

10 August 2023

Bradley Thomas
Chief Executive Officer
Hepburn Shire Council

Email: bthomas@hepburn.vic.gov.au

Brian Hood
Mayor
Hepburn Shire Council

Email: bhood@hepburn.vic.gov.au

Dear Mayor Hood and Mr Thomas,

Western Renewables Link – Changes post VNI West Project Assessment Conclusions Report [IS-00203]

Thank you for contacting the Western Renewables Link project team on behalf of Hepburn Shire Council. In your correspondence, dated 27 July 2023, you detailed concerns regarding the Western Renewables Link proposed route and changes to the project following the release by the Australian Energy Market Operator (AEMO) of the Victoria to NSW Interconnector West (VNI West) Project Assessment Conclusions Report (PACR).

We understand that the proposed changes to the project, following the release of the VNI West PACR, have prompted questions about the current proposed route for the Western Renewables Link and whether moving the terminal station from north of Ballarat to Bulgana would create opportunities to consider alternative routes. In addition to our ongoing engagement with landholders on the proposed route, we are aiming to run more community information sessions in September / October this year to provide information about changes to the project and answer community questions. We hope that the information provided below will help to address your queries, and we would welcome the opportunity to meet with you both to further discuss your concerns.

As mentioned in your letter, we originally referred the Western Renewables Link project under the *Environment Effects Act 1978* (Vic) in 2020 (referral number 2020-R11). At the time, the Minister for Planning confirmed an Environment Effects Statement was required for the project and issued the scoping requirements for the Western Renewables Link Environment Effects Statement. As you have noted, since the 2020 Environment Effects Statement referral was made, there have been changes proposed for the project.

As a result of these proposed changes to the project, AusNet is currently reviewing the 2020 Environment Effects Statement referral. The requirement to undertake an Environment Effects Statement from 2020 remains in effect unless and until a new decision by the Minister for Planning replaces the previous *Environment Effects Act 1978* (Vic) decision. Any new referral in relation to the Western Renewables Link project would be made available on

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the Department of Transport and Planning Impact Assessment Unit website, at: www.planning.vic.gov.au/environmental-assessments/browse-projects.

We note your concerns surrounding the proposed route identified for the Western Renewables Link project and the potential environmental, economic and cost implications. Alternative routes and projects were proposed in submissions on the Environment Effects Statement draft scoping requirements in November/December 2020, and have since been proposed by stakeholders, organisations and the community through ongoing engagement with the project. As discussed at the briefing to Hepburn Shire Council on 6 June 2023, feasible alternative routes and corridors have been considered and evaluated against the project objectives and environmental, cultural and social criteria as required by the Environment Effects Statement scoping requirements. Alternatives will continue to be assessed in preparation of the Environment Effects Statement.

In that briefing, key challenges facing alternative routes in the Hepburn area were also discussed. These included the Hepburn lagoon area and associated values, proximity to dwellings and built-up areas including Newlyn and Newlyn North, Kingston and Allendale, as well as Creswick Regional Park and Glen Park State Forest and an inability to obtain land tenure within the Creswick plantation. We are now reviewing and considering the impact to the Western Renewables Link of the change of the terminal station from the north of Ballarat to Bulgana, including to the proposed route. At this stage it does not appear that it will affect the outcome of the assessment of the alternative routes against the route selection criteria. The proposed uprate of the 220kV section of the Western Renewables Link to 500kV is however expected to require a change in the proposed route in the area to the north of Waubra. If additional work is required around project alternatives as a result of changes to the project, this will be undertaken and included in the Environment Effects Statement. The Environment Effects Statement process will facilitate further consultation on the Western Renewables Link project and the planning scheme amendment process by which AusNet is seeking approval for the project.

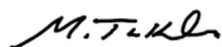
AusNet is committed to continue to act as a proponent for an Environment Effects Statement in the context of any new decision the Minister may make in response to the submitted referral under the *Environment Effects Act 1978* (Vic). We are continuing to work closely with landholders and stakeholders to respond to their feedback on the proposed route and project design throughout this period, including undertaking field surveys to inform project design and construction planning, and refinements at a localised and individual property scale.

Following this letter, a member of our team will be in contact to arrange a time to discuss this information and your queries further. If you have further enquiries specific to VNI West, you can contact AEMO directly for further information about the VNI West PACR at 1800 824 221 or email enquiries@transmissionvictoria.com.au. Alternatively, you can contact the project team via the contact details listed below, if you would like more information on these topics or any other Western Renewables Link project matters.

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Yours sincerely



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