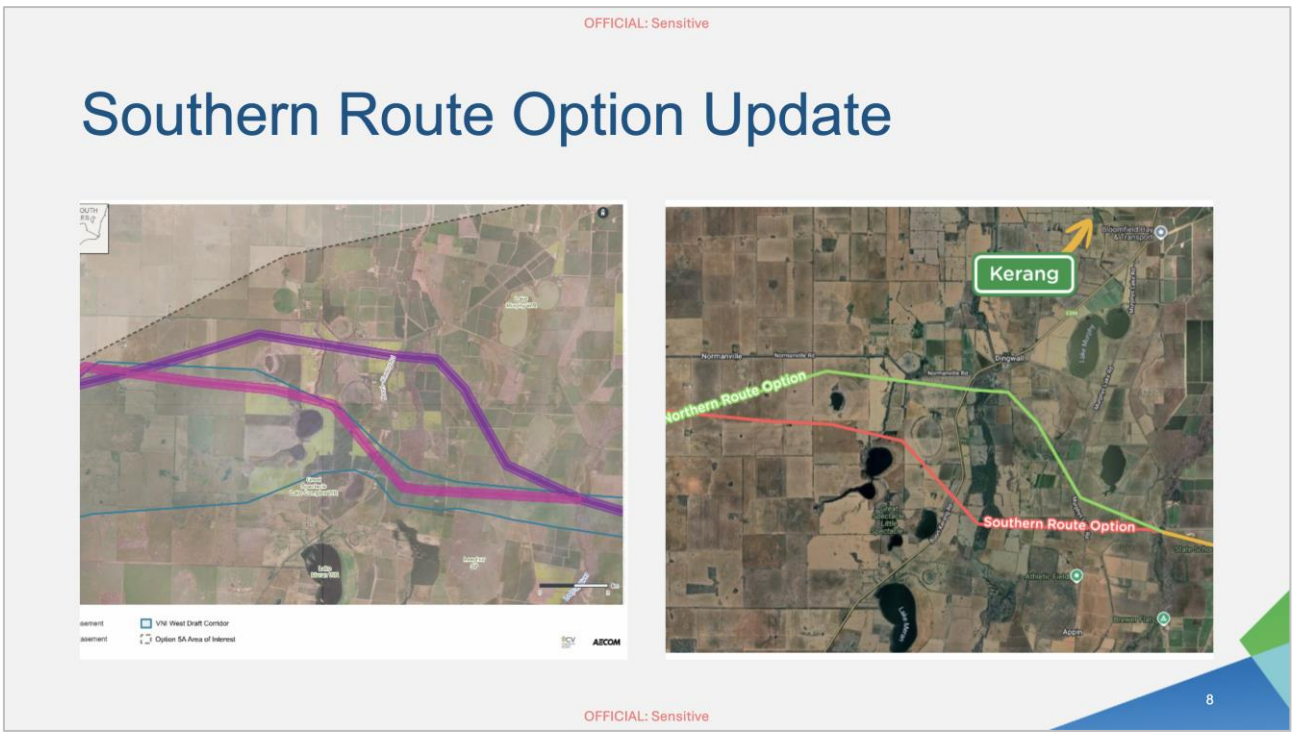
Independent Chair Claire Flanagan-Smith opened the meeting, welcomed attendees, made an Acknowledgement of Country, listed apologies and provided an overview of the meeting agenda. She also acknowledged that this is a busy time of year and thanked everyone for their time.

2.2 PROJECT UPDATE



VNI West Program Director Mick Douge provided an update on VNI West and an overview of project achievements from this year. The points covered included:

- Dozens of submissions were received on the public expression of interest for workforce accommodation and laydown area sites. Landholders, councils and businesses contributed information on potential locations, and shortlisted sites are being assessed for suitability under the Environment Effects Statement (EES) process.
- The final scoping requirements for the VNI West EES were confirmed via the Department of Transport and Planning. The VNI West team is working toward submission in mid-2026.
- The project was successfully granted a Victorian licence to transmit electricity by the Essential Services Commission.
- Land Easement and Access Packages (LEAP) were shared with landholders in July. The VNI West Team have met with more than 160 people to talk through those packages.
- Preferred easement feedback process wrapped up and resulted in more than 250 changes to tower locations.
- VNI West transitioned from the Australia Energy Market Operator (AEMO) to VicGrid on 1 November.
- Iberdrola Australia was announced as the development partner for VNI West. They will provide an update on the status of the project at a CRG meeting early next year.
- The focus for the VNI West project team is negotiating voluntary land access to support understanding of important information associated with the land and businesses in the project area. To date, 900 field surveys have been completed, and the team appreciates that there is still a lot to be completed.
- Extensive survey work and consultation with local landholders in northern area of two route options, a northern and southern route, has concluded in the selection of the northern route. The southern option was removed from ongoing consideration following survey work and collaboration that returned critical information about ecological and cultural values.



- In the year ahead, the VNI West team is focused on working with landholders to determine the information needed to get the best information for the EES, for consideration by landholders and the wider community. The VNI West team will also go through the process to achieve the planning scheme amendment required for the project.

Discussion

CRG member question: What are the next steps for landholders who have said no to access? There has been a lack of clarity about the next steps of the processes. What do the next 6-12 months look like here and when do the fines come into play?

VNI West team response: We have used a Section 93 access approach. Access at several sites were blocked on multiple occasions and we have not attempted to continue to gain subsequent access. The program is being reviewed, and the team is finalising plans for the next steps. This is not finalised, but the next steps are associated with access and the utilisation of Authorised Officers. In the meantime, we are continuing with pursuing access for surveys in the new year. Exactly when is not clear.

CRG member question: There have been mixed reports about the use of NDAs [non-disclosure agreements]. Are landholders required to enter into an NDA with the project?

VNI West team response: We are not requiring landholders to sign NDAs and the LEAP does not include reference to them. If a landholder wants one, we would consider it.

CRG member question: A person was entering a voluntary access process in good faith, but a Section 93 process was initiated anyway. Acknowledging that the VNI West team cannot disclose specifics on an individual case, what is the process if people are trying to participate in good faith discussions?

VNI West team response: Correct, specific information on a case cannot be divulged. Generally, a process has been put in place and we believe this process is reasonable to inform landholders of access. Safety is the priority for everyone involved. The Land Access Code of Practice (LACoP) requires a Notice of Access to go to the landholder 30 days before access to the property. Another notice is issued at least 48 hours prior to access. All notifications must include a map with a proposed point of access. Ongoing conversations with landholders can influence the point of access. The point of access is generally the closest point to the survey area where there is a gate. We must operate fairly and in reasonable accordance with the LACoP. All landholders are invited to respond but we cannot force engagement. All this information is recorded so we can demonstrate compliance with the LACoP to the Essential Services Commission (ESC).

Augmented reality tool update – Amy Pepper

Amy thanked everyone who came to experience demonstration on the augmented reality tool in November and provided an update:

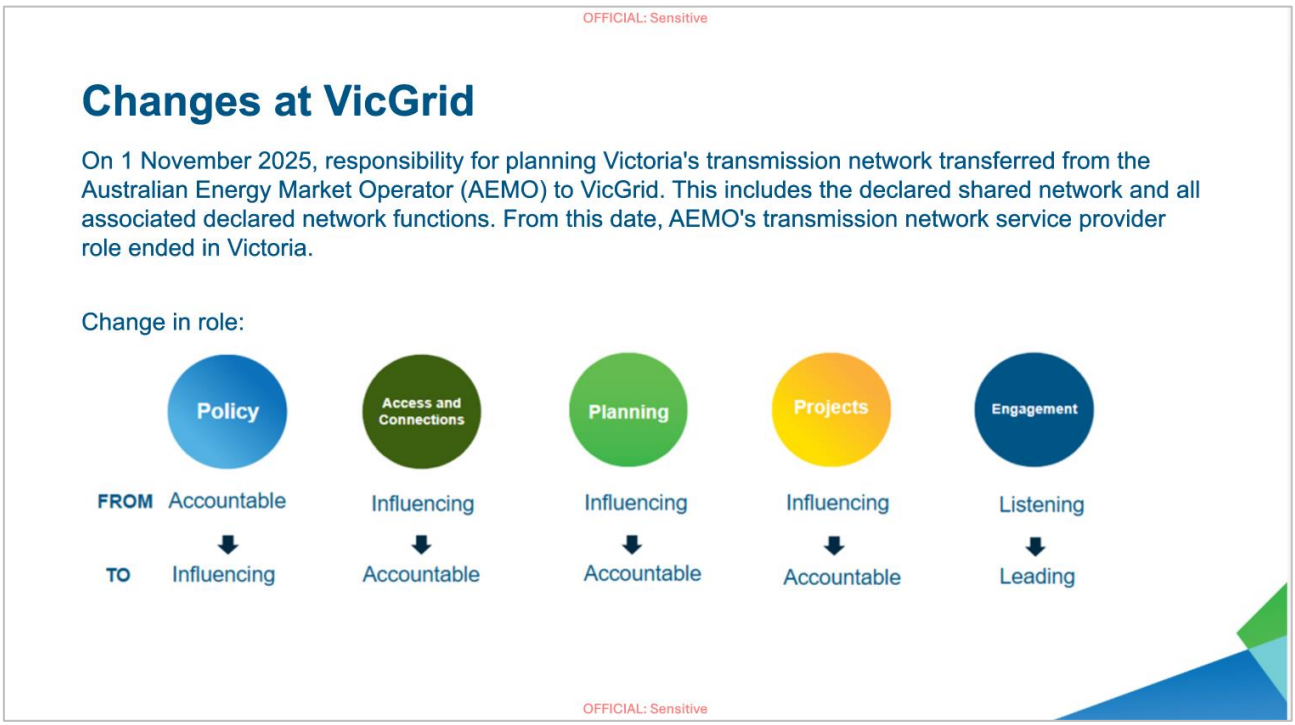
- Really useful feedback from landholders who participated in the VIZaR experience
- This has helped landholders and neighbours better understand what the visual impact might be
- The VNI West team have also talked to community groups such as the Friends of Mt Wycheproof, who were concerned about the visual impact from the mountain. The team were able to provide re-assurance about the proposed construction might look like
- The VNI West team has sought more detail from VisAR on the issue of magnification and viewing distance and have invited them to present to the CRG in future.

2.3 VICGRID UPDATE

VicGrid Regional Director North West Geoff Caine provided an update on the changes to VicGrid since 1 November across three areas:

- Changes at VicGrid
- Changes to the Victorian Access Regime
- Changes to the number of projects and transmission infrastructure.

Changes at VicGrid



As of November 1, VicGrid has been separated from the Department of Energy Environment and Climate Action (DEECA). As part of that change, VicGrid took on shared network roles from AEMO. What that means is:

- The DEECA policy team will continue to be responsible for legislation development and the work on transmission planning. VicGrid will have an influencing role
- VicGrid will be accountable for access and connections. Before November 1, it had an influencing role only. VicGrid will set up a new regime around access, connections and approvals for energy generation projects
- VicGrid will be accountable for planning for the Shared Declared Network for transmission infrastructure to connect the energy generating assets
- VicGrid has taken on the responsibility of some key projects underway including VNI West and Western Renewables Link (WRL).

In summary, where VicGrid has had an influencing role in the past it is now leading a lot of the work.

Changes to the Victorian Access Regime – moving from open access to closed access

In the past, Victoria has experienced significant challenges controlling where renewable energy generation projects occur. Under the open access system, energy developers could set themselves up anywhere in Victoria and find a way to connect to the grid. In the context of the energy transition, this raised the prospect of infrastructure weaving all over the countryside, which has happened to some extent in the south west of Victoria. To manage that risk, VicGrid are introducing a closed access system which includes the implementation of Renewable Energy Zones. The closed access system puts higher requirements (through the Grid Impact Assessment Guidelines) on projects outside of the Renewable Energy Zones through to make sure they are aligning with VicGrid's expectations.

The other change is a new test for those projects around community engagement and social value investments. Previously, access was focussed only on system and technical requirements so that there was no impact on the declared network and systems and that the National Electricity Market could still operate the

transmission infrastructure. The draft Community Engagement and Social Value Guidelines set the minimum expectations and expectations for how project developers will recognise stakeholders and deliver social values. There are 48 expectations.

VicGrid has received feedback on the Guidelines, including that:

- There should be improved clarity on structure, access connections and compliance and performance
- Engagement with local councils and communities should happen before projects start
- Projects need to have a regional economic development lens, not just taking from the regions
- Projects should be clear about per-megawatt costs.

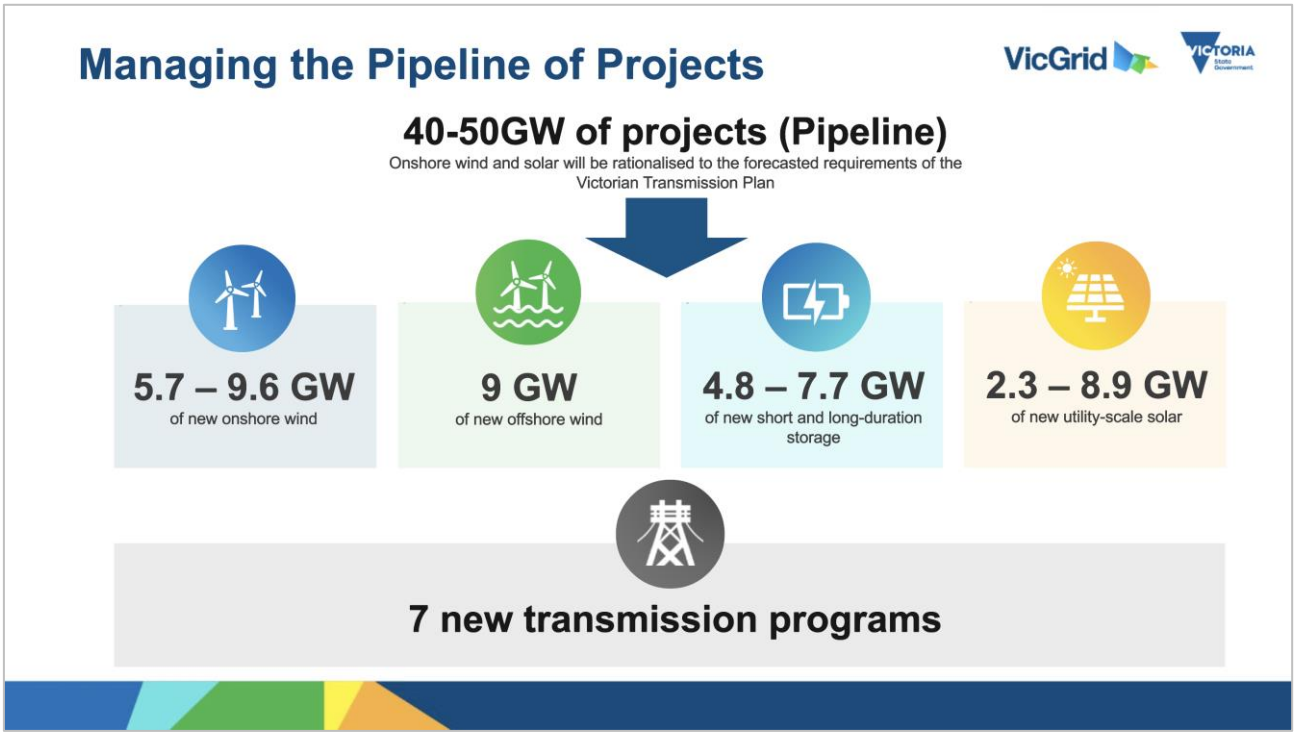
Changes to the number of projects and transmission infrastructure



The Victorian Transmission Plan has been finalised with a 15-year outlook and is the first long term strategic plan to coordinate all infrastructure at the right time and place.

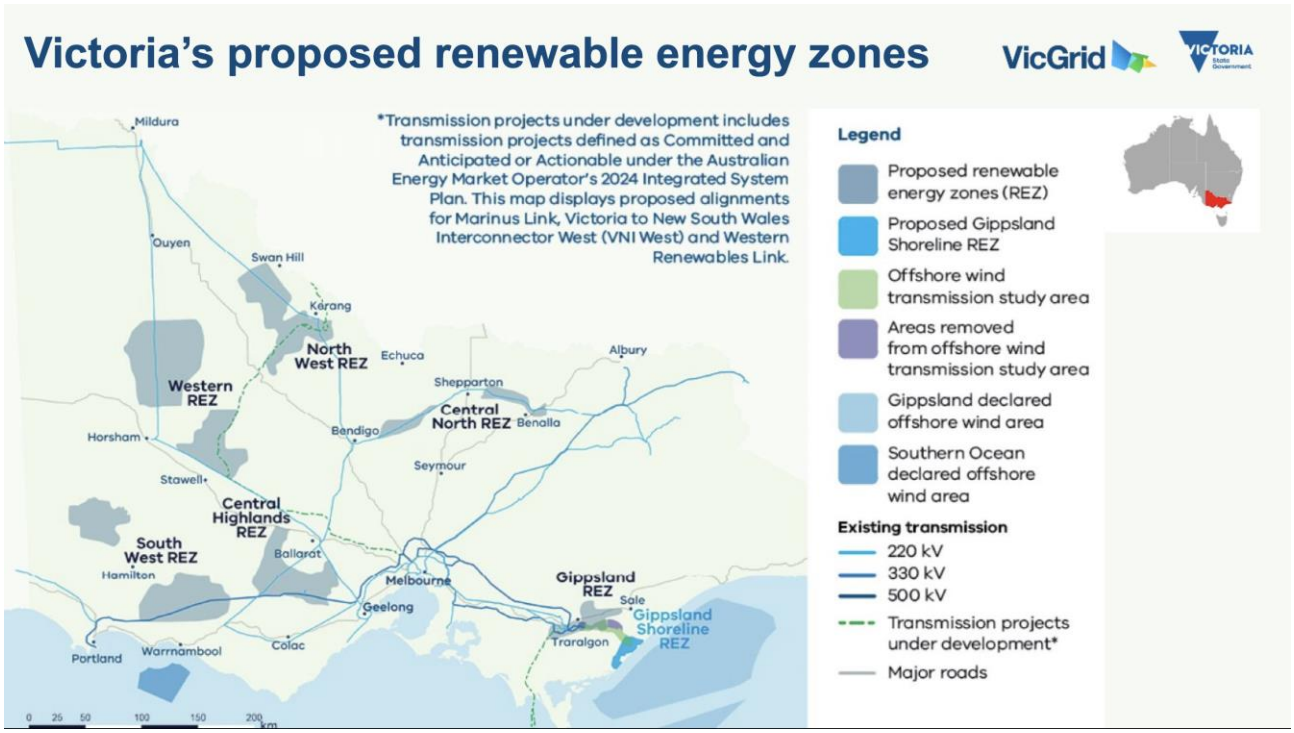
Part of this includes:

- Proposed Renewable Energy Zones
- Ensuring offshore wind can be developed and brought into the network
- Proposed new transmission projects.



There are between 40 and 50 gigawatts of proposed projects, mostly solar and wind. Through its transmission planning work, VicGrid is actively narrowing this pipeline to align with Victoria's energy needs under three demand scenarios identified in the 2025 Victorian Transmission Plan. For example, big data centres are becoming a growing energy user in Victoria, and globally. There are also a lot of aspirations for value adding food processing and other big energy uses.

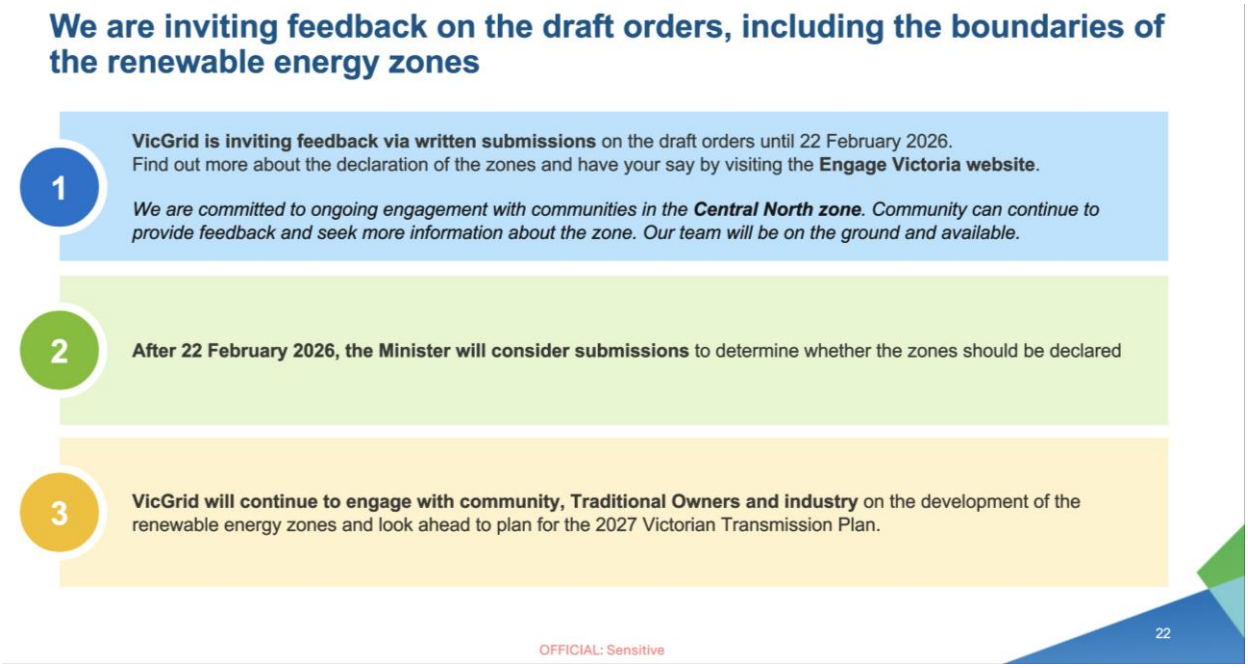
Victoria's Renewable Energy Zones



There are seven transmission programs and there are upgrades relevant to this VNI West transmission alignment which include:

- Ballarat, Horsham to Mura Warra – single circuit 220 transmission line to be upgraded to a double circuit to increase capacity. It will require a business case process
- Bendigo to Kerang – upgrade of single circuit 220 line to a double line
- Under a higher energy scenario, we may potentially look at an upgrade between Kerang and Red Cliffs.

Conclusion



Now that the final Transmission Plan is in place, the next step is to declare the Renewable Energy Zones so VicGrid can start the access regime.

The draft Renewable Energy Zone Orders are out for consultation until 22 February 2026.

There will also be pop-ups – Pyramid Hill, Boort, Quambatook, Kerang and Wedderburn in early February. Once confirmed, the details will be confirmed and circulated.

Discussion

CRG member comment: The community are familiar with the VNI West project, but now there are plans for upgrades which the community does not yet have a concept of. We want to make sure the community is better off in other ways for the project if we are going to wear it for the nation.

CRG member question: What has been done to coordinate benefits for the community on the project? And what are the benefits going to be for the community?

VicGrid response: The conversation about benefits is about establishing the mechanisms. VicGrid is in the process of establishing the Community Renewable Energy Zone Fund and community benefit sharing guidelines to capture investment from developers. As part of this work, VicGrid has competed a better understand existing conditions and emerging pressures, including workforce, housing and other regional capacity constraints that may arise as energy projects progress.

Once that piece of work is finalised and the recommendations are reviewed, VicGrid will undertake some work to identify the specific projects (e.g. workforce) required and sequencing to support the transmission line

projects. Alongside that, VicGrid will undertake strategic work clarify expectations for community benefits from those projects.

CRG Chair: We are looking for clarity that there will be some coordination for this. Companies have historically done it themselves in an uncoordinated way that do not consider the broader needs. Can that [a commitment to coordination] be offered?

VicGrid response: That is purpose of the Renewable Energy Zones and will be done through the access and connection arrangements. We will be asking them what they are offering communities and there is a compliance process around its implementation. If developers do not deliver, then they may have their right to access the grid revoked before the project connects to the grid. In addition, VicGrid can influence project delivery through contractual mechanisms, reflecting its expanded role following the transfer of responsibilities from AEMO.

CRG member question: We have heard that VicGrid has advertised for people to rent land to the project for infrastructure, such as housing. People have been advocating for ongoing permanent housing to be built as part of the project, but we heard that it will be temporary for this project, which is of no benefit to the local community whatever. Are you planning to go down that [temporary] line or will you invest in permanent structures?

VicGrid and VNI West team response: There is a general commitment to legacy housing. Feedback from councils indicated that given the size of the workforce accommodation required for the VNI West project – thousands of people for a very short time – and the location of the VNI West Project, it may not be beneficial for the community long-term if there is not another use for them. The project has committed to:

- Building temporary accommodation in areas where they are needed for the project. Following the project, the structures can be repurposed and relocated to appropriate sites and become permanent accommodation or community infrastructure where required. This will be conducted in consultation and there is funding set aside for this relocation and renovation.
- Building a baseline target of 50 permanent, bricks and mortar (or similar specifications) houses in areas determined through consultation with community and councils, drawing on the project's discretionary community benefits funding to support communities to attract people to the area.

CRG member question: Where are we landing on suitable sites, so they are not in the middle of nowhere?

VNI West Team response: All shortlisted sites are being assessed through the EES process. This will include an assessment of the workforce requirements, social impacts, visual impacts, traffic impacts and more. There are advantages and disadvantages to locations and the EES will work through that list and will determine the suitability of sites.

CRG member question: The EES process considers water, sewage and other considerations for green field sites. Are local councils responsible for the planning decisions or does that go to someone else?

VNI West team response: The Department of Transport and Planning will deal with any planning scheme amendments required.

2.4 GENERAL BUSINESS

COST OF THE VNI WEST PROJECT

CRG member question: Is there an update on the total cost for the project?

VNI West team response: There is no change from the$7.6 billion quoted for the Victorian and New South Wales components of VNI West combined. VicGrid will get an update in 18 months' time from the development

partner which will indicate if there are any changes. It will be based on finalised development design. We are working with them now so they can understand the intricacies of the project.

Price certainty on major projects is hard. There is a great deal of transmission being built globally and nationally. We have two other projects in Victoria: WRL the Gippsland Offshore Wind project that will give us an indicative understanding of cost per kilometre and other good data to indicate if the price is appropriate or not. The developer is one of the largest globally.

ENGAGEMENT WITH NON-REGISTERED ABORIGINAL PARTIES

CRG member question: What improvements have been made to engagement with non-Registered Aboriginal Party organisations?

VNI West team response: We have made two commitments following consultation:

- Individual engagement plans for each group regardless of RAP status
- A focus on outcomes for the groups.

We have been able to facilitate meetings with Barapa Barapa representatives and we will continue to talk with and support them wherever possible and appropriate. We have been guided by Barapa Barapa representatives on how to engage with them and have followed a similar approach with Wamba Wemba to ensure they are engaged in the project in a way determined by each individual group. We are very mindful that when it comes to engagement for this project, and the Barapa Barapa ongoing pursuit of RAP status, that we stay within the bounds of what is appropriate for this project. There are guardrails for engagement to ensure the role a project plays is appropriate. It is important to note that the Registered Aboriginal Party application is separate to VNI West and while we support it, there are limitations to how we can be directly involved.

IMPACTS ON LENDING

CRG member question: How much engagement is happening with banks on the impact that the project may have on value of properties, and the impact on properties with loans?

VNI West team response: There has not been any direct engagement with the banks. If there's a mortgage caveat on the property, then the bank must be made aware of the change.

CRG member question: Would this influence who gets the compensation (i.e. banks or landholder) if there is a mortgage on the land?

VNI West team response: We can only provide general advice. We recommend that each landholder gets professional advice, and costs can be reimbursed.

CRG member question: Can you get a banking representative to provide more advice that is a bit more detailed?

VNI West team response: We can facilitate information sharing forums between landholders and institutions if that is deemed suitable by the community but note we cannot force people to attend or absorb the information.

ACTION: VNI West team to review the advice provided to landholders to make the implication for loans if land is de-valued due to the project is clear.

PROFESSIONAL ADVICE PAYMENTS

CRG member question: What happens if the VicGrid land valuation is different to the private valuation sought by the landholder?

VNI West team response: Both valuers hold a valuers' conference where they review the method and the results and come to a joint decision on the value.

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

CRG member question: Professional advice is paid for by VicGrid. Does that include compensation or reimbursement for mental health treatment?

VNI West team response: There is provision for mental health support already operating which has had good uptake, however farm gate clinical support is missing from that current offering. So we are developing a pilot program to support farm gate clinician not just a program. The initial pilot program will be delivered in conjunction with Northern Grampians Shire Council for 12 months and then, depending on results rolled out in each Local Government Area. Someone from Grampians Community Health, who will provide clinical services at the farm gate, so it does not rely on the landholder going to a location to access services. There will be support work that sits around the clinical support. Then we will engage with surrounding councils to see if this model would work in their area, and if not, determine what kind of services would be more suitable for their area.

CRG member question: Is access to mental health support conditional on meeting criteria or a certain number of visits?

VNI West team response: We have not had any discussions on caps on funding. It will be based on clinician capacity in that area.

CRG member statement: I am concerned about where clinicians will come from.

VNI West team response: For the pilot project we have been advised by council that the resources are there to support it. If there are rapid increase in demand and we need to increase support, then we will do it. We will react to demand. If the program is rolled out further, resourcing will be a key consideration.

Statement from Northern Grampians Councillors: The Northern Grampians mental health pilot program has been informed through the roundtables. Some of the CRG members have participated in the round tables and included input from health services. The program was funded in response to a proposal.

CRG member question: Will it be a VicGrid branded program?

Northern Grampians Councillors response: No. The grant for the pilot will come to Council and be allocated by Council. This will be informed by the roundtable group. Northern Grampians Shire Council will not advertise that it is a VicGrid initiative and the VNI West Team do not require any acknowledgement. If asked, we will be transparent about where the money has come from.

VNI West team statement: The program is looking to use local providers in the communities already there. This pilot program does not reflect the full investment in this space. We acknowledge that there needs to be a range of different ways that mental health is supported.

CRG Chair: Please note [VNI West team] that the CRG are still looking for an update on:

- Insurance
- Tax treatment of compensation
- Vegetation offsets
- Fire risks from transmission lines.

We will seek updates on those at a future date.

2.5 CRG LOGISTICS

Discussion on rotating future meeting locations

Ali Driscoll noted that some CRG members have requested consideration of rotating the meeting location.

CRG discussion points:

- There are advantages such as opening the opportunity for other observers
- Given the distance, it would need a standing remote dial in option, which is not ideal
- The schedule would need to be set further in advance
- On balance, Charlton is a central location and has accommodation, so it is the best option for most people.

Decision: The CRG meeting will continue to be hosted at Charlton.

2.6 OBSERVER COMMENTS

None.

2.7 PREVIOUS MINUTES

CRG member question: There was an item on page section 2.4 about farmers commissioning their own assessments. Are they reimbursed?

VNI West team response: Yes, landholders can get funding for their own assessment or survey, but it needs to fulfil requirements of EES. If a landholder wants to commission their own assessment funded by us, then CRG members are to advise them to talk to a Land Liaison to get a copy of the scope for the contractor to follow. Please don't engage someone before talking to the VNI West Team.

ACTION: Secretariat to amend the minutes to explicitly say that the landholder can be given funding for their own assessment.

With this amendment, the minutes of the August 2025 CRG meeting are accepted.

2.8 UPCOMING MEETINGS

The date of the next CRG meeting will be confirmed. The goal is to have the next meeting in February.

There is an event on 8th and 9th of February that will affect some CRG members so the next meeting will be 10 or 17 February. This will be confirmed in January.

General conversation

CRG member question: Does VicGrid have a board or something equivalent?

VNI West team response: VicGrid has a Board. Details are provided on the website, including the membership of that Board.

CRG member comment: This is all very positive, there is a lot of value in educating people about the transition and how they can take advantage of things like community solar, batteries, electric vehicles and charging points.

Meeting closed at 8:14 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.	VicGrid	Aug-25	In progress
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?	VNI West Team to provide information Chair to share	Jul-25	Complete
CRG 51	19/08/2025	Amy Pepper (VNI West Team) 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.	VNI West Team	Aug-25	Complete
CRG 52	19/08/2025	VNI West Team to investigate options for supporting landholders to commission independent experts (e.g. ecologists) for site-specific input to the EES.	VNI West Team	Dec-25	In Progress
CRG 53	19/08/2025	VNI West Team 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.	VNI West Team	Jun-26	In progress
CRG 54	19/08/2025	Chair to organise out of session with CRG to run through the VNI West visualisation tool.	Chair	Dec-25	Complete
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	Closed
CRG 56	19/08/2025	VNI West Team to investigate what support can be provided to CRG to assess the EES material.	VNI West Team	Dec-25	Complete
CRG 57	16/12/2025	Review the advice provided to landholders to make the implication for loans if land is de-valued due to the project is clear.	VNI West Team	April-26	New
CRG 58	16/12/2025	CRG Secretariat to amend the minutes to explicitly say that the landholder will be given funding for their own assessment.	Secretariat	Dec-26	Completed directly after the meeting

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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	14/01/2025	M. Ludeman	C. Flanagan-Smith	B. Gravenor	C. Flanagan-Smith	CRG

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