

**Submission
No 299**

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

Organisation: Murray River Council

Date Received: 15 August 2023

Summary

Australia faces a challenge to convert from fossil fuelled power to renewables. This will require construction of a National Grid to enable demand to be met and supply transported. This paradigm shift is of national significance and is supported by both higher levels of government.

Renewable energy projects are continuing to emerge across the country, including near and in our region. We are faced with the reality that billions of dollars will need to be expended and thousands of kilometres of transmission lines provided to facilitate the shift.

Murray River Council is situated to the north of the REZ Zone in Victoria near Kerang, to the south of the REZ Zone near Hay, and southwest of Dinwan Substation connection point near Deniliquin with the main Wagga Wagga to South Australia transmission line running roughly parallel to MRC in the north.

In short, our residents are surrounded on all fronts. It will not be the case of a win-win for us as it is inevitable that much disruption to our peace and quality of life, whether overhead or underground, will occur. It has been mooted by many that the question will be “what is the least worst solution, versus what is the best.”

This inevitability due to being physically surrounded means we now need to move away from the sentiment of ‘not in my backyard’ and look to how we can make it work with the least amount of impact to the broader community.

But, as stated, there will not be a win-win for Murray River Council constituents.

At a micro economic level an overhead line will be less expensive but will impact those effected forever. At a macroeconomic level the project cost will balloon, and when energy prices are forced up, due to the amortisation of a greater spend to underground the lines, Australia faces risk to our standard of living on all fronts.

My personal feeling is that Murray River Council residents are what is known in theatres of war as collateral damage, who will be sacrificed for the greater good.

MRC first met with Transgrid to hear about the route options in mid-February 2023. At this meeting Transgrid indicated the ‘Consultation Report’ would be released with submissions invited by 5 April. The current route, named Option, 5A was not part of this initial report.

The Project Assessment Conclusions Report was then released on 27 May with a new option, Route 5A, announced.

MRC representatives attended the Regional Reference Workshop at the end of May.

This was the first opportunity MRC had to provide feedback on cultural, environmental, land use and social constraints to be considered for the new alternative route; 5A.

Council has been included in a reference group to provide generic local knowledge to Transgrid, such as tourism hot-spots and any future zoning changes. We will also provide feedback on cultural, environmental, land use and social constraints that must be considered before finalising the proposed route.

We understand Transgrid initially welcomed community feedback on the Draft Corridor Report until 4 August which was subsequently extended until the Friday 8 September 2023. This is the opportunity for the community to advise Transgrid of the local factors that it needs to consider in developing a transmission line. It is crucial that the community feed their thoughts or concerns directly back to Transgrid, and we strongly encourage them to do so during this feedback period.

Whilst we will continue to raise valid concerns and considerations, Council has very little influence over the project itself. Once Transgrid undertake route refinement and narrow the corridor down to a final alignment, the consent will rest solely with the Minister for Planning as this is classified as a State Significant Development/Infrastructure.

Despite the dire circumstances, council will continue to advocate on behalf of our communities to achieve the least worst solution.

Basic Timeline:

26/10/22 – Comms and Engagement Advisor from Transgrid emailed to coordinate a briefing regarding submissions to the Project Assessment Draft Report (PADR);

31/10/22 – Tentative time to meet confirmed for Friday 25 November

23/11/22 – Travel plans changed due to flood event, hopeful to still meet online, agenda:

- VNI West status update, look ahead to proposed key dates.
- Next steps – community engagement activity and environmental field surveys starting in 2023.
- What does ‘good’ look like when engaging the Murray River LGA community
- Any advisory on key players / industry in the region that need to be included in engagement activity, particularly in the formation of a community representative group (or similar)

25 November 2022 – Transgrid working towards publishing the VNI West Project Assessment Conclusions Report (PACR) in Q1 next year. This is the final step in the Regulatory Investment Test for Transmission (RIT-T).

- preparing for engagement with local stakeholders and communities, to start following publication of the PACR. We appreciate Council’s advice regarding local engagement and environmental studies given the recent flood event having had a significant impact on land access and people’s livelihoods. We will continue to keep Council advised regarding proposed engagement activity.
- There is a **push from Federal and State Governments to deliver VNI West sooner than the planned 2031 date** noted in the AEMO Integrated System Plan (ISP). Transgrid is working with AEMO to identify a way forward to deliver the project by 2028.
- that key members of the VNI West project team are planning to visit the region in mid-February 2023.

25 January 2023 - would like to meet with council’s exec on **Monday 13 February, Tuesday 14 February or Wednesday 15 February.**

CEO on leave, arranged meeting for 14 February 2023. Opportunity to meet with elected Council representatives as well as senior staff that Transgrid intending to have more presence in the field during 2023.

14 February – met with Transgrid who indicated the Consultation Report would be released in March and submissions invited by 5 April.

17 March – VNI West invited MRC to attend Regional Reference Group on Monday 3 April, which was to take place 2 days prior to the submission closing date.

CEO, Mayor Bilkey and Director Community & Economic Development had arranged to attend via Teams however due to technical issues at the meeting in Deniliquin council staff were unable to attend remotely.

Richard Ham, Chair of MRC Internal Audit & Risk Committee attended this meeting.

17 March - email received from Gannawarra who were putting in a submission and wanted to know MRC's stance.

4 April 2023 – Director Community Services & Economic Development drafted and submitted a confidential response (without knowledge of the discussion at the first regional reference group meeting. We needed to put forward reasons why we wouldn't support Option 5. This submission was not initially endorsed by Council, but was subsequently endorsed as part of a Council Report aired at the

12 April 2023 – I chased up Transgrid for a 1:1 meeting to find out what happened at the Regional Reference Group in Deniliquin.

28 April 2023 – met with VNI at MRC. Advised that the next report was scheduled for release on 10 May. Also indicated next Regional Reference Meeting would take place on 30 May.

26 May 2023 - Just touching base to see whether the proposed meeting at Moama Bowling is still taking place next week.

I followed up on the report which still hadn't been released so we could digest before the meeting on Tuesday.

23 May 2023 - Council meeting – SR submission was put to Council and a number of local landholders addressed Council regarding their concerns with this project.

Suggested we prepare a media release.

27 May (Saturday at 6.47pm) – Project Assessment Conclusions Report released. New option, Route 5A announced.

30 May – Rod, Chris, Terry, Sarah and Richard Ham attended Regional Reference Workshop.

This was the first opportunity MRC had to provide feedback on cultural, environmental, land use and social constraints to be considered for new alternative route 5A

5 June – MRC Encourages locals to familiarise themselves with VNI West Project MR

7 June – FAQs sheet and VNI West Fact Sheet received

There is also landowner specific information on our website, including easement guidelines at <https://transgrid.com.au/vniw>.

upcoming engagement to support the release of a Draft Corridor Options Evaluation Report that we will be launching in the coming weeks. See details below:

| Activity | Date | Location |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Release of Draft Options Corridor Evaluation Report identifying the preferred corridor | Week commencing 19 June | Available online at: transgrid.com.au/vniw |
| Write to landowners with properties in the corridor, including map of where their property sits in relation to the corridor | Week commencing 19 June | |
| Advertising in local media | Week commencing 19 June | Deniliquin Pastoral Times Koondrook & Barham Bridge Finley Southern Riverina News The Land Swan Hill Guardian |
| Phone follow up with landowners to schedule follow up meetings if desired | Week commencing 26 June | |
| Facilitated Landowner town halls with full project team | Timing TBC: 1-2 July or 8-9 July | Deniliquin Town Hall Moulamein Recreation Complex |
| Community drop-in sessions | Monday 3 July, 10am-4pm Tuesday 4 July, 11am-3pm Wednesday 5 July, 2pm-6pm | Deniliquin RSL Moulamein Bowling Club Jerilderie Civic Hall |
| Presentations to local groups and organisations | On request – please get in touch with to request a briefing | |

20 June 2023 - As part of the compliance requirements for the VNI West Regulatory Investment Test for Transmission, we are encouraged to make contact with submitters who have made a submission marked confidential, to understand if any part of the submission could be made public, or a simplified version.

Can you please let me know if Murray River Council would be comfortable with a redacted or summary version of your submission being released and published on AEMO's website?

I didn't respond.

30 June 2023 – reminder draft corridor report welcoming feedback by **Friday 28 July**.

13 July 2023 – reminder draft corridor option report open for feedback until **Friday 4 August**

Also advertising a series of new Community Information Days

- Tuesday 1 August, 10am – 4pm, Moulamein Bowling Club
- Wednesday 2 August, 10am – 4pm, Moulamein Bowling Club
- Thursday 3 August, 10am – 4pm, Moulamein Bowling Club
- Friday 4 August, 10am – 4pm, Deniliquin RSL

Would like the opportunity to brief Executive and Councillors as closer to the route selection phase of planning and overall project update.

17 July 2023 – SR confirmed meeting with Councillors at workshop on 8 August.

After discussing with Terry and Chris, we did have intentions of adding an agenda item to the pre councillor briefing on 25 July at Mathoura to discuss a draft submission (to report at August meeting). However it was brought to our attention at the Regional Reference Group Meeting in Deniliquin on 19 July that the timeline for submission has been extended to **Friday 8 September**.

19 July 2023 – Terry, Chris, Rod attended Regional Reference Workshop in Deniliquin.

It became apparent that a large number of landholders from Moulamein (Mellool and surrounds) attended a community information session. Landholders received a letter issued by Transgrid on 30 June. For many, this was the first they had any knowledge of the VNI West Project having a corridor that might pass through/around their land.

Main issue raised by concerned landholders:

- ***Repeat call for more time to digest the corridor options report;***
- ***Flood concerns – flood prone land***
- ***Aerial operations – buffer zones required around transmission lines***
- ***Tax implications***
- ***Travelling stock route egress***
- ***Blanket refusal for project to come onto their land***
- ***Repeated calls for underground transmission.***

26 July 2023 – confirmation of Community Information Days are published on the VNI West project website (<https://www.transgrid.com.au/vniw>)

Schedule:

- **Tuesday 1 August, 10am - 4pm at Moulamein Bowling Club**
- **Wednesday 2 August, 10am - 4pm at Moulamein Bowling Club**
- **Thursday 3 August, 10am - 4pm at Moulamein Bowling Club**
- **Friday 4 August, 10am - 4pm at Deniliquin RSL Club**
- **Tuesday 15 August, 10am - 4pm at Wanganella Hall**
- **Wednesday 16 August, 10am - 4pm at Conargo Hall**
- **Thursday 17 August, 10am – 4pm at Moulamein Bowling Club**
- **Tuesday 29 August, 10am – 4pm at Moulamein Bowling Club**
- **Wednesday 30 August, 10am – 4pm at Moulamein Bowling Club**
- **Thursday 31 August, 10am - 4pm at Deniliquin RSL Club**
- **Friday 1 September, 10am - 4pm at Wanganella Hall**

28 July 2023 – letter issued to Murray River Council under Section 45 of the State Electricity Supply Act 1995, and requests consent from Council to access land within the LGA under ownership of the State of New South Wales (Crown) for the purposes of environmental surveys.

EXTRACT FROM 23 May Council Business Paper.

9.1.5 MURRAY RIVER COUNCIL'S STANCE ON TRANSGRID PROJECT

File Number: -
Author: Lindy Leyonhjelm, Executive Assistant
Authoriser: Terry Dodds, Chief Executive Officer

RECOMMENDATION

That the Officer's report on Murray River Council's stance on Transgrid project be received and the information noted by the Council.

DISCUSSION

Murray River Council's feedback to Transgrid on the proposed crossing of the Murray River was sent on 4 April 2023. Since this date there has been a one-on-one meeting to further elaborate on the Council's stance of where the project proposes to cross the Murray River, with a further meeting planned in May 2023.

The response is as follows:

Murray River Council ("MRC") has concerns with Option 5, namely:

- MRC disagrees with the level of impact on high potential agricultural land for Option 5. The proposed crossing point is a very busy and populated area of the Murray River region and home to high value irrigated cropping land. Agriculture is our region's largest economic driver followed closely by tourism;
- The Project study Area of the Murray River region is home of the world's largest ski race, the Southern 80. Overhead lines would restrict access for helicopters to broadcast images of our region to broad audiences. Overhead lines would also restrict emergency services accessing the area should an incident arise as a result of the event;
- The Project Study Area of the Murray River region is popular for visitors, being the closest point to Melbourne and greater Victoria. The area is frequented by visitors staying in commercial caravan parks, camping and caravanning. This area of the Murray River region is almost double the NSW state average for visitors attracted to this type of accommodation;
- MRC disagrees with the level of social impacts on local communities for Option 5. Murray River Council is home to a vibrant mix of riverside communities where relaxed country living and modern-day indulgence collide. This area offers breathtaking river panoramas and forest playgrounds – fresh air, open spaces, cycling trails, walking tracks, national parks, golf courses, camping, houseboating, fishing and water sports.
- This area of the Murray River region is popular for lifestyle living and has vast residential expansion on both sides of the river. The NSW side of the border is one of the fastest

growing regional areas in NSW and has significant environmental issues with extensive wetlands and multiple national and regional parks;

- The proposed location of the crossing point from Victoria into NSW should be considered downstream of NSW state forests, in a more sparsely populated and low value area;
- MRC disagrees with the level of cultural sensitivity for Option 5. This area of the Murray River region has high cultural sensitivity. MRC recent experience with levy bank construction during the October flood event has brought some of these issues to surface;
- Option 5 has only half the capacity of other options;
- Option 5 is not supported by cross border local government areas;
- Option 5 fails to enhance generation in Murray River Renewable Energy Zone. The Murray River region should be rewarded for its natural endowments and reduce economic leakage from our area. There will be consequences of reduced amenity to our region. An opportunity for socialised community wealth building at scale could be considered for our region to leverage opportunities from the Renewable Energy Zone.
- Community engagement is not coordinated with other significant renewable energy projects taking place across our region which is stretching Council resources and exhausting small communities.
- The scale of the maps presented in each option are impossible to determine actual routes. However, the Project Study Area indicates a crossing point within the Murray River Council. The impacts in this sensitive area are likely to be significant when communities recognise what is being proposed.

Murray River Council welcomes the opportunity for a one-on-one meeting to further discuss MCA results and the inherent values for the Murray River region.

In conclusion, there is no disputing where the high-tension lines originate from and go to. However, the question remains where the line traverses between those points. Council disagrees with TransGrid's proposed route (upstream of Torrumbarry Weir) and strongly prefers downstream of Barham.

ATTACHMENTS

Nil