

REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

STANDING COMMITTEE ON STATE DEVELOPMENT

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

At Dunlop Room, Deniliquin RSL, Deniliquin, on Wednesday 16 August 2023

The Committee met at 10:15.

PRESENT

The Hon. Emily Suvaal (Chair)

The Hon. Susan Carter

Ms Cate Faehrman

The Hon. Wes Fang

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The CHAIR: Welcome to the fifth hearing of the Standing Committee on State Development inquiry into the feasibility of undergrounding the transmission infrastructure for renewable energy projects. I acknowledge the Wamba Wamba, Wemba Wemba and Barapa Barapa people, who are the traditional custodians of the land on which we are meeting today. I pay respect to Elders past and present, and celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their ongoing cultures and connections to the lands and waters of New South Wales. I also acknowledge and pay my respects to any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people who are joining us today. Today we will be hearing from Mrs Helen Dalton, MP, member for Murray; Mr Terry Dodds, CEO of Murray River Council; and members of the community. We will also be holding a public forum after a lunchbreak to provide another opportunity for people of this community to share their views on transmission infrastructure. I thank everyone for making the time and effort to be here today to give evidence to this important inquiry.

Before we commence, I will make some brief comments about procedures for today's hearing. Today's hearing is being broadcast live via the Parliament's website. A transcript of today's hearing will be placed on the Committee's website when it becomes available. In accordance with the broadcasting guidelines, the House has authorised the filming, broadcasting and photography of Committee proceedings by representatives of media organisations from any position in the room, and by any member of the public from any position in the audience. Any person filming or photographing proceedings must take responsibility for the proper use of that material. This is detailed in the broadcasting resolution, a copy of which is available from our secretariat.

While parliamentary privilege applies to witnesses giving evidence today, it does not apply to what witnesses say outside of their evidence at the hearing. Therefore, I urge witnesses to be careful about comments they may make to the media or to others after they complete their evidence. Committee hearings are not intended to provide a forum for people to make adverse reflections about others under the protection of parliamentary privilege. In that regard, it is important that witnesses focus on the issues raised by the inquiry terms of reference and avoid naming individuals unnecessarily. All witnesses have a right to procedural fairness, according to the procedural fairness resolution adopted by the House in 2018. As the inquiry will be tabling its report on 31 August, the Committee has resolved that witnesses are not required to provide answers to questions on notice. If witnesses wish to hand up documents, they should do so through the Committee staff. Finally, would everyone please turn their mobile phones to silent for the duration of the hearing.

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Mr TERRY DODDS, Chief Executive Officer, Murray River Council, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: I now welcome our first witness. Would you like to start by making an opening statement?

TERRY DODDS: Yes, I would. 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 south-west of the Dinawan 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 affected forever. At a macro-economic 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, in what is known in theatres of war as "collateral damage", will be sacrificed for the greater good. The choice was did we want our leg amputated below or above the knee? Murray River Council first met with Transgrid to hear about the route options in mid-February 2023. At this meeting, Transgrid indicated that 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 and environmental land use and social constraints to be considered for the new alternative route, option 5A. Council has been included in a reference group to provide generic local knowledge to Transgrid, such as tourism hotspots and any future zoning changes. We will also provide feedback on cultural and 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 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 undertakes route refinement and narrows the corridor down to a final alignment, the consent will rest solely with the Minister for Planning, as this is classified as "State-significant development/infrastructure". Despite the dire circumstances, council will continue to advocate on behalf of our communities to achieve the least worst solution.

There is a basic time line attached to the document that was sent yesterday. It consists of four pages of notes and dates, starting from 26 October 2022, where the communication and engagement adviser from Transgrid emailed council to coordinate a briefing regarding submissions to the project assessment draft report. Unfortunately, due to the floods late last year, that meeting didn't occur until February. From then on, we've been pretty well involved with some sort of meeting or other every few days since then, and there are four pages of notes of all the meetings that have been attended. In addition to the four pages of notes, starting from October last year right up until 28 July this year, council, on its 23 May ordinary council meeting—as published in open council in the 23 May council business paper—issued a letter based on the following to Transgrid. Council voted unanimously on this—and this is going back to option 5, because at that stage option 5A wasn't on the table:

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;

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- 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—

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Sorry, Chair. Can I interrupt the statement? I'm so sorry to do this, sir. We've got your whole statement in front of us and we only have you until 10.45 a.m.

TERRY DODDS: Has the audience got the statement?

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: That's fine. It's just that we have less time for questions.

TERRY DODDS: Okay, thank you. I'll stop then. It would be in the audience's interest to refer to the 23 May business paper.

The Hon. WES FANG: Thank you, Mr Dodds. The papers you have tabled with us will be published, so everyone will be able to read that. We just have some questions we need to clear. In relation to your opening statement, you said that "not in my backyard" is the attitude that's going to have to be adopted in this place but, in effect, these powerlines and transmission lines are being forced upon these communities because people in metropolitan areas don't want power generation in their areas. They want it outside of their visible areas, so they're forcing these transmission lines on country people. Isn't it fair in that case that they bear some of the brunt—i.e., the cost—of perhaps undergrounding these lines instead of forcing overhead lines on communities such as yours?

TERRY DODDS: I'm not qualified to say about the amortisation of the cost, but last time I was in north Sydney along the northern beaches I didn't see any wind turbines and I didn't see any floating photovoltaic cells in Sylvania Waters either when I was there. So you have got a point that, with the vast majority of people living and voting in block in Australian capital cities, to vote for something outside is much easier than something in their own backyard.

The Hon. WES FANG: I guess it's the case that a lot of these renewable energy projects require space. They require either large areas for solar panels or large, clear areas in order to be able to access the wind with wind turbines. That doesn't really work in metropolitan areas so, in effect, all these renewable energy projects are being forced upon people in rural, regional and remote communities.

TERRY DODDS: Yes, that could be partly true. As I said, I'm not qualified to provide advice on the amortisation of the cost. I did work in the electricity industry for eight years and eight months building electrical substations, so I know a little bit about the retail and distribution side of it but not the generation side.

The Hon. WES FANG: Of course, if you're producing renewable energy power in rural, regional and remote areas, the only way, really, to get that power into the metropolitan areas—it doesn't get there magically. You need to transmit it, right?

TERRY DODDS: I think you're 100 per cent correct. Yes, it needs to be transmitted and the AEMO website has a fairly intricate map of the eastern seaboard of Australia showing where all those new lines are going.

The Hon. WES FANG: Obviously, Transgrid are "consulting". I use the word in inverted commas because I think there has been a lot of testimony that we've heard during this inquiry that says the consultation isn't really consultation. It's more of a dictatorial process where they say what's going to happen and then try to convince you that it's the right thing. Have you found that that's the experience in your area in relation to the time line that you're talking about?

TERRY DODDS: The time line is actually quite tight. On 25 November council was led to believe that there was a push from both the Federal and State governments to deliver the VNI West sooner than the planned 2031 date which was noted in the AEMO integrated system plan, and Transgrid is working with AEMO to identify a way forward to deliver the project by 2028. So, yes, the time lines have been reduced.

The Hon. WES FANG: Compressed?

TERRY DODDS: Compressed. The way that Transgrid looked at the routes was through a fairly complex matrix of scoring system, looking at social, environmental, cultural, finance and physical. There were pages of criteria. When council and the public initially met Transgrid earlier in the year, there were a lot of blanks or a lot of missing information which they sought to ground truth, which was done quite well, I must admit—the ground truthing in relation to options 1 to 5 at the time. I can't comment on option 5A because that was a new option.

The Hon. WES FANG: I've got one more question but I didn't want to monopolise.

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Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: I was just going to jump in about option 5A, actually. The statement you were reading out from council addresses option 5. Can you tell the Committee what the substantial changes are from option 5A that Transgrid—it sounds like it was lobbed in at the last minute after the consultation report was released. Is that right?

TERRY DODDS: What happened was that Transgrid met with council and a heap of other agencies and associations, including the Federal Government's representative for the RDA for our area and quite a few other people, and they assessed options 1 to 5. Consequently, option 5 was written off because basically it was going through the western side of Moama and they hadn't spoken to council until then to find out that that land had all been subdivided and broken up into smaller blocks. They were intending to put the powerlines almost directly over the western end of Moama, which was a bit of a faux pas on their behalf—not to have worked that out prior. When council highlighted that fact to them, they went away and further assessed other options, which was when they came up with option 5A, which I understand wasn't until late April.

As I said in my opening statement, Murray River Council is surrounded by these high voltage lines and surrounded by REZs, and we feel as though we're the sacrificial lambs, no matter what. We feel as though we weren't given much choice, since the Kerang substation, which is on the eastern side of the Victorian REZ, is almost directly in the centre, equidistant from Murray River Council's southern border, which is the Murray River. So somewhere the lines to get to Dinawan have to cross Murray River Council's area. So we weren't given a choice.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: With those five options that Transgrid had, as I understand it, in the initial consultation report earlier this year—I think you've got a date of February in your submission—did any of those five options have underground transmission as an option?

TERRY DODDS: No.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Really?

TERRY DODDS: No.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Has that come up in conversations or in anything in a formal way from Transgrid about underground transmissions?

TERRY DODDS: Yes, it has come up in just about every meeting I've ever been at.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: From them?

TERRY DODDS: From everyone in the room. The statement that council keeps hearing is that it's related to expense but equally environmental degradation, because digging up hundreds of kilometres of land to put lines in is significantly more disruptive than basically counterweights on the bottom of transmission towers.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Is that also comparative to the clearing of the hundreds or potentially thousands of hectares of native vegetation as well to put those up? I suppose a lot of it goes over cropping here.

TERRY DODDS: One of the criteria that Transgrid looked at was actually designing a line that missed the native vegetation, which is possibly why the line is so long to get from A to B, from Kerang to Dinawan. If you have a look at the topographical maps along the Murray River, almost all of the Murray River has got native vegetation on either one or both sides, and there are very few gaps. So to get the line from Kerang to Dinawan, Transgrid were basically boxed in to sorting and reviewing those gaps, which is why there were only five original options and then six options, including option 5A, in the end, because there are so few crossings on the Murray River that don't go through native veg.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Just to be clear in terms of options 5 and 5A—because your submission addresses option 5—does Murray River Council support option 5A?

TERRY DODDS: Murray River Council, as I said at the beginning, is in a situation where we were asked whether we wanted our leg amputated above or below the knee. We don't really support anything, but we're not in denial that the line has to cross Murray River Council somewhere.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: But if there was another option around underground transmission in certain parts, you'd support that over what you've been offered?

TERRY DODDS: As I said to Mr Fang, I'm not qualified to comment on the cost amortisation, but I would understand that the cost is in the quantum of two or three times more at least. I'm unsure about whether the environmental degradation is of the same quantum. But what I do know is if it goes above ground it will affect the people nearby forever, and if it goes below ground it will balloon out the cost and it'll affect those people not wanting it in their backyard more than what it'll affect the people who have the lines through their property.

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The CHAIR: Mr Dodds, you talked about "the least worst solution" in your opening statement and again in some of your remarks. What is that? Give us an idea of what that is for the Murray River Council.

TERRY DODDS: The least worst solution is the least number of people affected, knowing that the line—somewhere, somehow—has got to go from Kerang to Dinawan. If it goes up disused railway lines or if it goes through TSRs, that's another option. The exact route, I understand, hasn't been narrowed down yet. It's getting narrower as Transgrid go through—

The CHAIR: So community feedback was happening, and I notice there were a number of information days that were flagged in your submission as well.

TERRY DODDS: Yes, we've been to a lot of those. There's a lot of anxiety with council because council is damned if we do and damned if we don't. If it goes to the east, an equal number of people will be upset as if it goes to the west. But at some stage—at least by 2028, according to AEMO—it will go through Murray River.

The CHAIR: How have you found the consultation? Have you got any remarks? That is something we've heard in other hearings: discussions around what the consultations have been or suggestions for improvement. Have you got any thoughts about how that could be improved?

TERRY DODDS: The consultation started off in good faith. The flood sort of destroyed that. We didn't open up the roads to Moulamein until a week before Christmas. That basically wiped out from October until 21 December for council, so we were unavailable anyway. It started off with good intentions but the flood cruelled that. There was some reasonably good consultation in the middle and then rushed consultation with the public at the end. It's been a little bit hit and miss, not through all of Transgrid's fault. Transgrid and the Government would be under pressure because of the retirement of the coal-fired power stations. If it takes until 2031 to get this up—as I said, I'm not a demand planner, but I'd assume that the reason they want to get it done three years early is because of the lack of generation by that stage.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Mr Dodds, just to clarify the discussion about Transgrid and the consultation, is it clear to you and the council that Transgrid actually listened and changed anything after the consultation?

TERRY DODDS: Yes. It's clear to us—they certainly listened about option 5, and they weren't to know unless they had a ground truth, which they didn't do until after they met with us and went for a drive and actually had a look at all the subdivisions and all the "for sale" signs and the new trees planted and that sort of thing. The challenge for Transgrid—and for anyone putting a high voltage transmission line anywhere—is there are a million different scenarios and obstacles in the way. It would be very difficult to get enough people in the room and, depending on your point of view, to rate those—which they did; they had a scoring system. Depending on your point of view, you would have different weightings for different scores. Someone who was financially orientated would rate the cost of the tariff to the average tariff payer in Australia very high. Someone who is environmentally orientated will rate environmental scores very high. Someone who is socially orientated, such as council, would rate the social effect on our constituents very high. The score will depend on what pedestal you're standing on. Transgrid are in a very difficult situation in that regard.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Is it true to say that council's view is that all of the options that are being offered at the moment will have a negative impact on the council area?

TERRY DODDS: Yes, absolutely. It's going across Murray River to get from Kerang to Dinawan, and whether it's underground or above it will have negative options and a negative effect. Below ground will have less effect locally than above ground. But the question remains as to how it can be buried without having a huge environmental effect, and I can't answer that.

The Hon. WES FANG: There's another solution, though, isn't there, Mr Dodds? We know that whether it is solar generation or whether it's wind generation, there is no doubt that prime agricultural land is lost when we have renewable energy projects put in regional areas such as Deniliquin, around Wagga and the Armidale-Tamworth region—all places where we've had regional hearings. That's to generate this power that we then send to metropolitan areas. The transmission lines themselves are obviously to move that power from those regional areas back into the metropolitan areas. It would just be simpler to put power generation closer to the metropolitan areas, would it not? It would then remove the need to have these solar or wind farms put on prime agricultural land where we produce food and fibre, and it would mean that we haven't got these crisscrossing powerlines all over the State. Would that not seem like a better option?

TERRY DODDS: I'm not qualified—and neither are very many people—to look at not only the demand forecast but the capacity to generate. I've read the AEMO website a few times, and each time I read it I just get more confused.

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The Hon. WES FANG: I think they do as well!

TERRY DODDS: It's an extremely complex beast. I've read that our power system is our most complex machine that we run as a nation—and that most other nations run as well—in its level of complexity. So I can't comment, but what I can comment is that I hope the people who do this professionally are looking at science versus emotion when they make those decisions about where these go. But I can't help that there's some political influence applied to that either. After being in local government since 1982, it's almost inevitable.

The Hon. WES FANG: If there was, say, a technological advancement that would allow power generation to occur closer to metropolitan areas, removing the need to have solar and wind farms put in prime agricultural land areas and to have these high-tension powerlines crisscrossing the State creating easement issues, loss of amenity, fire risk, risk to aircraft et cetera, it would seem that would be a more equitable solution for rural and regional people than having what's being enforced upon us now with these REZs and transmission lines.

TERRY DODDS: My experience has been that equity and politics shouldn't be used in the one sentence.

The Hon. WES FANG: Should it not, or should it be perhaps that—

TERRY DODDS: It should be, but it's never used in the one sentence.

The Hon. WES FANG: Maybe we can change that.

The CHAIR: Mr Dodds, thanks so much for attending this hearing today. As the inquiry will be tabling its report on 31 August, the Committee has resolved that you are not required to provide any answers to questions on notice.

TERRY DODDS: Thank you very much. Good luck.

(The witness withdrew.)

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Mrs HELEN DALTON, Member for Murray, before the Committee

The CHAIR: I'd now like to welcome our next witness, Mrs Helen Dalton, MP. Would you like to start by making a short opening statement today?

Mrs HELEN DALTON: Yes. Good morning and thank you for your time today. I know it's been a very impromptu hearing but all the same we appreciate the efforts that have gone into it. The community knows as well. I'll get straight to the point. A few weeks ago Premier Minns was questioned on Sydney radio about powerlines and why they can't be undergrounded. He said it would be too expensive. To me, the decision has already been made with those words. So, with all due respect to the work of the Committee—and I again welcome you here today—I wonder what this Committee's deliberations are meant to achieve. I'm really hoping that there will be change, especially when the Premier has already seemingly ruled out undergrounding of powerlines as it's far too expensive—so he says. When the Premier says it's too expensive to underground powerlines, what estimate is he relying on? Transgrid certainly has a financial interest in having them above ground and, of course, they will pocket that money.

What about the real cost of the projects anyway? We are well used to this by now. The benefits of these projects are overestimated and the costs are underestimated. We've heard it all before. We are told it'll mean cheaper power prices. Well, a report by professors Bruce Mountain and Simon Bartlett from the Victoria Energy Policy Centre says otherwise. We already know the other costs of putting these lines over the ground. Professors Mountain and Bartlett have made these clear. There are many others who have raised objections, including people that are here today. I think there are 16 submissions, done in a very short amount of time. A "natural disaster magnet" is what professors Mountain and Bartlett have called it. That's because over the ground powerlines are known to cause bushfires, and we have experienced that over the years here.

NSW Farmers say the short-term cost savings of overhead powerlines are cancelled out because of the bushfire risks and restrictions on fighting fires in areas with powerlines, the loss of critical vegetation and visual amenity, and the higher maintenance costs and outage risks—as well as there will be interference with farm equipment reliant on GPS and interference with agriculture aviation. I know from personal experience what that means. We had a workman who was a helicopter pilot. He worked part-time for us on our farm and part-time with Riverina Helicopters. He hit powerlines at Conargo, which is just half an hour out from Deniliquin, and was rushed to Melbourne, where he later died on his own during COVID. His mother was in Condobolin and couldn't get to him. So we've already been through those. These lines will create a far bigger risk.

Farmers are also pointing to undergrounding projects in other developed countries and rightfully want to know why it can't be done here. I would suggest that Transgrid are not keeping up with the times. I trust the Committee is fully looking into that. I think it's old technology. We know farmers are against it and we expect to hear some more evidence here today. It seems to me around here that we are expendable cannon fodder for green city ideology. We provide the food. We provide valuable exports to city people. Out here we're almost out of sight, out of mind. Taken for granted, we receive a lower standard of health services, a lower standard of education provision, and our land can be just ripped up to provide power to the cities. The problems being caused by these powerline projects do not seem to be registering with a lot of city people. We saw the big protest yesterday in Melbourne and I think it's just the start. That is what is needed to get the message across.

Big companies with their billions forcing their way onto people's lands that in many cases have been farmed over generations is very controversial. It certainly is here. In my electorate compulsory land acquisition for this project is in the context of Tanya Plibersek's threat to implement compulsory water buybacks. It's compulsory water buybacks and we see compulsory land acquisition for this project. We have got "reform"—I use that word very loosely—fatigue. I don't think that this Transgrid VNI West project would ever go ahead through a city. That's because we're out here in a rural area. The cheap way is to put it over the ground and let the rural people pay the full cost of that. We already do our bit for the environment here. These overground powerlines are just a bridge too far.

I've discussed the views of farmers. Let's also acknowledge many green groups are also against these overground powerline projects. The National Parks Association says that undergrounding powerlines is international best practice. It dismisses Transgrid's claims that undergrounding powerlines will harm the land because of the heat. The Nature Conservation Council of NSW supports undergrounding. It says there is a need to balance the renewable energy transition with its impact on the environment. The construction of above-ground transmission could damage ecosystems and remove thousands of hectares of habitat. It will damage ecosystems. The solution, the Nature Conservation Council says, is to put the lines underground:

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We acknowledge that there is a higher cost associated with international best practice underground connections. However, in a climate and biodiversity crisis, and when the vast majority of the public want more done to protect nature, financial cost can no longer be the only determining factor.

Before I conclude, let me return to the issue of compulsory land acquisitions. The National Farmers' Federation has vowed to oppose any widespread compulsory acquisition of land to the bitter end. I agree with them, as do many other people around here. There is a lot of concern around compulsory acquisitions, let me tell you. In closing, I agree with professors Mountain and Bartlett, who questioned the need for the VNI West project at all. Other alternatives need to be looked at, because the cost of this to my community is too great. If this project is to occur, despite widespread opposition in my electorate, it needs to be put underground. Thank you.

The Hon. WES FANG: Thank you for appearing today, Mrs Dalton. I wanted to start in relation to VNI West and the proposal to bring forward the construction date from early 2030 to a completion date that's closer to the end of around 2028 or thereabouts. Have you been consulted at all in relation to that acceleration of the project by Transgrid or by the State Government?

Mrs HELEN DALTON: Certainly not the State Government—I couldn't attend the last meeting with Transgrid; one of my staffers did that—not really consulted, no. Consultation is not—I mean, they're just giving their updates. So I don't think that I would have been consulted, or my staff hasn't mentioned that, to bring forward that date.

The Hon. WES FANG: Because we know that things like Snowy 2.0 have obviously been delayed because they're still trying to dig a boring hole out of a cave and there are a number of renewable energy projects that are reliant on these lines that have also been delayed. It's curious that they want to accelerate this project to completion. What advocacy do you think you're able to provide to see the community at least have a little bit of a reprieve to go back to what was the original time line for the project?

Mrs HELEN DALTON: I'll certainly be bringing it up in Parliament. I'm receiving a lot of information from right up through to people in the Snowy Mountains. It seems like Snowy 2.0 is a complete white elephant. *Florence*, the tunnelling machine—*Florence* is the machine that is bogged—will cost us billions ahead of what they have projected. A lot of these projects—and we've seen that time and time again where, for example, Julia Gillard shoehorned another 450 gigalitres of water in the dying days of her prime ministership. Then, again, you see Malcolm Turnbull doing the same thing with Snowy 2.0 at the end of his prime ministership, leaving what he thinks is a great legacy without doing due diligence with this project. It'll impact on irrigators. It'll cost us a fortune and there are better ways of generating power, and they're expecting us to reform—so-called reform or adjust—to closing down of coal-fired and having renewables in a very, very short time.

The Hon. WES FANG: We've only got about 12 minutes of questions each, so I just wanted to fire a few more questions in.

Mrs HELEN DALTON: Yes.

The Hon. WES FANG: Have you had a chance to meet with the environment Minister and energy Minister in relation to this project?

Mrs HELEN DALTON: I have spoken to Tara Moriarty, the ag Minister, about this. I haven't as yet spoken to Penny Sharpe, but I certainly wish to.

The Hon. WES FANG: What did Ms Moriarty say to you in relation to the loss of prime agricultural land and the impact of easements et cetera for the overheads?

Mrs HELEN DALTON: Not a lot, but she did roll her eyes, as if to say, "Oh my God, this is a big issue." She's getting hold—I suppose, easing her way into the ag portfolio. She hasn't got an agricultural background. She's learning and she just said that she was going to discuss the matter with the Federal energy Minister. By the expression on her face, she knows it is a massive issue.

The Hon. WES FANG: Given that you've had conversations with Ms Moriarty at a State level, have you had any engagement with the Federal Government, knowing that, in effect, this interconnection of energy markets is more of a Federal issue when we're talking about cross-border supplying of power than it is perhaps a State issue? Have you had the opportunity to speak with Federal members—Chris Bowen, Murray Watt—about the impacts on your community in relation to these transmission lines?

Mrs HELEN DALTON: Not as yet. With the change of the route just recently, I haven't had the opportunity to discuss that, but I've certainly been talking to State members. Not as yet, but I intend to.

The Hon. WES FANG: If it's the case that you have the energy and environment Minister at a State level effectively saying—as the Premier did, as you rightly indicated, on radio—that these lines are going to go

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ahead no matter what the outcome of this inquiry, that it won't matter and it won't change a thing, what are you going to do as a local member to have the views of your community represented? How are you able to force the current Labor Government to have their views acknowledged in relation to these powerlines?

Mrs HELEN DALTON: Look, I'm a firm believer of people power. I do say to my community that I can't do it by myself. We've seen protests in Melbourne just yesterday. People won't rest. They're not going to be rolled over. I will be making a lot of statements in Parliament with private members statements and notices of motion, and I've started doing that. I don't rest. I continue on and make sure that we are heard in Sydney, and I'll do the same. I'll be speaking to Deborah O'Neill and a few others that are in the upper House federally—Murray Watt. I will be making that very, very plain. I'm only just beginning to launch into all of that. We have had massive issues with water as well, and it almost intersects with the power and energy portfolio as well.

The Hon. WES FANG: When you've got a Premier effectively dismissing the outcome of a parliamentary inquiry before we've even finished the hearings, don't you think that a speech in Parliament is perhaps unlikely to shift his position? Are you considering some stronger positioning in relation to the views of the current Labor State Government so that your community is heard?

Mrs HELEN DALTON: It's the media that makes the change. It's pressure on our leaders that makes the change. We've just seen today a bad decision by the Coalition five years ago, with the merging of the only two public high schools in Griffith that are now to be demerged, and that's power. That's media pressure. That's pressure from the community. I intend to do the same with these overground powerlines, and it can be done.

The Hon. WES FANG: What happens, then, if we see a situation where, in effect, if this Committee finds that undergrounding is feasible and the additional cost is justified and the position that we take forward to the Parliament through this Committee is ignored by the current Labor Government? What options do you see then? Are you able to perhaps use your number on the floor to provide some impetus to the Labor Government to encourage them to have the views of your community better heard?

Mrs HELEN DALTON: It's a minority Labor Government, and I think, as an Independent and part of the crossbench, we have enormous influence. I won't rest and I think that, in the end, common sense will prevail. These blowouts with Snowy 2.0 are just going to be next level. It's going to be a huge problem. We did see at the Bush Summit Peter Dutton talking about he thinks that every community should have a nuclear reactor, so there would not be the need for these powerlines. That's another solution that could be followed up, and I'm hoping that this Committee will make recommendations for such things.

The Hon. WES FANG: I'm a supporter of nuclear power and I've always been a supporter, especially for small modular reactors. Do you feel the same way? Do you think that perhaps nuclear power is an opportunity to provide power generation closer to the populace, removing the need to use prime agricultural land to generate power and to transmit it?

Mrs HELEN DALTON: We should be exploring every option. We sell uranium to other countries for their nuclear energy. I'm not understanding why we don't utilise that ourselves.

The Hon. WES FANG: You spoke about the fact that it is a minority Labor Government, especially in the lower House, and that obviously they require certain members to be able to get legislation through at any particular point. Given that and, I guess, the view that there's an importance for Independents—I know that Joe McGirr has been able to speak with the environment and energy Minister about these transmission projects that are going through Snowy Valleys and Wagga, and we heard from Wagga council around the land that's been compulsorily acquired in their Gregadoo Waste Management Centre for Transgrid projects. Is it not the case that by now you should be in a position to be able to have forced, already, a meeting with the energy and environment Minister, who is, in effect I guess, responsible for the oversight of a lot of these issues? Given that the election was in March and we are now in the middle of August, shouldn't these views already have been put to her and secured by you?

Mrs HELEN DALTON: For sure. I have just been absolutely flat out. I'll be speaking to Joe McGirr next week. We've spoken on and off about the situation. People haven't, I suppose, spoken out about undergrounding them until just recently here. I think we were very uncertain of the route which was going to be taken. But now, even speaking to Joe in the last sitting week, we intend to get together and make some presentations. If that means going together to see the environment Minister, Penny Sharpe, and the Federal environment Minister, we will do just that. I think, given that this electorate is the second biggest electorate, with 110,000 square kilometres, and provides a huge amount of food for New South Wales—indeed, the nation—we matter. I would hope that the views of Murray and, of course, the views of Wagga will be taken into account and respected.

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Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Thanks for appearing today. Could you expand a bit more for the Committee on the impact that overhead transmission lines will have on the region in terms of cropping in particular? There have been a number of submissions made around that. I'm thinking along the lines of how much land will need to be sacrificed, if you like, to the transmission lines, and the impact that will have. Could you also expand on the aerial cropping activity that takes place in this region and how significant that will be?

Mrs HELEN DALTON: The transmission lines above ground are going to take a fair bit of our land. I think it's like 100 metres—I'm not sure exactly what it is—either side of those lines.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: That's about right.

Mrs HELEN DALTON: That cost is now borne by the farmers with lost productivity. Sure, you can graze under those powerlines, but you wouldn't want to be cropping. It also changes the way we have to do business, because often we use planes and helicopters in irrigation areas particularly, and we have to dodge those powerlines. We've got to now change the way we farm. It's going to be more expensive and probably less efficient than the way we do it. Often the timing of things—we have to get planes in quickly, especially with cotton, and there is cotton grown in this area. You have to make decisions quickly. If you need a plane to go over the top of that cotton, it needs to be done today. That changes now, with people using ground rigs. It will be slower. The costs are borne by the farmer, not only with the loss of land and productivity but the extra costs in changing the way we do business. Of course, we are looking for efficiencies every day so that we can get food and fibre to the people as cheaply as possible.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Concerns have also been raised in relation to bushfire risks. We have heard from landholders in both Armidale and Tumut concerns in relation to being able to fight fires if fires are on their property as a result of the transmission lines—not being able to pass under them, having to stay a distance away—and potential for transmission lines to cause fires in some circumstances. Has that also been raised with you locally?

Mrs HELEN DALTON: Absolutely, and the insurance—like, who pays if Transgrid or those lines start a fire, and then what if I start a fire accidentally? What insurance or protections do I have? There's also the issue of capital gains tax. This land that has been acquired—will I be taxed because I received a sum of money? Will I be taxed or get capital gains tax on the sale of that land? We have submitted that question to the Parliamentary Library and they do not know as yet. Those questions need to be answered fully.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Can I just check on that? Are you saying if the landholder receives some form of compensation or payment?

Mrs HELEN DALTON: Compensation, yes. And the other thing too is it is not transparent, any of this process. I may have done a great deal with Transgrid and your deal may not be as good as mine. Is it because I'm better educated and may be able to negotiate better? Does that mean that I deserve more money than you? You know, all of these things need to be taken into account. Of course, the loss of productivity in our regions is not just borne by the farmer; it is borne by the whole community. That needs to be stated loud and clear.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Can I check, in terms of Transgrid's consultation and their approach so far in relation to this proposed project, what the community sentiment is around the way in which they have conducted themselves, the way in which they have been available for consultation? What is the general community sentiment that you're picking up?

Mrs HELEN DALTON: They are appalled by the lack of consultation. I don't know whether they think that people live five minutes from town. They will just give you half a day's notice, or not even notice, that they're running these sessions. People are an hour or so from here. They've got to make plans too. They've got kids' buses to run after. All of those things need to be considered. It's almost like we're so over it because we've gone through all of this same situation with the Murray-Darling Basin Plan, where the consultation hasn't been genuine. We've been shafted on many occasions. They try to heavily script the meetings. They divide and conquer, conquer and divide. They divide us up. It's almost like they have this manual on how to get something through without genuinely consulting. We'd appreciate the consultations being made public, time to get there and plan—all of those things. Basically, be respectful of country people.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: From the conversations you've had, is there more willingness from most landholders, or some landholders, to accommodate underground transmission lines, or is it a general resistance to all of it?

Mrs HELEN DALTON: I don't think there is a general resistance. I think in probably the more marginal areas it's not worrying them too much. Where you've got a property that doesn't crop—they're just running stock—out towards the western part of the electorate, not on high-value land, there are not those concerns. I mean, fire is

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always a concern, for sure, but not with aerial applicators and the loss of productivity—not as much, because they're not cropping.

But where you've got mixed farming, it's difficult—and high-value land. Of course, there are concerns about solar farms and the disposal of those solar panels when they become obsolete. They will be obsolete in a very short time. There's no doubt about that. Who bears the cost of that? I was hoping that Councillor Dodds might bring that up. I would hope that the Government looks into that and that, as with any mining, you rehabilitate after you leave. Perhaps take a bond from these foreign companies that are coming in—and they are foreign too—so they are obliged to provide a bond before they leave so that we can dispose of those panels. And that's the same with the wind farm too. It's very expensive to dispose of that equipment when they're obsolete—and they will be.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: We've heard from landholders in relation to HumeLink, who were very clear that they reject overhead transmissions, they reject the current proposal, they will essentially not allow Transgrid onto their property, they are going to put up a massive fight, and it's going to be ugly, basically—direct from their mouths, so to speak. But if it was underground, they would allow it to proceed pretty much tomorrow. Maybe it's too soon for this area because the timing of the consultation is slightly different and lots of landholders are almost just finding out about it. Is there a similar sentiment here, do you think?

Mrs HELEN DALTON: I think so, particularly around this area. Once the new route was put through, I had phone call after phone call, email after email. We're used to rallying. We don't want to do it, we don't want to protest, but we're not going to stand aside and be run over either. It's just too important an issue. It will be ugly, I think. We saw protests at the Bush Summit in Tamworth. They were there, ready to send a clear message to governments loud and clear that we matter—and we do.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Organisations like Transgrid, which do have to build the infrastructure—they don't have to build overhead transmission lines; they could obviously go underground—like to talk about the importance of social licence. Does Transgrid have a social licence in this community to build overhead transmission lines?

Mrs HELEN DALTON: When I first started speaking to them I just said that I wanted every community in my electorate to be really happy that you're here, so you need to provide something, if that's what the community wants. They said that they would sponsor the football team, and I just said, "No. It's not trinkets and beads." We want enduring legacy from Transgrid if they are to be here, but I think the whole project has not been well thought out by governments at all. I think the technology is obsolete, and we should really start from the beginning again and take a good, hard, long look at this.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: We just heard from the previous witness from Murray River Council that there was no option in the five options provided for underground transmission. Is it your view that Transgrid seems to be ideologically bound? It seems to be ideology as opposed to the facts. The evidence put forward in favour of overhead transmission lines appears to be almost ideological in some ways. I'm struggling with this question. I have been trying to work out why Transgrid has so stubbornly put forward overhead transmission lines as the only option and seems to have rejected every very sensible argument for underground transmission lines. What's your view around that? It just does seem to be extremely frustrating that the community is not getting objective facts about the underground versus overhead transmission line argument, and there's no balance. What are you seeing in that regard?

Mrs HELEN DALTON: I think they're a big company driven by profits. I think that they probably will see how much they can get away with before they have to cut their profit margin and embark on best practice. And best practice is not having overhead powerlines. We know that in Germany they are under the ground, and that's what they should be doing.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Helen, for appearing today. Before I start with questions, I just wanted to acknowledge your opening statement and the loss of life that you mentioned in the tragic event with the helicopter pilot. Thank you for sharing that with us. Our thoughts are with that family.

Mrs HELEN DALTON: Thank you. I do appreciate all the hard work the Committee has been doing. It's quite a project to get you all here, so thank you. I almost think that all these electrical wires remind me of Transgrid, really.

The CHAIR: In terms of—I have a couple of questions.

The Hon. WES FANG: You're still—you're not getting away that easy.

The CHAIR: If I didn't use the time, I'm sure somebody else would find a use for it.

The Hon. WES FANG: I'm very happy to continue with questions.

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The CHAIR: You mentioned in your opening remarks about the Premier and talking about undergrounding being an expensive option or too expensive an option. We've heard other evidence in this inquiry, in some of the Sydney hearings as well, about the delays of undergrounding. I acknowledge it is a much more expensive option but also the delays that projects would incur, were it to be undergrounded. Have you any comments on that or thoughts about that?

Mrs HELEN DALTON: As I said before, reform or change takes a long time, and we are expected to adapt quickly in really unrealistic time frames. I think that, because these time frames are unrealistic, they're cutting corners. They're not looking at all the options, and they should be. Our kids will be wearing this disaster—and I think it is one—for generations. It's money too, public money. It needs to be done right, and here's the opportunity to maybe slow down. I'd almost say that, instead of switching off some of these coal-fired power burners, we build a couple in the interim to make sure that we get it right. We can switch them off later if we get the solutions to this power generation right, rather than just rushing things in for the sake of it.

The CHAIR: In terms of the consequences of rushing things or having things balloon out in cost, is it fair to say the cost of electricity is an issue that is felt in your electorate?

Mrs HELEN DALTON: Absolutely. We have processing of an agricultural product. The way things are going with the cost of electricity, it's pricing us out of business. We're seeing businesses going broke. I think, really, we need to look after ourselves. It can't be at the cost of communities and the cost of family businesses and often generational businesses. It needs to be well planned and well researched and not just some whim that somebody decided a few years ago would be a good idea. Everything needs to be put out on the table. We're a very forward-thinking nation and yet we're making silly decisions like this.

The CHAIR: In terms of the comments around the nuclear technology—and I know Wes' thoughts on this—there are also consequences that would be better, say, with technology like that, such as the disposal of nuclear waste.

The Hon. WES FANG: You should have done the nuclear inquiry.

The CHAIR: That's typically in regional areas. Have you got any thoughts on that?

Mrs HELEN DALTON: I really don't know all the ins and outs of all of that but again it should be looked into. I think it could be something that is not a negative if we did it right and we disposed of that in a very stable environment and looked after it. It can be done.

The CHAIR: In terms of the VNI connector—and I apologise; we've been talking a lot about HumeLink in this inquiry thus far, so I'm only just getting up to speed on VNI myself—is it fair to say that that project isn't quite as advanced in the consultation period?

Mrs HELEN DALTON: No.

The CHAIR: Have you got any further comments on or suggestions around that consultation?

Mrs HELEN DALTON: Only that it be genuine and give people time and advertise in the papers. There are a lot of people that aren't connected digitally because of poor connections. Our papers are far more important in the bush than what they probably are in the city because people are online more in the city. I think that the notices for meetings should be done at least a week in advance, and they should be put in the consecutive papers so that people understand, because it's their go-to. There's no doubt about that. I know the Deni Pastoral Times has two edition during the week. Everyone buys the paper. It is very successful paper, and people love the *Deniliquin Pastoral Times*. It would only be respectful for notices to go into that. Notices, of course, can go up online on different sites as well but, for the aging generations and whatever, the Deni Pastoral Times is incredibly important. I would suggest in every rural area that they do that.

The CHAIR: I know, coming from a regional area myself, it is the go-to for many people still.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Mrs Dalton, we've heard a lot about the significant burden on your community and your electorate that this project will bring. Are there any benefits that your community will receive as a result of these projects?

Mrs HELEN DALTON: I have heard councils are thinking about reaching out to Transgrid to get money coming in to provide certain services that the Government is not prepared to do. So I guess there's a benefit in that. There's no doubt about that. There's an injection of money. We're finding that the workers that are coming through—this is how limited their knowledge is. They think that they can just snap their fingers and that they'll have workers and housing to put those workers in. They've got a lot of challenges to make—and they're not the only things that are occurring in areas. Masses of solar farms are being set up right now, wind farms and also nut

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farms. There is a lot of development, but of course it's only a sugar hit in these communities. They're here and then they're gone.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: You're concerned that any benefits that your local community would receive would be just during the building stage? There's long-term burden but no long-term benefit.

Mrs HELEN DALTON: That's right.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: We've heard talk about power prices, which are certainly a huge issue. Do you have any confidence that this project will reduce power prices for your community?

Mrs HELEN DALTON: There's a lot of talk, but I think there's a lot of scepticism, too, about all of that. I think the scepticism is, like, South Australia's secured their water and now they're going to secure their power. Whether that's being cynical, that would seem to me to be a lot of the driving force: A couple of marginal seats in South Australia may have something to do with all of this and the timing of it.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: If I understand you, you're concerned that some of these projects are designed—they're projects in New South Wales but not to benefit the people of New South Wales?

Mrs HELEN DALTON: That's my gut feeling. I haven't got any stats or whatever, but that's my gut feeling and I think that's the feeling of the community as well.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: When you spoke to Minister Moriarty in relation to the potential degradation of good agricultural land by the construction of the powerlines, what answers did the Minister for Agriculture have for you about this agricultural degradation?

Mrs HELEN DALTON: She didn't have any answers, only that she was going to meet—I think shortly—with her Federal counterpart. I haven't followed up with her about what happened or the results of that meeting.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: I note your statement that you felt that Transgrid were updating you rather than consulting with you. Are you able to actually talk to Transgrid to develop the best possible option for your community?

Mrs HELEN DALTON: I think they're scheduling in another meeting shortly, so yes. As things are panning out and we get information from our constituents, we are relaying their concerns to them. In fact, I ran into the Transgrid representative at the Bush Summit and I told her about some of the concerns that we have. That was only last Thursday. I'm hoping that she'll take that back to—

The Hon. WES FANG: Did she give you a commitment on what it was that she would do in relation to VNI West?

Mrs HELEN DALTON: She just said she'd take my concerns on board. I presume that she—

The Hon. WES FANG: Did she tell you who she'd be giving them to?

Mrs HELEN DALTON: No.

The Hon. WES FANG: Did you push her for a position or a concrete answer as to a change in policy, route or the way that consultations—did you get anything concrete out of her at all?

Mrs HELEN DALTON: No, not really, other than she took it on board. I know that I've got a meeting scheduled again in the next few weeks with Transgrid so I would expect to be following up on that. But it was only a fleeting conversation as we were moving into the auditorium in Tamworth.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Mrs Dalton. That concludes the time for questioning of you today. Thank you for attending the hearing. As previously mentioned, the inquiry will be tabling its report on 31 August so the Committee has resolved that you are not required to provide answers to any questions taken on notice—not that you took any. Thank you.

(The witness withdrew.)

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Ms ANN HARE, Community Member, affirmed and examined

Mr NEIL BULL, Community Member, affirmed and examined

Mr PETER REDFEARN, Community Member, affirmed and examined

Mr BOB CRAWFORD, Community Member, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: In terms of how we will run our next session, we have eight listed community members to appear as witnesses. I ask that they appear in groups of four. We'll bring the first four names on the schedule up for the first half-hour and then swap and have the second lot of community members. I welcome our witnesses. Would any of you like to start by making a short opening statement?

NEIL BULL: I'd be happy to start. I am policy and project manager for the Ricegrowers' Association of Australia. The association represents around a thousand rice growers across the Riverina and many across the proposed powerline construction. I'm also a member of the regional group that Transgrid has set up from day one in terms of consultation.

I guess, in a brief introduction, I've been aware of the potential construction of interconnectors since late last year and agreed to participate in a regional group more to try and communicate that across our communities. This route has changed multiple times since my first meeting last October. I know that's separate to this, but our communities in this area have only learnt about this powerline with any great knowledge less than four weeks ago. To me, that process has been totally flawed.

To take that forward to then have an understanding of what undergrounding these powerlines really means in this context is very difficult for the average community member or rice grower that we represent, but it has even been a challenge for me, who actually works in the area of policy. I'd just like to make that point before I might make some comments about undergrounding, which is what this particular inquiry is about. I assume you've read—

The CHAIR: We do have your submissions as well and we have read them—if you can avoid covering anything in them. We are interested in any additional comments you have.

NEIL BULL: Basically in that submission, I've referred to the cost to start with, as it's very difficult in this short time frame for me to research the actual cost. There's no talk of innovation in the reduction of cost for undergrounding anywhere. My phone uses satellites flying just above our head connecting the world to communications. Farmers adopt innovation continually to reduce costs when they are forced to reduce costs to maintain business. It seems to me, when we talk about cost of undergrounding compared to overhead, where is the new technology in this when we look at the increased cost for it? The benefits of doing it are significant and high.

In relation to rice production, we don't know where this will go but I'm aware it's proposed to go across many rice farms. Now, rice farms use aerial agriculture, number one. A tower of 70 metres or plus has then a barrier of 60 metres either side of any of that for aerial operation. Assuming that's a straight line or maybe that there's a way to find a track through a rice farm to build it, maybe not—but no plane is going to wait 60 metres before climbing and going over a powerline. So the impact on rice production or a reduction in rice plantings is significant. This town in Deniliquin—its employment is largely that rice mill; you'll see if you drive past it. There's a massive land use issue at stake here when we're going up with overhead powerlines, particularly in terms of high-value irrigated agriculture. It can't be forgotten.

Innovative irrigated agriculture involves drone technology imagery to monitor crop progress, any health issues, disease issues, plus the application of aerial-based seeding to fertiliser to chemical treatments to protect the crop. Immediately, powerlines are put in a convenient location underground. That removes that risk as well. Again, with aerial operation with undergrounding, we have bushfires in this country, some of which may be caused by these powerlines that I understand operate at something like 500 degrees Celsius anyway. Throw them out when it could be 60 degrees Celsius in the sun—adding a bit for climate change—and I suspect the risk of them starting a fire is great. But while we've got them over ground, how will our aerial aircraft and other things deal with those landscapes and dodging these overhead powerlines? To me, a fire risk is really, really important.

There's no new rice ground, I'll point out as well. There's no way to replace that. All of our rice ground is developed, because it's specific to soil type and, of course, irrigation infrastructure that rice is grown on. It costs a lot of money. Thousands and thousands of dollars a hectare of land value plus the infrastructure cost, how we move water across the landscapes, all of the things—massive costs to interrupt that. Again, undergrounding and using easements instead of going cross farm where possible can really change that. Undergrounding also allows a lesser easement to be involved. I am amused with Transgrid. Somehow in June the preferred option was

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option 5—then forced to create a 5A, which has now become option 1. So I'm a bit of a cynic about how all that stuff unfolded as well. There's an absolute lack of trust out there in the community about what any of this means. It's been thrown across the community within months of them being forced to work with one of the greatest floods ever experienced in this region, under water for months—totally disrespectful to the community.

BOB CRAWFORD: I want to address the specific terms of reference of your group—number (a) were benefit costs. My knowledge about addressing that comes from eight years in local government and then I actually had eight years in the county council electricity, which was the Murray River one. It distributed power from east of Albury all the way to Broken Hill. That experience was invaluable. I've experienced the outcome of a fire in the transmission lines. It started in Albury. We lost all the transformers in minutes. That experience really led me to think more about how we connect the high-voltage lines and that was invaluable to this inquiry, as far as I can see. The other thing that I experienced when I was a council member and president of this county council was we had an interconnector. Many of you probably wouldn't know that but out at Mildura we would take electricity from the Victorian network and then we transmitted it up to Broken Hill. So it was Victorian power being supplied at Broken Hill.

But that experience was really quite neat. It could be of benefit when I discuss this next little point. There was an issue. The Victorians reckoned we were having more power than we were actually distributing and metering out at Broken Hill. So there was all this argy-bargy going on, saying, "No, you've taken so many megawatts or terawatts"—or whatever it was at that time. And we'd say, "No, this is what we've metered out and distributed and therefore"—there was always this argy-bargy and this going on. It was an alternating current interconnector. The big thing about a direct current one is that you can measure it. You can order it. You can measure it and there's no argument. And that's what I really want to finish by saying in this short start: that I have no doubt that all new interconnections and new renewable energy zones—I'm talking about a zone rather than the individual ones in that zone—should be connected to the transmission lines through a high-voltage direct current connection. That really forces it so that you know exactly what's coming out. You can measure it. There's no argument. It's there. That's the point that I wish to make today.

PETER REDFEARN: I'm a rice farmer at Moulamein. I've got five properties and they're all within the 10-kilometre shaded zone that was sprung upon us. I found out about it on 10 July when I was in Birdsville. That's the first I knew about it. Then when I got home there was some mail that we'd received on about 17 or 16 July. So it's hardly great notice. We were expected to make a contribution to the story by 4 August. That's since been extended—still totally inadequate, really, for the amount of work that's involved. We are fully employed beforehand. The other thing I gleaned from Mr Dodds' presentation—I really think the Murray River Council have thrown us under a bus. Option 5 was rejected and they were looking for another option and we were the ones that were thrown under the bus there. I also make it known that Transgrid sponsored the Moama Lights so there's a conflict of interest there too, I believe.

I've been involved in conservation work on my property for many years. There are four endangered birds recorded on my place, including the ones that I've been releasing in a captive breeding program. We've released about 70 bush stone-curlews, which are endangered in New South Wales. The painted snipe, the Australasian bittern and the ground cuckoo-shrike are regularly recorded on my properties. The problem we've had with the bush stone-curlews is colliding with the single-wire earth return powerlines, which are single—quite a small-scale thing compared to what we're looking forward to. From my point of view, for the wildlife it will be a damn disaster apart from all the restrictions on our farming operation.

My opinion is I'm not convinced that this line is necessary, number one. Number two, if it was necessary and my property was in a direct line between the start and the finish, I would almost have to accept it, but that's not what's happening here. We're talking about close to \$140K extra on the original option 5 proposal, which amounts on today's costs to be \$600 million or \$700 million, and you know by the time that it's built it'll be several billion, going by past history of these things. I'd be looking at small-scale renewables, talking about encouraging reduced consumption, maybe switch off the lights in the cities at night—are they scared of the dark?—solving energy problems without having impacts on wildlife and habitat, and efficiency costs and socio-economic impacts being major considerations. That's about where I come from. Thanks very much for the opportunity.

ANN HARE: First, thank you, everyone, for coming out here. It's good to be able to speak to people and at least feel that we have a voice. Our area's pretty cranky. I'm personally pretty cranky. We've had so much reform, we're just sick to death of it—council reform, water reform. "The city doesn't like it, so we'll throw it out and we'll neck rural areas with it because there's no population there and no-one lives there." So it's going to be the path of least resistance, which was something that was said to us by Transgrid. "We're out here because there's no population and we thought it'd be the path of least resistance." Transgrid also told me at one of those meetings that it's AEMO that decides whether the lines go overhead or underground. Perhaps it's just another one of their lies, of which there have been a few.

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They also told me that the first time they met with council was 22 May 2022, which is a question they had to take on notice and take 24 hours to get back to me on. I suppose as far as the lines coming through our area and the solar installations and everything wind and solar, I find it extraordinary, being a farmer, that Australia's going to peg its electricity security on intermittent, unreliable wind, weather and sunshine, because we're out here and that's an integral part of our business. We've got to try to work out what's happening, where it's going to happen, when we've got to do things, when we've got to put a plane over. I've got a little bit of a spiel here that I wrote. Transmission lines should only be put if they're going to generate and be useful for the needs for 100 years. The future of solar and wind farms, as I just said, is uncontrollable. In the morning a solar wind farm never knows what it's going to generate, if anything. They are not a finite thing, whereas coal and nuclear, you fire them up, you know what you're going to get.

I just find it extraordinary that rural areas are going to be decimated, food production is going to be impacted, as is the rice industry by a third in our area. I actually will struggle to farm if they put it through like they say they're going to. There are other options that are just—the lid's put on them. Let's have a look at them before decimating—well, in my area—at least 200 kilometres of productive agricultural area; up at Wagga, another 200 kilometres; down through Victoria to the South Australian border. "Throw it out to the rural areas, and decimate out there." We don't even use it. It's going to the cities.

The Hon. WES FANG: Thank you all very much for appearing today. It's vitally important that the views that you hold are communicated to the metropolitan areas, where the impact of what is being proposed will be felt in relation to lower power prices because of the lower transmission cost. But it means that you have to bear the brunt of that. In relation to bearing the brunt, isn't it true that you would all prefer to have these powerlines undergrounded if they have to impact your property? Would that be a fair assessment across the board? I'm getting a lot of nods. Hansard can't record nods. They have to record "inaudible". I will say that I'm seeing a lot of nodding and then Hansard can record that.

PETER REDFEARN: Agree, yes.

ANN HARE: Yes, but not in irrigated agriculture.

The Hon. WES FANG: I worked out on the numbers that Transgrid provided at our earlier hearings that per household it would work out to be about \$8 per power bill if we were to underground these lines as opposed to keeping them overhead. How do you feel about providing metropolitan areas an \$8 cheaper power bill by being impacted with overhead lines cutting your productive land? Anybody can go first.

ANN HARE: I'm not happy with it at all—that my farm, just with the overlay, gets roughly a 25 per cent loss in equity and, with them up, gets a 55 per cent loss in equity. Nothing to say about my neighbours, nothing about my schools, the man that I pay to drive my truck, the local supermarkets that we go to, the community that we support, the football clubs—we won't be able to do that. Everyone keeps saying, "Cost, cost, cost". Cost to who? Cost to the taxpayer, cost to the Government, cost to Transgrid shareholders, because that's who's most important to them? Or cost to agriculture, cost to me, cost to my productivity—a generational encumbrance of loss of equity? And, as I said, your Transgrid. There's no figure that you could give me that would repay that forever.

The Hon. WES FANG: Mr Bull, you look like you want to say something. Then I'll come to Mr Crawford.

NEIL BULL: Just briefly, I don't think anyone wants to impose increased cost on anyone else in this, but there is that increased cost on the farming community and the regions over a lot of these powerlines across Australia right now. The other point I have is we've got a lot of distrust right now in terms of what that number you quoted really means. Is it accurate? I'm seeing some creative wording in documents that can be read in a couple of different ways, which really concerns me when I look at some of the reporting.

We've got a system where our major auditing companies have now been found out to actually not have been doing it properly, and we want to sell this information back to the people who've got to, proposedly, possibly, wear the infrastructure. Where are the facts about it? This goes beyond the—we've got developers rolling up driveways wanting to lock people into agreements for renewable infrastructure with no real understanding of what our landscapes will look like. We've got no education across our community of what the top-end thinking is of what this region and the renewable energy zone will look like in the future.

There's a lot of distrust and a lot of "We want facts and we want honesty" before you could even consider the future. But coming back to this, undergrounding solves a lot of issues. It will be more expensive, I'm sure, but it can also shorten the distance that these powerlines have to go. I didn't do it at the start, but thank you very much for coming along today. I appreciate it.

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BOB CRAWFORD: New South Wales has about 40 per cent of the usage on the National Energy Market, or something like that. It used to be about 40 per cent. Basically, you've got metered out around about 40 per cent, too, when you think of the whole network. I was in Sydney the other day and I asked one of the businesses—small business, it was—and they flew into me pretty rapidly about the increase in power. I went straight back and I said, "If you knew where that was going, if, say, it was going in to properly and correctly record the meterage, the actual power coming out of a solar farm or a wind farm or some renewable energy." They said, "Well, that'd be all right." I think that when you've made the question about whether it was \$8 per year, or was it per account—

The Hon. WES FANG: Per household, per bill.

BOB CRAWFORD: Yes, okay. I reckon they'd be in favour of that if they only knew it. I really encourage you to take back if we can measure something, then they'll be into it. They'd be like us—all thinking in the national interest, so to speak. But if they can't measure it and it's just a guesstimate, it's a hopeless situation because, whichever side of the compass you come at it from, if you can't prove something in a definitive way there will always be someone that doubts you. I'm all for high voltage, direct-current measuring—measuring renewable farms, whatever you like, and especially these interconnectors. If you think about it, we're in the invidious position of the Victorian distribution network doubting the amount of power that we were taking for Broken Hill. Look at this situation. I think it's going to be reversed. They want your power, New South Wales' power. If we went to the electorate and said, "We can't really measure it. We'll just have a guess," then we're lost. I reckon they'd pay the \$8 if they knew exactly what was going on. The only way you can do that is through direct current.

The CHAIR: One of the things that we've also heard about the direct current lines is that they need inverter stations to be converted to the AC current, and they come at the cost of half a billion dollars each. This was one of the issues when looking at HVDC, because these lines are, for all intents and purposes, there to connect renewable energy infrastructure.

BOB CRAWFORD: True.

The CHAIR: Do you have any comments on that?

BOB CRAWFORD: Yes. Looking at the renewable zones, apropos of the Murray River, there is a renewable zone designated on the New South Wales side and there is one on the Victorian side. The Victorians have got a very strong transmission line going up that side. We've got unused, if you like—not fully occupied by the transmission—lines going on the north side. I think we should not join the thing up here, not have this VNI West interconnector at this location. I think we should extend right out to Red Cliffs and do that interconnection there. That's where I'd put the DC measuring equipment. That's where I'd spend the half a billion dollars, if you like. I wouldn't do it here because it looks and smacks like someone could be utilising your dispatchable power. It's too early in the loop. I'd take it right out and complete that network out at Red Cliffs.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: I wanted to go to Mr Redfearn, if I may. You mentioned the issue with one endangered bird species here, bush stone-curlews. Have you seen or do you know of evidence of birds and wildlife being killed as a result of transmission lines in the area currently?

PETER REDFEARN: Absolutely.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Can you expand on that, please?

PETER REDFEARN: I've got a bush stone-curlew in the deep freeze that got killed on a powerline, and I've had others there too. Those and the roads have been the main issue we've had with our release program. I mean, obviously we've had to control feral animals that attack the birds, but no question about that.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: To expand on that, it's because with rice growing there are a lot of wetlands in the area attracting those birds, if you could expand on that a little bit, just to get it on record again, please.

PETER REDFEARN: I mean, even under a SWER line, which is a single line, it's commonplace to find dead birds.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: And bush stone-curlews are endangered?

PETER REDFEARN: Very much so, yes.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: And this area attracts them because of the rice—

PETER REDFEARN: We've had a breeding and release program on my property, and there has been a lot of survey work. There is plenty of documentation to prove the results and all sorts of stuff. Also, with the ANU Fenner group doing transect research there for at least 20 years, there is plenty of evidence to prove my

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point. The other birds, the painted snipe—which is even more endangered—and the Australasian bittern, have been recorded numerous times on my property. But to go further than that, it is not just my—the whole community and all the farmers are supportive of our actions against this business because of the community effects and the diminution of the whole area, really, if this goes ahead. As far as undergrounding, if they underground it near Moama for a short distance and then went overhead or whatever happens there, there are two corridors from Moama to Deniliquin, which is the shortest route, which was option 5. There is the railway corridor and there is the highway corridor. So the disruption would be much, much less than anything they're proposing out our way.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Just for clarification, Ms Hare, am I correct that you said at the beginning that the council knew about this in May last year, but are you inferring that the community just found out about it about four weeks ago?

ANN HARE: Correct. That was one of my questions to Transgrid staff—to two of them, actually—"When did you first have meetings with our council?" And they came back the following day. When I asked the question again, and if they'd had long enough to take it on notice, they told me, "22 May 2022."

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: You didn't just clarify that that 2022 was not 2023 and that it was a typo?

ANN HARE: No.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: It was definitely 2022?

ANN HARE: Yes. I said to them, "I already know the answer because I've read the meeting minutes."

The CHAIR: Thank you for attending the hearing today. As we are tabling our report on 31 August, we have resolved that you are not required to provide any answers to questions taken on notice or supplementary questions.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

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Ms CLARE MARTIN, Community Member, affirmed and examined

Mr MATT ROWLANDS, Community Member, sworn and examined

Ms NICOLE FITZPATRICK, Community Member, sworn and examined

Ms ALISON GLENN, Community Member, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: I welcome our next lot of witnesses. Would you like to start by making a short statement? I ask that you please keep it to a couple of minutes so that we have time for questions at the end.

CLARE MARTIN: I am a landholder in the area in question. My major thing has been submitted. It wasn't very major anyway, but I'll go to a statement that I thought of at one o'clock this morning. This has been very disturbing for everybody, I think I can safely say. It is less than four weeks since we first heard of Transgrid's plans to build a powerline through our district. It is less than four weeks since we received correspondence from Transgrid telling us that our property is in the potential path of the powerline. Like the diagnosis of a serious illness, we have quickly become aware of the symptoms and prognosis of what a 500kV powerline and all that it entails would mean to our lives and the lives of everyone in its path, from Murrabit to near Jerilderie.

We have repeatedly asked Transgrid at their meetings about the possibility of putting the line underground, and the responses have ranged from patronising to ridiculous, with no mention ever of their involvement in this inquiry. Since being asked to be a witness in this inquiry, I have spent hours reading the transcripts from preceding sessions and now realise that time has made no real difference to Transgrid's dogged determination to use outdated 500 kV above-ground powerlines for all their interconnector projects. We will not be cooperating with Transgrid in any way to progress this above-ground line in our district.

MATT ROWLANDS: I am a chairman of the united community committee representing in excess of 300 landholders, 200 schoolchildren and over 900 types of separate enterprise in our local community. I am also a family member of a multigenerational mixed farming enterprise, an employee of an agribusiness company servicing southern New South Wales, and a current and future farming member in our community. I would like to say thank you for your attendance in our community today. My submission that came to the Committee was pretty short. I will just give you a quick overview and keep it brief. In line with a lot of other community members, on 30 June 2023 Transgrid wrote letters informing our community of draft corridors that would potentially be considered to travel through private landholders' properties in our community. These letters were sent by postal services. Some of them people never received; others failed to reach people until 7 July 2023 at the earliest. The VNI West corridor report New South Wales 2023, issued by Transgrid, gave our entire community a deceitful 11 days' opportunity to, first, respond with feedback in consideration of the draft corridors from 17 July, which was the first Q and A session of Transgrid's so-called consultation.

Since this time our community has been confronted by Transgrid. It has confronted our community in a manner whereby they have conducted themselves in an inexcusable way. Large amounts of misinformation are held within these reports that they present to government and the community as they come along, and the misinformation and misleading facts and details have been both privately and publicly questioned by our community. On multiple occasions this misleading and non-factual information that has been provided has been proven to be conducted in a most deceitful and dishonest way to our community. I would also like to make present, as you will have heard from different people who have been witnesses to your Committee, that different regional reference groups that have been consulted have told our community in discussions, publicly and privately, that it has now come to light that these plans that they were consulted on are completely different to what is happening now or what looks to be happening.

NICOLE FITZPATRICK: I own a family farm in the area in question and I'm also a primary school teacher at Moulamein Public School. The transmission infrastructure proposed by Transgrid at this stage is not due to through my land. However, it is proposed to run through my neighbours' properties. There are many questions to be answered regarding whether this flood-prone area is the best route to take high-voltage powerlines, but today we're discussing the importance, if they have to go through, of why they should be underground. Lots has been said about the loss of value of places where the towers will be placed, but nothing has been said about the surrounding farms and the surrounding community, which will bear much of the cost.

I was a teacher at Mallan Public School, which closed because of a lack of student numbers not long after the Murray-Darling Basin started recouping some of our water. I now teach at Moulamein Public School. If this goes through, we will lose people in our community. We will lose students, we will lose teachers and we will lose people in the community—the people who do all the jobs, do all the volunteering and do all the work. We've heard about fire hazards. We don't have a fire brigade. We're the fire brigade. My husband is on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week, for a fire call. With limited basic training, he is expected to deal with fires and help those most

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in need, and you're expecting to put these powerlines through our land and then leave us with not enough resources or personnel to deal with the repercussions.

We've just recently had one of the most memorable floods in history, and it has been stated that once these powerlines go in, levee banks cannot be altered in any way. So that means once these powerlines are up, people can't increase their levee banks. So if the flood is coming, they are to be untouched, which means not only their farm will therefore go underwater but also the neighbours', and the following flow-on effect that that will have, if you can't manage the flooding coming onto your land.

The environmental factors—everybody likes to think that farmers are not environmentally friendly. We are doing our best, and we are making big gains and improvements in making our food some of the best in the world. By putting these on agricultural land and in irrigation areas, you are not enabling us to do this. You are also endangering wildlife. To sum up, you're putting in a system that's outdated. Overhead powerlines are not what countries are implementing. I don't know why you would implement a brand-new system and then put in old technology to support it. It just doesn't seem to make sense.

ALISON GLENN: I am part of a farming operation at Moulamein representing the community today. I think most things have been said this morning, so I'll keep it brief. Community ripple is starting from the loss of agricultural income or land, down through your hundreds of local businesses, as Nicole pointed out—schools, community groups and the capacity to be able to invite people back into your community. Those people are, for example, a school principal who provides a professional, new investment of intellect to the community, which we don't have if we don't have any of those opportunities in our town. The other thing that concerns me is that when Transgrid came to the consulting meetings, they mentioned that it was not a *fait accompli*, but it sure did feel like it from our point of view. No-one valued our time. This is no disrespect to any of you people today, but Transgrid were sitting at the table being well paid but had no respect for the amount of farmers who came for the day or their wives. There was no respect for our business.

The Hon. WES FANG: Thank you. I can tell the passion with which you're providing evidence today and it is so evident in the way that it's coming across to us that you're really feeling the pressure of what's being enforced on you. In relation to that, the provision of renewable energy is, in effect, designed to bring us towards net zero and try to reduce our carbon output as a country, primarily for environmental reasons. But I would be interested in your views where that environmental impact of reducing carbon is having a detrimental impact on prime agricultural land, in which you all have experience. If you have a productive reduction in your output on your farms because of these projects, could you provide some insight into how much loss of productivity that might mean and what that would mean for food production in the future. Whilst offsetting carbon emissions is one thing, the food and fibre in order to clothe, feed and resource our nation is another environmental problem. So it seems to me that, in part, it shifts the burden from one part to another. Do you have some views on that and what it would mean for this area to have a reduction in the output of food and fibre?

MATT ROWLANDS: I think one of the biggest concerns that we have with renewables and transmission lines, in particular, in our area is that effect on production in our community. Now, that's definitely evident. We've seen that through Murray-Darling Basin plans. We've seen that through drought. We've just recently seen that through one of the biggest floods we've had in living memory. I can tell you now that those effects on productivity in the future won't affect our community. I say that in that manner because they are currently affecting our community. It's happening right now and it's been happening for years.

When we talk about the demographic scale of that effect, we talk about not only regions where the food and fibre are produced but we in fact include larger regional towns, of which some people in those towns are unaware of what happens outside. That's fine, but the bigger regional towns—and cities, even—in our area are solely driven by the agricultural industry that surrounds them—that's schools, that's industries, that's hospitals. It comes into things like the funding we receive as our communities grow. It's crippling our community at the moment. We've seen it happen with everything that's gone on in the last decade—and further back than that, of course. But it definitely is going to crush production and efficiencies. There's no doubt about it because it's happening right now. The toll that is taking not only on people's business lives but their personal lives, their personal mental health and their children's future is as evident as it's ever been. That's a real concern.

NICOLE FITZPATRICK: It's been known for ages that farming costs are going up—fertiliser goes up, chemicals go up. What doesn't go up is our profits. They seem to be going down. We'll sell a whole sheep at market and get \$160 for the whole lot, and then you go to Woolies and you buy a leg for \$40 or \$50. As you can see, it doesn't equate. We're the ones working long hours late at night, 24 hours a day. My son and daughter help out. We will run our headers 24 hours a day to complete harvest in enough time to get our crops off before rain comes so that people in the city can have food on their tables—and good food, with regulated water, and chemicals that aren't allowed to be applied that are detrimental to your health. But the question is, if you keep putting our

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costs up, why are we going to keep doing it? I say to my husband, "You can't keep working these hours." Why would we not sell and do something else? Yes, it's a lifestyle choice. My kids love it. We thrive on it. We enjoy it. But there does come a point where if it's not financially viable, you are going to get people leaving the industry. If you talk of losses on property, if you suddenly declare someone's property has 40 per cent less value, how are they going to make their mortgage repayments?

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Thank you all for coming today and making the time. Mr Rowlands, your submission and your opening statement referred to the behaviour of Transgrid. I just wanted to get a little bit more information for the Committee. You say in your submission they "even threatened our community". In terms of that behaviour, would you like to put that on the record?

MATT ROWLANDS: Yes, I can do that for you. I won't go into too much detail as to the numbers of times that this has happened in our community, but it can be proven—a great example that I hold in the simplest form for people to understand is that of course we know the VNI West project has come into our community with four to five weeks' notice. We know other areas in our community have had lots more time than that—12 or 18 months more.

To give you one example, being part of the committee, we are constantly talking with our community, as rural communities do—always communicating. There was an instance of a family that had been confronted by Transgrid to have some private consultation, or so it was called, of which the lady had great concerns about how close these transmission lines would come to her house. It was assured by Transgrid staff that these lines would have a limit of no closer to her personal residence than 500 metres. While she wasn't happy with that, at least they'd given some sort of boundary that was perceived to be factual or even legislated.

Then in turn, approximately 10 days, 12 days, two weeks later we attended our public meeting that was given to us on 17 July 2023. The same question was raised to another half-a-dozen or seven staff that were there represented by Transgrid. They then led to inform our community that, no, 300 metres was the example of which it could come to a personal residence. Days later or weeks later at these so-called consultation walk-up meetings for our community I raised the question once again. I was then told with a different answer that these boundaries are in fact not legislated to how close it can come.

I can go on and on, and I'm happy to provide the evidence that I have if you need to—that's a great example for you. But the deceitful manner in which this company that has been employed to do this job is conducting themselves—and we've seen that with the regional reference groups giving evidence that they were planned on areas that, you know, "This is where it's going to go and we consulted with them and everything" and then the goalposts have been moved.

NICOLE FITZPATRICK: I attended one of the meetings in Moulamein. It was during the day, 10.00 a.m. to 4.00 p.m., which is great to attend if you've got a job, but I did. I was sat down with four Transgrid people and myself. They were sitting at the table at the bowling club. I said, "I would like to talk about what other option—There is no other option. This is the route it is going. This is the route that it will be put through." I said, "But what if you don't get—We will compulsorily acquire land. This is what the State Government wants, this is where it is going and there are no other options."

CLARE MARTIN: From Transgrid's point of view, when questioning about undergrounding specifically, on all contact when I've brought up undergrounding—in person or at the question-and-answer meetings—we've been given really the silliest responses: It would contaminate the soil; the width of the trenches would be way wider and more detrimental to the environment than overhead powerlines; it can't be done because of—every sort of ridiculous thing. The weight of the cables being brought up to be put in the ground is terribly heavy—you know, for goodness sake! They're talking to people who are dealing with major machinery and are totally aware of the sorts of things.

There was such a lot of talk about this contaminated soil being brought up that I said, "How deep are the trenches?" They said, "A metre." We make channels—not weekly, but a lot—that are way deeper than that. They were silly, silly things. I notice that has been repeated in the transcripts of Transgrid's—in fact, the sound of Transgrid in these transcripts is exactly what we've found. They are very patronising when you ask about undergrounding. At no time did they mention that they'd actually done comparative costing and that it had been almost thrown out, and that this inquiry had come from that. From the position of me, my husband and our family, undergrounding would be the answer. But we feel that if it was underground, the route would be so reconsidered because it is totally to avoid all the things like the ski race that we've heard about—once a year, terribly important! It would be changed anyway if it was underground. But they would not entertain any discussion about underground at any of the meetings we had with them.

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The CHAIR: We heard evidence that the undergrounding option, given the cost in terms of the current regulated system, would not pass the regulator. Even if we wanted to underground it, it wouldn't go ahead because of the AER or the regulation that's in place at the moment. Do you have any thoughts?

CLARE MARTIN: I do. The regulation is clearly at fault. Reading Simon Bartlett—their evidence, it's the regulation that is the problem. Transgrid can get away with this cheap technology because they're meeting that RIT or whatever it is—you know, the test. They themselves, Transgrid, while telling us about these ludicrous reasons for why they can't underground for us, have put a state-of-the-art undergrounded 300 kV line recently into Sydney, which has fibre-optic monitoring. They've told us they nearly have to dig up the line every week to check if it's all right—just silly things that they've told us. Ultimately, it has come down to cost. They can get away with not having to put it underground and it's meeting the test. This is the problem.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Thank you all very much for your time today. If it was possible to underground the line, do you believe that would be acceptable to you individually and to the broader community?

MATT ROWLANDS: I'll just speak to that first if that's okay. I think, obviously, your reasoning for running a Committee and what you're doing is quite important and that's involved with the undergrounding. My representation and the people that we represent—I think the process of which private companies are conducting themselves in Australian communities would be a first step of tying our shoelaces before we take our first step. It's the manner in which—obviously, the renewables aspect of things might have to happen and that's okay. But why are we taking these great, unplanned, misleading steps well before our first steps? These companies that are employed to do this—undergrounding? Okay. It's a much more favourable idea than overheads. I think you've managed to find that as you've gone through your hearings and all that. But before we even get into that, there's got to be a great reform on how these private companies are conducting themselves in a manner and what benefits that gives to, one, the communities affected and, two, the nation at large with the next 50 to 100 years in mind.

CLARE MARTIN: I would say, yes, we would be infinitely happier with underground than overhead powerlines. We also have been approached during this period by a company wanting to install wind turbines on one of our properties with no idea of how that would be transmitted back to the grid. They suggested we could use this VNI, which is not true. We were expected to sign a two-year exclusivity document so that they could assess, I guess, the wind on our property with no idea of transmission. If we are going to have these renewable energy projects dotted all over our land and we even agree to them because there's some enormous benefit financially, what about the transmission of those projects and what will our landscape look like if there isn't some sort of built-in factor?

Coming back to the regulator, they don't have to look at transmission. That isn't their problem. And we've heard—and it's totally gossip. But that particular wind farm operator has said they are going to try to convince Transgrid to put in a transmission line, which would be compulsorily acquired across land back to I guess the Jerilderie—because that's the property I'm talking about. So I'd say underground for all transmission and it should be built in to the cost of any renewable energy project that's mooted. It's happening in Victoria and it has to happen. Otherwise you wouldn't be able to land an aeroplane in our area.

ALISON GLENN: I'd just like to say that, if we have to have this development, then let's put it underground. If it's a must-be, let's look at the realistic best route possible—the straightest route. We've been told that it must be straight. It can't be bending the line. Let's put it on an already created easement such as a disused railway line or a TSR or, for goodness sake—what an invention—let's put it underground and build a road on top of it. Or run it down the side of the road—already created easement. There are so many options.

NICOLE FITZPATRICK: Personally I believe that the people that I've spoken to—that there is no point in having a conversation about above-ground lines. It will not be accepted; they will not agree to it. You can offer them all the money in the world. Would you like an 80-metre tower in your backyard? It's that simple. My backyard might be a little bit bigger than yours but I still worked hard to get it, and I work hard every day. Do you want an 80-metre tower to look at regardless of all the other things that come with it? You wouldn't like it in your backyard; you can't expect to put it in other people's. And when you said before that it's an \$8 cost, that is ridiculous. Eight dollars—what? A coffee a day added to the bill when you said before—we can't wear the cost. The country cannot keep wearing the cost so that the city people get what they want. The cost has to be shared.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much, all of you, for attending this hearing today. As the inquiry will be tabling its report on 31 August, the Committee has resolved you are not required to provide any answers to questions taken on notice or supplementary questions. That concludes our first portion of the hearing today. We'll have a short lunchbreak and come back for the public forum, which will start at 1.00 p.m.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Luncheon adjournment)

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The CHAIR: I welcome you all to today's public forum for the inquiry into the feasibility of undergrounding the transmission infrastructure for renewable energy projects in New South Wales. This session is an opportunity to hear directly from the people of this community and their views on transmission infrastructure. Thank you all for coming. Before we commence, I would like to make some brief comments about the procedures for today's public forum. Speakers were asked to register in advance for the public forum. Those of you who have been registered to speak will be called up to the table in turn. If time allows at the end of the speakers who have registered, anyone in the audience who wishes to speak will be invited to do so. Please indicate to us. You have approximately five minutes to speak to the Committee.

What you say today is being transcribed and streamed live to the Parliament's website and will be included as evidence to the inquiry. It's also important that I note again that while all participants are covered by parliamentary privilege, Committee hearings and public forums are not intended to provide a forum to make adverse reflections about others under the protection of parliamentary privilege. In that regard, it is important that participants focus on the issues raised by the inquiry's terms of reference and avoid naming individuals unnecessarily. Finally, can I sincerely thank those who have come along today to speak to the Committee. It's important that the Committee hears from the people that transmission infrastructure for renewable projects will have an impact on. It will help to shape our report and it will formulate what we hope are important recommendations for the Government. I now welcome our forum participants.

Ms SALLY DYE, before the Committee: Hello, Madam Chair. We live on a property between Deniliquin and Moulamein. We have about 46,500 acres, and 17 kilometres of this powerline has to run through the middle of our property. I'm well versed in what the potential impacts are of this financially and on our emotions because it's been an extremely fraught time. We were only notified that we were in the path of this at the beginning of July and it was hearsay. Neil rang and said, "Are you aware?" I said, "No, we haven't been contacted." Went to a public forum and there we were notified by Transgrid that, effectively, it was going to be a compulsory acquisition whether we like it or not.

Yesterday, actually, we had two men come out and want to speak to us about getting access to our property to start running the preliminary things, which seems a bit premature to me, given that this line doesn't seem to be necessary, according to the plan B from Simon Bartlett and Bruce Mountain. It just seems a complete waste of time to explore this option until they've looked at other alternatives. When we said to them about undergrounding, they're not even considering undergrounding. Not a single option in their proposal paper mentions undergrounding at all. It's just not on their radar and they're not going to do it unless they're forced to do it.

The only reason this option has been put on the table is because the Victorian Minister put an order out in May ordering that this line had to come through and cross the river where she ordered it to cross the river from Kerang. We're pretty angry the Victorian Minister has the power to order this and we're hoping the New South Wales Minister has the power to force this underground through New South Wales. We do intensive irrigation cropping and pasture as well as dryland grazing on our country. We use gyrocopters and drones because if there's one thing—farmers are required, for best practice, to maintain our social licence to operate. We're innovative and we like to do things properly so that we have minimal impact on the environment and a maximum output.

When we looked into what Transgrid was going to do to our enterprise, apart from devaluing our asset and creating an eyesore—I'd like to say at the moment we can stand anywhere in a 7,000-acre paddock on our place and look around and you can't see any sign of human habitation. It's completely native, it's all natural and it's a really good soul-filling, joyous time to stand out there and look around and there's no sign of man—but back to the gyrocopters and drones. Farmers are innovative and we achieve our social licence by having minimal impact. When these powerlines go in, we have huge issue because we use gyros and drones—more gyrocopters than drones at the moment, but we're getting better with the drones—to check our stock waters and check our stock and it saves a huge amount of time. What would normally take a day and a half or a day takes an hour and a half, so it's been a huge innovation for our business. That won't be allowed anymore. You can't fly within 60 metres of the powerlines. But the problem we have there is that from our own risk management perspective, we're not going to risk anyone on our place flying around with a powerline like that through it. We're just not prepared to take that risk.

We've got to completely change the way we manage our stock and stock waters, go back to how we used to do it—but anyway. We also use ag aviation to spray our crops and different things in our pastures. That will no longer be able to be done. When they came out to see us, they said to us, "Well, look, it's a 10-kilometre-wide corridor through your place for 17 kilometres. Where do you want the powerline?" We said, "We don't want the powerline", and they said, "Well, basically, you're getting a powerline." I said at that point, "So does that make

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us—you're expecting us now to be the pragmatic pissed off"—excuse my French—and he laughed and said, "Well, yes, probably." We were not happy about it at all.

Climate change is upon us, and the problem we have is 45-degree days where we are—stinking hot north-westerly dry winds. If we're expecting more extreme events under climate change, the way it pans out, our way, is that we end up with the winds and dust storms. Now, everyone knows dust and smoke create arcing from these major powerlines and start fires. Our nearest neighbours are 18 kilometres to the east, 18 kilometres to the west, and there's two or three of us living on our property at any one time. There is nobody to fight fires out there and if it's going to happen more often, we are so at risk. Fire insurance is becoming increasingly prohibitively expensive, as with all insurance with climate change. When I asked Transgrid twice at public forums about their fire insurance because of the risk that it posed, no-one from Transgrid would answer. I said, "Well, who carries the risk for the fires that start?" There was no answer at all. I gather they just socialise them across the expense when they've got to pay out when it's proven that they're liable, but they don't admit liability was the indication that I got.

I would suggest that if anyone's got to have an easement to overhead powerlines, it's part of their easement agreement that they have a certificate of currency for fire insurance for their liability written into it. That should absolutely be necessary because—I think I've made the point—it's just so dangerous: stock losses, fencing losses, feed losses. You can't insure against feed losses and it doesn't come back for however long after a fire. The United Nations have always said in article 3 of their Framework Convention on Climate Change that:

The Parties should take precautionary measures to anticipate, prevent or minimize the causes of climate change and mitigate its adverse effects.

That was 23 October 2020. New South Wales needs to apply the precautionary principle. New South Wales needs to put these powerlines underground. I would say that undergrounding these powerlines, we wouldn't have nearly as much of a problem. It would still be an issue, having something straight through the middle of your property, particularly when they're installing it, but I question the validity of what Transgrid is saying because I listened very carefully to what they said about undergrounding. Every time it was raised at a public forum—and I think I've been to four of them now and met with them privately as well—they say, "The construction costs of undergrounding are three to 10 times dearer."

Well, we're not in rock country; we're in soft country. It's a variety of soft soils, but a metre down there's no rock. So it would be cheap, or relatively cheap, certainly against other things. But what they don't tell you is that that's the construction cost. But I think the total cost of putting poles and wires in would actually be much more expensive, because the resulting compensation for devaluation and all the other things that go with it, like the land use changes that we are going to have to do to change our crops from crops that require aerial applications, once you compensate for all of these things and not just acquire the easement—and undergrounding has smaller, narrower easements—I think they'd be far more comparable in cost. I don't think that any one of the big companies is being up-front and honest in providing figures about—okay, they've got the construction costs, but they have no idea of the implications of the compensation costs.

One of the concerns that we've raised—and we're waiting for legal opinions and we're waiting on financial advice as well—is our assets are pre-capital gains tax assets. We're seeking clarification that the acquirement of an easement over these for the powerlines won't create a capital gains tax event on a pre-capital gains tax asset. We're still waiting because this asset has been in the family for three generations and is definitely pre-capital gains tax. To have a \$35 million property suddenly become a capital gains tax active asset, so that when we sold it in the future it would be hit with capital gains tax, is a major impact. How do you compensate for that? I mean, I'm just flabbergasted at the lack of information that Transgrid will actually give us.

They say, "Go and get your own advice. We can't provide advice on tax. We can't provide advice on anything", which is fair enough to a point, but they could give us some case studies that prove one way or another as to whether these things are actually really things that we need to be concerned about, or whether they have been dealt with in some previous way. The other issue is that, as far as New South Wales tax is concerned, there are some entities that potentially will be hit with land tax. Now, farming country currently does not have to pay annual land tax. However, if the compensation payments—it's my understanding, and I may be wrong—are received as a one-off for these things at the beginning, they are taxed as income in that year.

If you're entitled to \$800,000, you lose 25 per cent off the top, so suddenly you're only getting \$600,000 of value out of the \$800,000 compensation. But if that's more than what your income in that year is, and agricultural production fluctuates with climate and everything else, you can actually find yourself in a situation where that entity gets hit with land tax that year. So land tax on a \$35 million asset is not insubstantial, and you'd expect that they would have to write land tax into the compensation payments.

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The CHAIR: Ms Dye, I might ask you to wrap up your remarks. If we still have time at the end, I'm happy to—I'm just mindful that there may be other people who might want to speak as well.

SALLY DYE: I have just tabled a submission, if that's okay?

The CHAIR: Yes, we've got it. Thank you.

SALLY DYE: There's a summary of the cost benefit as to why I believe that undergrounding, once that's looked at properly, would be much better and much more acceptable to the community. Thank you so much for coming and listening.

Mr MATT ROWLANDS, before the Committee: I'm the current chairman of the united community committee representing in excess of 300 landholders, 200 schoolchildren and over 900 types of enterprise in our local community that will be affected by transmission lines going ahead; I'm also a family member of a multigenerational mixed farming enterprise, which has been built over three to four lifetimes; an employee of an agribusiness company servicing southern New South Wales; and a current and future farmer in our local community. I would like to take the time to speak to the Committee and thank them for their time. It's not very often our community gets access to people like yourselves, and it's a credit to you for taking the time to come here.

I just wanted to go over a couple of things that I think that, during the whole process of everything you're doing, you should consider. I think a great way to express that is to ask a question, and I'll use a tree as a metaphor: When is the best time to plant a tree? I can answer that for you. It was 25 years ago. Good people do things for other people. Smart people, progressive people plant trees today because it is the second best time that we can. We plant those trees knowing that we will never sit in the shade of them, yet our future generations will. As a Committee, I would like you to consider—obviously you're doing a great job of considering the fact of the overhead lines, and considering that they need to go underground. We appreciate that as a community.

What I would ask you to take back to your colleagues and in your own time and in your business is the fact that—who are we employing to conduct these activities in our nation, and specifically in our State, at the moment? Our community, which stretches from the Murray River to Jerilderie and the people who we are involved in communicating with, are sick to death and fed up of lies, misleading information and private companies acting in a disgusting, deceitful manner, which is happening right now and has happened over the last couple of years in our communities. I can tell you from many accounts of dealing with a lot of people in the last four to five weeks, as well as every account I have in my day-to-day, personal job, is that people are at breaking point, and these private companies are the cause of it.

This is happening in our area, and people are having these people come in and sit at their kitchen table and tell them one thing, only to then turn up at public meetings within weeks and tell them a different thing—continually questioning, and can't be answered or is answered in a deceitful, lying or misleading manner. We are sick to death of it. They're not only affecting future generations; they are affecting people in our communities right now. I just want, as a good example, to table three documents here that came out of Transgrid. It's the *Victoria to NSW Interconnector West: Draft Corridor Report – NSW*, June 2023. There are three documents there that come from their draft corridor report, and the issues that we have with them, the first one being a map that displays the flood-prone areas, which would constitute restriction of transmission lines in their area—unfortunately, the entire area from the Murray River to Moulamein and east and west in both directions in New South Wales.

As you can see when you have a look at this, it is not mapped as flood-prone land. Personal accounts that I can provide you with demonstrate that thousands upon thousands of acres of our land was under three, five or six feet of water for months. People's infrastructure, their livelihoods, their livestock—all damaged or perished. Homes were lost. It's absolutely disgusting that a company would come into our community and present a finding like this, let alone not being able to identify who businesses are, who leading industries are in our community, and then stand up and privately and publicly conduct themselves in the manner that they have. It is unacceptable. I'd like the Committee to consider, as they go along—and I'm sure there will be future committees as renewables come into play and everything—how we are monitoring these private companies that we are employing to make sure they are doing the right thing. How are we doing that, and how do we do that going forward?

I know in my own community, and I know in other communities, we will no longer tolerate being treated as second-class citizens just because there's been a little bit of pushback from other communities and, at the last minute, we'll have something dropped on us like this. It won't happen. I ask the Committee that they consider, going forward from now, if undergrounding becomes an option, which I hope it does—because it will solve some small parts of our issues—that they consider how they manage these companies so that they conduct themselves in a manner that is ethical and professional. Unfortunately, they seem to be doing that in that manner. I don't know about anyone else who runs a business, is raising a family and is active in their community, but it wouldn't fly for

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one minute in anyone else's life—not a single minute. Respect is earned, not given, and currently these companies who are railroading these projects to push through in our communities have earned zero respect and their credibility is now tarnished and lost.

There are some other maps here I'd like you to consider as well, with migrating bird paths and different things they've missed out there. I'll highlight the fact that they talk about in their reports—and this will continue with undergrounding projects. There'll be problems you'll run into if that's a consideration as well—about these Ramsar wetlands and the fact that our community is a huge corridor for wildlife and environmental factors in times of drought and floods for flora and fauna to have access to these other safe havens.

I would also just present a finding that this is the map that was presented to our community with six options at a community meeting of the proposal of the corridors that may be considered. Until it was questioned at our community meeting, it was portrayed as though these six options were being investigated as to which was the best one. When questioned, we were told that all other options had been discontinued and option 1 was the preferred route. Our community was given 11 days to produce feedback from that meeting. That is the manner in which these private companies are acting, actively in our State, our country and our homes. This is the reason why we will no longer tolerate the activities that are going on. So please consider that going forward in any projects that you may present findings to. This is happening and it's happening here and now.

Ms ALLEENA BURGER, before the Committee: We have just recently brought a farm in the Moulamein area, and I also work for an ag merchandise company in Barham. There are a few concerns with this. On a personal level, we bought the property at the start of May. In June a letter was sent to my parents because they were the owners of the property beforehand. We haven't actually personally received any communications from Transgrid at all. The map of our property—my husband looked at it and he said, "I can't see where it is. Where is it?" I said, "That's because the whole area is shaded." It is only a small property. It's almost 2,000 acres. It has been in the family since the early fifties and is a rice-growing farm. We have bought it with the intentions of growing rice and have potentially got the Transgrid line going straight through it, which would ruin it for rice and, of course, devalue what we've just bought.

On a work level, we service quite a lot of rice growers in the area. The Murray valley—especially the western Murray valley, and east as well—is very dependent on the water allocation for our area. When there is water we need to make the most of what we can out of our land, and rice growing is the most suitable for our area to make the most amount of money per hectare out of our area. The process of growing rice in our area—although it's not as regulated now as it used to be. We have had to have all of our land drilled and assessed for suitability to grow rice. In that, we have to show that our ground actually does not use huge amounts of water to be able to inundate to grow rice. In years past, the ground has all had to be drilled and surveyed for that. There are sandhills amongst it, which obviously aren't grass-growing areas, but that whole area around the Moulamein, Mellool, Barham and towards the Deniliquin area—the floodplain areas—are all low water use areas because they are the floodplain areas. So that's what makes it so perfect for growing rice. To wipe out that area of rice growing would have a major impact on heaps of people personally but also to a lot of the businesses around Deniliquin, Swan Hill, Moulamein and all of those areas.

I did have Transgrid say to us that we can't fly planes, but they're going to review the use of drones, when I questioned it, because we could potentially fly drones underneath the lines to be able to still do our crop protection, for herbicides and pesticides and so forth. They said they'll review it. I know as a fact that that's actually a CASA law as well. It's not them that does it. It was another one of the disappointing examples of what felt like lies being told to us so that we would agree to it. Potentially, we have 20 years of paying back a farm for which we might get compensated a small amount of what we're going to have to be paying back. My husband and I both have shares in the business that we work at. So we will both be impacted on, even though we do have outside income on both fronts, as well as just a community impact too.

Mr DONALD BULL, before the Committee: I'm north of Conargo. I am a fourth-generation farmer in that area, which is mainly large grazing country with some irrigation. I'm looking at—and as we've discussed today, the maps are very vague—between 15 and 20 kilometres of possible powerlines through our property. I'll just go back 30-odd years, or 40 years. On 16 January 1987 all our country was totally burnt out when a fire ravaged from the Hay Road, which was approximately 30-plus kilometres west of us, and burnt 30 kilometres east of us. That was started by a power pole that had blown over on a 42-degree day, with a hot northerly wind blowing. It devastated the whole community out there. I think it was something like 22,000 sheep that were burnt. Many cattle were burnt, plus all the vegetation and fencing. It was like starting your whole property again. I never want to see that again.

Just prior to that, through our property along the Moonbria Road, a powerline was put in which is still there today. I think it's 120 kVA line, or whatever they quote them as. This one we're talking about now is 520,

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so nearly five times the size. My memories of that powerline—we had to sign basically a disclaimer for health reasons. This time last week I had a Transgrid rep in my house, and I said, "I'm really concerned about the health issues. If you drive under that powerline existing there now, your radio doesn't work in your ute. There's obviously a lot of energy coming off those powerlines." I said to him, "How healthy is this for me to have men mustering under these powerlines?" His comment was "I wouldn't want my kids to play under this line." That basically answered my question, I take it. To this day, I advise my staff not to sit under the powerlines when they're on buggies or bikes mustering.

Through our property we've got a critically endangered species called the plains-wanderer. As I say, we don't know exactly where the line's going but almost certainly it's going to come across a lot of primary habitat. I only found out about this on 20 July; no time to reflect, and I haven't prepared anything. Transgrid have bought a property about 30 kilometres north of us to offset the habitat onto this property. I said to the guy, "The plains-wanderer is flightless. What, are you going to go and pick these birds up and take them up 30 kays north, are you?" He couldn't answer that, obviously. There's obviously flora as well as fauna, other types that could be affected.

Our property, we use aerial sprayers. I was also led to believe that if we have another fire, the water planes are not allowed to go very close to these powerlines, which is a real—out in our country there are no channels and no rivers. It's open-plain country and you will not stop a fire unless you have help from the air. On a personal note, we use planes to spray our irrigation property. It could have severe impacts on a lot of our management practices. Very similar to Sally's story, it's the same type of country: big grazing paddocks. We do not want this powerline. We don't want it over the top.

Ms CHARLETON GLENN, before the Committee: I am a third-generation farmer from the Moulamein region. I also, like Matt, work for an agricultural private business. I am of the opinion of everyone else here today that the powerline overhead is not a great thing, but particularly because, as Alleena said, we're a rice-growing region. It would decimate 50 per cent of the job that I currently do as an agronomist, and it was also a passion of mine. My family is in the process of discussing what a future looks like for our farm. Rice is currently 50 per cent of that farm; the other 50 per cent is grazing.

If we get rid of rice, I don't see a foreseeable future for myself to go home. I can't envisage that there will be enough income where there is enough industry for my dad, my sister, myself, my mum and, potentially, our future partners and families to come home and have a viable future. We're very passionate about what we're doing, but if Transgrid comes into our region and they're not willing to actively consult and look at other options, what hope do we have for future generations of farmers—or people who want to work in agriculture who want to come out here to regions—to move back? I would have to look at getting another job. Yes, I have other skill sets outside of agriculture, but it's not what I enjoy doing and not what I'd like to do.

My boss, for example—there are five of us in our business. Three out of five of us are involved in rice-growing farms and we also do rice for work. If we don't have rice as a job, he loses three people from his business as employees. Their kids no longer live here; they can't go to school. We're here for a long term and generations. The Transgrid people who are coming in and providing jobs for the construction are only here for the foreseeable future. They're not sustainably long term. Their kids aren't going to come to our school. They're not going to grow up and marry local farmers. As one of the only people in the room who is 30 years and under, I thought we should have probably had a voice today. Thank you very much for your time and for coming.

Mr ROBERT BOLTON, before the Committee: I come from a former farming family, but my background is now with construction management, project management and dealing with what I would call complex projects. We've got the example here today, talking about complex projects. I actually attended a Transgrid meeting about six weeks ago. It was an interesting conversation with the other engineers, talking engineering talk. But talking about process, particularly—I'm not sure whether you're upper House or lower House in there—a couple of process points; first of all, the compensation. Has the Committee considered the mineral rights below where these powerlines are going? In particular, there is a large mineral sands operation in Balranald and one further north. I understand they're exploring in this area. Do you add the future earnings to these people we just heard for the rare earths and the other mineral sands that are available under this land?

We're talking about, I think, 60-metre-high powerlines 450 metres apart. How does the easement and access work? To add to that point, I think the Committee should look at the jurisdiction conflict that happened in Queensland in the in situ gasification issue, where the Petroleum Act and the coal Act were in conflict and innovation was not able to go through for a couple of mining companies. This has all happened around the Chinchilla area in Queensland. I think that's a precedent that you as a parliamentary committee should look at. That is point one.

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Point two is bonds for the farmers and any work that gets started on their property and does not get completed. I've been talking to a number of contractors about various renewable projects that are happening around New South Wales and Victoria. A rule of thumb is that these wind farms, Transgrid powerlines and the solar farms are about 50 per cent mechanical-electrical and 50 per cent civil. The civil side has been underestimated and most of the complaints from farmers are mainly due to the contractors running out of money and not being able to finish the work to what would be a normal standard. Once again, I would ask this Committee to look at other parts of New South Wales, in particular the mining operations, where they do put that in legislation and force the mining companies to do it. But as you heard from these people behind me, it doesn't appear to be applying to Transgrid. That is something I feel this Committee should be looking at. Usually you would have some form of bond. There are number of different ways of doing that.

The final thing is that I think it's useful to do a time line of what has happened on this. This has been the fastest \$3 billion to \$4 billion development I've seen in my career—and I've seen a few. If you're familiar with the Sydney Harbour Tunnel, Darling Harbour and about 40 to 50 kilometres of the Hume Highway, I have seen a few of these sorts of construction projects. To me it's more of a process issue. If you have a look at things like what happened with the Inland Rail, it's the same thing: They're cutting short on the budget. That's where you will find all the negative feedback that you're getting from these people here today. Thank you.

Mr PAUL BROWNRIGG, before the Committee: I am now a resident of Griffith and I am advising Helen Dalton, MP. I am not making a political comment in my capacity as an adviser to her. I would just like to make the Committee aware of an article in the *Financial Times* of London from 30 July this year regarding the massive inflation in electrical cables for these projects and interconnectors, the huge world demand for these materials and the huge number of projects very similar to VNI West and Hume. If the Committee could refer to that—I am a subscriber to the *Financial Times* and could make that article available to the Committee. I haven't heard any comment or information about the huge inflation in costs for interconnectors and the actual cables that go into these projects. That's all I have to say.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Are there any additional people who want to speak in the public forum?

MATT ROWLANDS: I thought, just while we had the opportunity, we might get the Committee to consider also the way the time lines of these projects are happening in reference to—currently, as we see it, we're faced with overhead transmission lines and obviously the work you're doing is to provide some evidence on the necessity for underground lines. I just wanted to make the point that into the future I have no doubt our State and especially our community that I represent will face more issues, especially with net zero requirements that are coming between 2030 and 2050. I just wanted to make it a consideration that the Committee possibly have some protocols or take something back that these time lines and the way—I know a witness spoke about the way that the consultation is presented: newspapers and country people accessing that.

It's sort of the question of why hasn't this been thought of prior to. Yes, different entities have time lines that they have to act on and everything like that. But why is that at the detriment of our communities and people's livelihoods? It's not through our communities' misplanning or poor research that we suffer. I'd just like to make that point that, if you continue down this road as we're going to with renewables going forward, maybe we need to present some statutory sort of protocols for time lines, for consultation, for the manner in which these companies that are employed by our State are conducting themselves, because presently it's a terrible reflection of both the companies we're employing but—it's a bit like the homework our State is doing to protect the people that live in it. Why aren't we making sure that these are planned and we have a plan it that has to happen by 2028? Why aren't we thinking about that and just taking the small steps one by one?

I think it's never been more evident than in a project like this that's happening that the plans are sort of there but we just got to get it done so it doesn't matter. And it does, because of the effect that it's going to have. You've been all over the State and everything and now you're aware of all the effects, so please just consider the fact that we need some tight protocols around these companies that we're employing and what they are bound by and how they have to perform, rather than them dictating, "Well, this is how we'll do it and we'll just go through it", and it may differ from what's actually happening in our local communities.

Ms ALISON GLENN, before the Committee: I've composed myself now after this morning. Just one of the community concerns for landholders would be that, when you have an overshadowing of a possible transmission line or a development of any of that scale—it's the future planning, where people are questioning what their future planning will be as to if they change the direction of their industry. So they might be thinking of going from rice, for example, into another grain or livestock. Should they be commencing that development, it could be a very financially burdening exercise. To have that shadow across the country—how do you make that decision based on "what if"? I think that the possibility of holding people back when it's very uncertain for people to make a future and to hold onto their future and encouraging the future generations—to say, "Please come on

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board. We would like you to be welcome in our family industry. However, there is a chance that this overriding development could decrease our yearly income or our income forever." Then it reflects on your ability to have the aggression to go out and purchase the farm next door. I think this goes without saying. We're multigenerational and we're go-getters. We want to buy the farm next door but that will be overshadowed by Transgrid.

I'd also like to refer to a sentiment that was certainly put forward at the Moulamein meetings. That is that Transgrid have a sentiment that agricultural land is less valuable than the State forest or the national park. This is not something we agree with. The environmental impact is exactly the same, where we have, as you heard today, Australasian bitterns, southern bell frogs. We've got the bush stone-curlew project. We're high-value agriculture. Our region delivered almost 8.5 per cent of the Riverina rice crop this year. That's amazing. We have some of the best rice growers and we have a publication, Murray land and water management wildlife survey, for everybody to have a look at. There are lots of environmental bonuses in our region that are being put below those of the national park. I just feel that there should be an equalising—or at least compare apples with apples. We're not able to farm the national park—possibly a good thing because there are ferals and Bathurst burrs and all those things. But we would like to say that we are just as important—well, we're more important than the national park.

Mr NEIL BULL, before the Committee: I've spoken previously. I am Neil Bull from the Ricegrowers' Association. Alison covered off something I wanted to emphasise, which was the environmental side and that flight path stuff. If you don't know, I was instigator of the Bitterns in Rice Project, which has also led to the massive work across the country on the recovery of that threatened species. I'll highlight that the one bird we have in use for display purposes that we had taxidermied was—guess what?—killed flying into a powerline. It was a major powerline too. We were lucky enough to pick it up to be able to preserve that bird for educational purposes. But these overhead lines have massive risks with the flight path that shouldn't be ignored.

I have serious concerns for the Victorian side of this line as well, travelling through some pretty amazing wetlands. The VNI West line and its proposed route is going through an area of flood plains, natural ephemeral wetlands. Also, many wetlands have now received adaptive environment water as well. That's a consideration that's really not been picked up in terms of the environmental impacts of such an overhead powerline through the current proposed route. I just wanted to emphasise that. The other point that linked with Alison's comment is that in Victoria potato farms are rated as a high-value agriculture enterprise or high-value land. In this case, a rice farm is not and I do not understand that.

SALLY DYE: I have spoken previously. I just wanted to highlight the advantages of undergrounding these things against going over the top. It's a matter of reduced fire risk; reduced compensation payments needing to be paid; nullifies the impact of a visual amenity so there's less depreciation; reduced or no devaluation of the surrounding assets—so the properties next door that these ones don't actually run through; reduced impact on landholder equity with the banks because there's less devaluation. There's greatly reduced change-of-land-use compensation required. There's reduced impact on the environment, both flora and fauna; reduced easement acquisition costs as the easements are narrow and it would follow a more direct route and potentially along public lands instead of over private lands; and reduced construction costs by a shorter, more direct route.

In this case, if they did the original direct route through Moama central undergrounding, it would be 156 kilometres less than following their current preferred proposal, or approximately that—various numbers come from Transgrid. It's reduced fire insurance costs on an annual basis to the landholders and/or to Transgrid if we can get it written into the easement agreements; no impact on agricultural aviation, so people will be able to maintain their current use of planes, gyros, drones et cetera, and stay as world leaders; and no exposure to extreme weather events, and that's really important because of the reduced risk of system failure.

On 28 September 2016 South Australia went through a statewide electrical blackout because their 23 towers collapsed in a wind event. These are the same sort of towers, I believe. If we're getting more extreme events going to happen with climate change, putting in overhead wires and poles is actually leaving the system open to further collapse more frequently with more extreme events. No arcing causing fires in dust storms or bushfire smoke causing further arcing in fires means people will still be able to burn their stubbles if they wanted to, or whatever, whereas once the wires go in that'll be another management practice that won't be allowed. More importantly, it'll increase the mental health from maintaining our beautiful natural landscapes. It will give Transgrid, if they went underground, a social licence to operate, or certainly improve their social licence. Finally, we'd have a reduced negative flow-through to the community from reduced primary production. I just thought it was important to highlight that there are so many positives in undergrounding against overhead wires.

Ms ANN HARE, before the Committee: I just wanted to speak about the raptor birds that fly along and look down because they're hunters, and they go into these things. For instance, if you have a pair of wedge-tailed eagles come into the area, they're cleaned up by the powerlines—nothing to say that another pair, they come into

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the area because there's no opposition to them, and again and again and again with kilometres and kilometres and kilometres of it. All the raptor birds around here are fair game for these big powerlines.

Also I want to speak on mental health. Since 7 July it has been extraordinary. We've had to be up—well, I don't know that many people have slept since we got this dumped on us. The amount of information that you've had to go through, the amount of submissions that you've had to read, the education of yourself for wind and solar—I refuse to call them farms. They do not generate a crop or livestock. They are installations. They actually call themselves solar electricity generation works, not farms. They don't produce farms, so we all need to stop making them light and fluffy and calling them farms, because they are not. They intermittently produce things.

While I'm on wind generation from turbines, I don't know if anybody knows about the leading edge degradation that happens in the third and fourth year of a wind turbine—on every wing of it. Then it spews blue asbestos dust from then on for its next, what, 16 years of life, times how many are on a plot—20? 200?—all over the ground, over the people, over the environment, over the animals, over the flora, over the fauna, over the people. Then the rain comes along and washes it. Google it. Blue asbestos dust is the worst asbestos. I can't believe that we're actually bringing that into the country. We are letting it go into our land when we have nuclear. It could go on the same place for coal—same footprint—and use the same lines. Maybe we should spend the \$1.5 trillion on working out what we could do with nuclear waste instead of imposing on people like us who are just trying to live their lives, do their best, pay their taxes, look after their communities, keep their mental health and not have to walk out every morning and look at three, four or a dozen dirty big transmission lines.

The Hon. WES FANG: Chair, I just wanted to—

The CHAIR: We can't ask questions. There's another man who's indicated that he wants to make a submission.

The Hon. WES FANG: It's not a question. It's more just in relation to asbestos.

The CHAIR: This is definitely a question. You can't, Wes.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: It's a question. We can't do it in a public forum. We all want to but the rule is we can't. We've got to hear from someone else.

The Hon. WES FANG: I just think it's important to say that we can't import asbestos.

The CHAIR: Order! Ms Hare, have you finished making your remarks?

ANN HARE: Yes, I think so. Putting these lines through is an intergenerational encumberment on future generations, as is spewing asbestos dust over every acre of our land.

The CHAIR: Just with the time we have left—sorry. I wasn't sure that we would get there, but go for it.

ROBERT BOLTON: I'll be quick. I just want to make a disclosure up-front. I'm a member of something called dispute advisory board. That's a group of ex-engineers and -lawyers that resolve and deal with commercial disputes, particularly in infrastructure. The reason I'm bringing it to this group's attention—in New South Wales it is the leader of using that, particularly within Transport for NSW, so roads, rail projects and that type of thing. The mechanism is you have a client, which is typically Transport, and a contractor and then there's a third entity, the dispute advisory board, who resolves major commercial conflicts so the projects go better and move along. That technique has been founded in New South Wales and is actually world leading.

The reason I mention it to this group is because we are moving to a situation where there's going to need to be rapid conflict resolution. You actually have it in New South Wales, it's not bad in Queensland—the Queensland Government follow—and Western Australia. The point to note in Victoria is that the Victorian Treasury is anti this approach, and I think this Committee would pay a lot of time to talk to your Transport for NSW colleagues and understand how that mechanism works and how it could be applied to help these people behind me.

The CHAIR: That concludes our public forum for today, and indeed our hearing. I'd like to again sincerely thank everyone who came along today to speak to the Committee and those who have listened from the gallery as well. It's important that we hear from people like yourselves about the impact that the transmission infrastructure related to renewable energy projects will have. It will help to shape our report and formulate what we hope are important recommendations for the Government.

The Committee adjourned at 14:00.