Submission No 21

INQUIRY INTO FEASIBILITY OF UNDERGROUNDING THE TRANSMISSION INFRASTRUCTURE FOR RENEWABLE ENERGY PROJECTS

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The Hon. Emily Suvaal,
Committee Chair,
Inquiry – Feasibility of undergrounding the transmission Infrastructure for renewable energy projects.
Standing Committee on State Development
Parliament House
6 Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

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Dear Committee,

Underground to avoid building a multi-billion dollar firetrap through NSW communities.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to this necessary inquiry into the feasibility of Undergrounding transmission infrastructure for renewable infrastructure projects. Your deliberations and recommendations on this issue represent a once-in-lifetime opportunity to ensure better outcomes for future generations of NSW citizens.

I do not own a farm and therefore none of the proposed overhead lines would directly affect me; But the Fire Risks would be of great concern. Experiencing the 2019-2020 Fires was a harrowing experience to say the least. Our beautiful town of Batlow was evacuated.

After all this time Batlow is not fully restored to its former self; the country side still bears the scars of the vast devastation. Continued health problems still linger for many as a result of the dreadful smoke. I personally was allowed back into Batlow to get vital medication for a friend; the smoke was that dense I was choking even with a mask on. Visibility was barely 2-3 meters.

We cannot possibly be expected to go through this again, or be put at risk for this to happen again.

A personal friend is now on portable oxygen as a result of the smoke. There is no doubt that Transgrid's current HumeLink proposal for high voltage overhead Transmission towers from Wagga Wagga and the Snowy Mountains to the outskirts of the Southern Highlands will make fire-prone southern NSW even more susceptible to devastating bushfires.

- Outdated transmission tower technology significantly increases the risk of deadly bushfires and makes it harder to fight them, threatening lives, property and native animals.
- HumeLink cuts through large areas still recovering from the "Black Sunday" bushfires of 2019-2020.
- Bushfire risk will increase with Climate Change, making towers even more dangerous.
- PG&E's modelling in California shows underground lines reduces their risk of lighting wildfires by approximately 99%.
- The cost of bushfires in Australia can run into billions of dollars and will be well in excess of costs associated with undergrounding.

Supposing the project goes ahead in its current form. In that case, I can be confident in assuring you that the proven and known risks supported by many inquiries and reports will show that; lives will be lost, properties devastated, incomes wiped out and the devastating impact on endangered wildlife.

After the 2019-2020 fires we were unable to return home for some time as power had not been restored to our area of Batlow. We are on the outskirts of the town and had to wait another 3 weeks after Batlow Township proper had been restored. The personal costs to myself in refilling

our fridges and buying new provisions as a pensioner this was a great financial strain. Restoring my gardens again was another great financial drain. I was one of the lucky ones, many of those known to me lost a great deal, and in some cases they lost everything.

Underground energy transmission is the best practice worldwide, and Australian scientific studies support this. Underground transmission is more reliable, safe and efficient and will not be impacted by extreme weather or increase the risk of catastrophic bushfires.

While Transgrid is telling the community nothing can be done, and the towers will be built, the NSW Government must take a leadership position and ensure this foreign-owned company doesn't railroad decision-making and build a multibillion-dollar firetrap through the middle of our communities.

Power lines regularly cause fires.

• Faults in electrical distribution networks are one of the primary sources of significant bushfires.
• Power faults cause 2% -4% of all rural fires.
• Inclement and severe weather events elevate fire risk up to 50% by faults in transmission networks.
• University of Wollongong found that powerline-caused ignitions were the major cause of bushfires, and with most houses destroyed.
• AusNet Services report to Energy Safe Victoria and the Australian Energy Regulator that there were 79 "Fire-Start" incidents in the 6 months between January and June 2016. Of these 59 were attributed to lightning strikes; contacts with birds, animals or objects, HV Fuse failures and other infrastructure failures.
• The Arc distance for a 500kV overhead powerline that is hit by lightning is up to 50 Meters from the towers base.
• The massive overhead towers impede the means of fighting bushfires.
• High voltage impedes the management of fire-fighting. The space around and under them is No-go for fire teams.
• Impeding aerial firefighting planes and Helicopters from accessing nearby rural dams for fire control. • Some Landowners lost significant parts of their property do to inability to fight fires as a result of High Voltage overhead power lines on their properties.
• In neighboring State of Victoria the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission highlighted that the; "State has a history of electrical assets causing bushfires. In 1969 and 1977 the failure of electricity assets- including the clashing of conductors, conductors contacting trees, and inefficient fuses – caused major bushfires. This history was repeated on 7 February 2009, when 5 of the 11 major fires that day were caused by failed electricity assets; among the fires was that at Kilmore East, as a result of which 119 people died."
• Deloitte Access Economics put the tangible and intangible costs of the Victorian "Black Saturday" bushfires at $7.6 Billion. By extrapolation, the cost of the 2019-2020 Australian bush fire season, "Black Summer", has been estimated at $230 billion.
• The Fire on the Farm Report by the World Wide Fund for Nature-Australia and the University of Sydney estimate that the 2019-2020 bushfires cost Australia $4 to 5 Billion.
• PG&E's modelling shows that burying lines reduces risk by 99%
The Committee must look at the devastating and economic cost of bushfires. A significant threat of loss of life to Human and animal. These have been highlighted above. These devastating costs would outstrip the cost of undergrounding.

Recent Costings provided by independent consultants and real-world experience overseas show that the differential cost between undergrounding and overhead transmission lines is much smaller than Transgrid's inflated estimates, which have proven wildly inaccurate.

Finally, what will the NSW Government say to families if lives are lost, and our little towns like Batlow are destroyed?

Will we need to fill in reams of paperwork to get a few dollars of help? What will they do when our homes are burnt down and businesses are destroyed, incomes lost? Theses outdated transmission lines either cause a fire or prevent a fire from being controlled and fought.

The bushfire risks from transmission towers are well known and documented but are being deliberately ignored in favour of flawed economic modelling and outdated thinking by a privately owned company.

I urge this Committee to recommend undergrounding as the best way forward for renewable transmission in NSW to avoid being responsible for more devastating bushfires like the 2019-2020 "Black Summer" fires.

Trusting that this committee will think of Us as Communities of people not fringe complainers.

Most sincerely,

Kevin Parker