

Submission
No 111

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

Organisation: HumeLink United

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The Hon Emily Suvaal, Committee Chair,
Standing Committee on State Development
Parliament House
6 Macquarie Street
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Dear Committee Members,

HumeLink's bullying and blindsiding tactics devastate proud regional communities

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission relating to the Inquiry into the "feasibility of undergrounding the transmission infrastructure for renewable energy projects" on behalf of HumeLink United and to put forward our case for undergrounding.

As proud members of the communities severely impacted by the current HumeLink overhead tower proposal, HumeLink United very much appreciate the chance to put our concerns on the record and have our voices heard.

We support the commitment by governments across Australia for greener energy generation, but as we strive to meet our greenhouse targets as a nation, we must ensure that we build Australia's renewable energy future based on sustainable, efficient infrastructure and proper planning, not flawed economic modelling and short-term thinking that has a detrimental impact on people, communities, the environment and bushfire safety.

With this in mind, it would be imperative to quote our Premier Chris Minn's in his Victory Speech - words that we hold with great hope, "The People of NSW have voted to put in a government that will put people at the heart of all decision making, we will not let them down!". This statement had each one of us encouraged that our concerns would be put at the forefront of the decision about HumeLink, instead of a substandard archaic overhead option that ignores people over profit.

This submission focuses on the costs and benefits of undergrounding, and our environmental concerns as set out in the Terms of Reference.

Executive Summary

Key points:

The health and vitality of local communities is threatened by HumeLink's proposed 360-kilometre-high voltage cable with towers as tall as the Sydney Harbour Bridge
The current proposal will further lead to community backlash and delays.
Local communities are experiencing anxiety and feel railroaded and powerless.
Some residents have experienced thoughts of suicide.
A local survey showed the project has negatively impacted the mental health of 76 per cent of respondents.
Despite concerns, Transgrid has pursued only one option with a scare campaign.

The proposed HumeLink overhead towers will severely impact our long-standing regional communities in southern NSW, including their industries, their precious environment, their safety and their health.

Thriving towns and businesses that have survived almost two centuries of economic downturns, floods, droughts and fires, like the Black Summer blazes of 2019/2020, are now on their knees and powerless to fight the will of a foreign company which appears to have been given extraordinary powers by our governments to decide how transmission is delivered.

Bullying tactics, mistruths and misinformation have been repeatedly used in an attempt to force through Transgrid's current HumeLink proposal to install 360 kilometres of high voltage cables across large areas of Southern NSW, running on towers as tall as the Sydney Harbour Bridge pylons.

If Transgrid have their way, our beautiful regional landscape will be lost forever, with trees replaced by hundreds of 85-metre-tall towers for some 360kms. And if the mockup Transgrid has provided is a worry, imagine what it would really look like if it is allowed to be built. Transgrid, after 3 years of insistent community request, released to the community consultative groups distressing images using a new technology NEARA 3D Visualisation tool, which appeared to be closer to construction standard. We were told this technology would replace their process of creating photomontages not adequately scaled or incumbent of an accurate depiction. To the community's surprise and downright outrage, Transgrid clearly sensed the reaction to the more 'detailed' images of NEARA and told the community that this technology is now not suitable for use for public display and will only be used by Engineers.

Transgrid are withholding the 'real' impact, and the 'visual' impact from the public. Please see following images

Below: Transgrid's Photomontage through a Gilmore property, basic depiction without 70m removal of vegetation



Below: NEARA Visualisation with existing 330 KV lines photoshopped out



Community concerns have repeatedly been ignored in favour of short-term, questionable economic thinking to push ahead with this proposal despite its detrimental impacts on a huge area of our State,

from Wagga Wagga and the Snowy Mountains to the outskirts of the Southern Highlands. Transgrid continues to say to the community that they are advocating for underground but show no evidence of this.

If HumeLink proceeds in its current form in the face of such fierce community opposition, the project is likely to face serious delays as people fight to protect their communities and the environment, and appeal to commonsense for already high fire-prone areas rather than making them even more susceptible to deadly bushfires and firefighting death traps if this project goes overhead.

Undergrounding is the obvious solution to resolve the issues faced by our communities and provide a sustainable, environmentally sensitive solution for NSW's clear energy transmission needs.

Introduction

The current proposal to take HumeLink above ground will be by and large a massive cost not only on us, the people impacted, but also for the State.

It will:

- industrialise our beautiful rural landscapes.
- destroy communities and the people that live and work in them.
- result in the destruction of our environment
- see workable prime agricultural land lost.
- have significant impacts on tourism and local economies in Regional NSW; and,
- pose the greatest of risks and hazards in the next bushfire event.

These environmental and social impacts are not costed and considered – but they should be!

Internationally, governments are taking into account all costs of overhead transmission, including environmental and social costs, and have moved forward with the notion that underground is the cheapest long-term solution.

For instance, in California, they are putting 10,000 miles, equivalent to over 16,000 kilometres of powerlines underground, for the sole purpose of protecting people, homes and communities in the next wildfire event. When asked about the cost of undergrounding the CEO of the Californian electricity utility said, and I quote: "It's too expensive not to do it. Lives are on the line!"

In other jurisdictions they are going underground because it's simply the right thing to do!

The NSW government should follow suit.

Proud historic communities oppressed by Transgrid's HumeLink

The Wiradjuri, Walgalu and the Ngunnawal people have been custodians of the area impacted by Transgrid's HumeLink proposal area for more than 40,000 years.

The area was settled by Europeans from the 1820s and today's thriving communities include Wagga Wagga, Tumut, Adelong, Adjungbilly, Batlow, Bookham, Yass, Gunning, and Bannaby, home to more than 86,000 people.

The people of this region have a deep connection to their local communities and to the land. Many farms have been owned by families for multiple generations.

HumeLink will impact third and fourth generation farmers who have weathered many ups and downs due to their love of the land, only to be defeated by Transgrid's plan to build huge towers and high voltage transmission lines directly through their productive properties, assisted by government agencies and unfair and outdated processes.

These communities are also concerned about the project:

- having long-term mental health impacts on local people; if early signs are any consideration of the impact, we hold grave concerns for the prospect of construction and further impacts on people.
- the decimation of large populations of threatened plants and animals.
- clear-felling bushland cultivated by the farmers themselves.
- sending local tourism and agricultural businesses broke.
- increased risk of bushfires, as many residents are still recovering from the Black Summer fires of 2019/2020; and
- Increased safety concerns in the event of a fire, due to witnessed arcing activity in Dunn's Road Fire 2019/20, concerns for human life as a result of HumeLink being a hazard to safely control fires and deeming areas undefendable.
- electromagnetic fields (EMF) which French courts recently recognised there are very real health risks.

Without doubt, if Transgrid proceeds with the current proposal it will be met with fierce opposition and delays from these communities. Transgrid should be held to account, on any delay, as they have ignored community outcry, and have gone to great lengths to stall any real consideration of undergrounding. If Transgrid proposed to underground HumeLink, it would already be near completion. Undergrounding grants Transgrid and the Government social licence, and we as a community have said this from day one.

Mental health impacts

Local communities in the impacted region are experiencing significant anxiety about the HumeLink proposal and feel railroaded by current processes, and powerlessness at the hands of Transgrid.

For some members of our community, the HumeLink proposal has prompted thoughts of suicide as they fear destruction to their family homes, properties, livelihoods and treasured landscapes that have been held dearly in their hearts for generations. Devastating the hope of the property being a well-presented legacy for our next generation.



A survey of landholders impacted by HumeLink, conducted by Wagga MP Joe McGirr's office, found that among 110 respondents, 76 per cent stated the project has negatively impacted their mental health.

Almost half of the responses mentioned stress, while anxiety was mentioned in ten responses.

As this statistic was taken early on, we have witnessed an increase in anxiety and depression to impacted landholders, and their families. We hold concerns that the largest cost of HumeLink will be people.

Mental health is of particular concern among our regional communities. Official suicide rates from the Australian Bureau of Statistics show that in 2021, the suicide rate (suicide deaths per 100,000 people) in rural and regional NSW (16.4) was more than double that of the Greater Sydney area (7.6).

In the area impacted by Transgrid's HumeLink proposal, people are particularly worried about increased bushfire risks, their own safety, and angered by environmental destruction and other environmental health impacts that will occur in the area.

Recent studies show that people implicitly associate power lines with being unhealthy, suggesting a spontaneous negative evaluation of the health risks of power lines. [The relatively high perceived risks of power lines may also adversely affect well-being and health of residents living near a power line](#)

[through a psychosocial pathway linking exposure to a potential environmental hazard such as bushfires.](#)

We have seen over the last 3 years people's health deteriorate, and in some cases fail them under the stress and absolute lack of human consideration and empathy this project presents. This project is failing regional people, as they feel meaningless, irrelevant and not considered.

Transgrid bullying and bogus arguments

Despite our calls for undergrounding and meaningful consultation about issues directly impacting our communities, homes and properties, Transgrid has instead pursued only one option.

People in our communities are deeply offended by the lack of genuine care for their plight, their homes, their connection to the land and their histories in our tight-knit communities.

Transgrid has run a public scare campaign using bogus, wildly exaggerated claims about the cost of undergrounding to win government support for its tower proposal.

These cost claims were shown to be completely wrong in Transgrid's own report last year, but are still regularly repeated by government officials as "truth" and used as rationale for discrediting undergrounding.

Recent costings provided by independent consultants and real-world experience overseas clearly show that the differential cost between undergrounding and overhead transmission is marginal at best and are in stark comparison to Transgrid's still inflated estimates.

The cost argument is being used to bully communities into submission and railroad unconscionable outcomes as shown by Transgrid's repeated public statements showing absolutely no regard for the community and blindly focused on dollars and cents.

As an example of how deceitful Transgrid has been with the community and Government, for close to 2 years the community have asked it to bring their 2020 overhead costing to today's market terms to properly compare it with their 2022 undergrounding cost yet been met with ignorance to do so. In reply to our request, one Transgrid director stated: "I am not looking forward to re-calculating the cost, because I know it will result in the need to ask for more money."

Any comparison to Undergrounding estimates cannot be calculated without first bringing the overhead cost estimate into today's market terms.

Impacts of tourism, agriculture and the environment



The current HumeLink tower proposal will hit several local industries hard and have a devastating impact on our local wildlife.

The project impacts a massive 48,322 hectares of land (483.22 square kilometres) in our region, and will involve clear-felling huge areas of native forests and bushland with serious impacts on habitat for 82 threatened species of plants and animals including the Koala, Yellow-bellied Glider, Eastern Pygmy Possum, Squirrel Glider, Greater Glider, Wedge Tailed Eagle, Scarlet Robin, Flame Robin, Powerful Owl, Masked Owl and Spotted Quoll.

Tourism is a major growth industry for regional NSW. Revenue from tourism was \$14.3 billion in 2019 alone, and visitors increased by 41% from 2014 to 2019. After the Dunn's Road / Black Summer Fires, the area was a recipient of the Federal Government's \$76 million bushfire tourism recovery package to help get the tourism and agri-tourism industry back on its feet. HumeLink will negate the work and investment already made and will throw these same communities further into the fire.

While the Snowy Mountains and Tablelands have been selected as iconic locations to promote regional Australia, their tourism status was not treated as a serious consideration in Transgrid's HumeLink proposal. Instead Transgrid has pushed ahead with its plan for a massive eye-sore, leaving a 360km long, 70-metre-wide scar through old growth forests, state forests and working farms. It goes without saying that this impact would be significantly reduced by undergrounding.

Similarly, there has been little consideration about the impact of HumeLink on the region's productive farmlands, which are significant contributors to local employment and the State's food production and economy.

Numerous farms will see operations significantly impacted with HumeLink lines cutting through their land coupled with insurance issues associated with bushfire risks from the proposed aboveground powerlines. These issues could again be significantly reduced by undergrounding.



Bushfire risks will be exacerbated

After the Black Summer Fires, how can we put people and communities at further risk?

If HumeLink goes overhead we are concerned for our safety, fearful of the bushfire risk and firefighting hazard, when we know the reality we face is the inability to control fires in the vicinity of HumeLink from above or by ground, leaving areas undefendable. Yet, there is an alternative that instead of increasing the risk and burdening people and communities with the risk for the next 80-100 years, undergrounding protects and negates the bushfire risk surrounding HumeLink.

Solution – Underground Transmission Lines

All these issues are preventable by simply undergrounding the transmission infrastructure. Undergrounding solves a myriad of environmental issues and stacks up financially over the long-term, due to reduced ongoing maintenance costs. Transgrid being an overhead easement management company, will profit on the maintenance cost for the next 80-100 years, though people and communities will be at its detriment.

Underground energy transmission [is best practice around the world](#). It is less susceptible to outages and blackouts because it cannot be impacted by extreme weather, and it lessens the risk of catastrophic bushfire.

Undergrounding has been adopted in other parts of Australia, Europe, California and many forward-thinking jurisdictions.

Conclusion

We recognise the importance of renewable, clean energy and the need for infrastructure to support its transmission, but this cannot be at the expense of people, local communities and the environment. Undergrounding presents a clean and cost-effective long-term solution to provide sustainable outcomes for the people of NSW.

And I would like to add from a personal perspective, undergrounding would be a relief, a return of sleep, a removal of fear, anxiety and depression, and an elimination of mental health concerns that have resulted from The HumeLink Overhead Transmission project.

Undergrounding HumeLink is a viable solution, it is a socially conscious, ethical, safer, more environmentally geared, sustainable and I would have thought 'more Australian', in the hope that we leave no one at the detriment of an overhead option.

In Australia, private companies are opting to put transmission projects underground, including Murraylink, Marinus Link, Star of the South, and Directlink.

Do we really want future generations to look back and question the decision to create a 360km long, 70-metre-wide scar of clear-felled land, where trees are replaced by 85 metre towers and wires across NSW? It is difficult to envision Regional NSW in this way, a thick cobweb of transmission lines traversing this beautiful country.

As a representative for the communities affected by HumeLink, I urge this committee to recommend HumeLink sets us on the right path in our transition to renewables, by recommending this transmission line be taken underground.

Should the Inquiry wish to discuss any of the above or related material, I can be contacted on mobile or email .

Yours sincerely,

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