April 9th, 2021

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Michael Obrien, Liberal Opposition Leader

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Andrew Dyer, Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner

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Dear Sir or Madam,

I am writing to you about the Western Victorian Transmission Network Project (WVTNP) being undertaken by AusNet and my concerns of their disingenuous community consultation.

I strongly oppose AEMO’s contract for AusNet to install towers and the Terminal Stationthrough Western Victoria. My views and concerns are shared by my immediate and extended family, neighbours and landowners. Overhead towers and the Terminal Stationare environmentally and socially unacceptable. Our stance is based on evidence, such as recent tower failures at Cressy, outcomes of the 2009 Bushfires Royal Commission, local advice from the CFA, and coalesced feedback from affected parties.

The community and I have made and continue to make the above objections clear to AusNet and the Australian Energy Market Operator. AEMO are markedly unresponsive and absent. It appears AEMO is leaving all community consultation to AusNet. The ever-escalating problem for all affected is that AusNet are proving at best under resourced or incompetent, at worst deceptive. Affected communities in Western Victoria have attempted to engage AusNet constructively via established feedback pathways. Taking in all engagement with AusNet to date, their message repeatedly boils down to ‘the contractual scope we have with AEMO is to install AC transmission towers and the Terminal Station’. It is clear AusNet has either no interest or no mechanism to affect real change to genuinely address concerns.

To elaborate, the following information represents some of the feedback raised by affected communities, demonstrating AusNet’s inability to conduct effective, credible consultation:

* AusNet either does not comprehend the impacts on the community, or they do not care.
* AusNet are more focused on espousing project benefits than sincerely addressing impacts.
* Feedback and concerns raised with AusNet have mostly been ignored or placated.
* AusNet continues to communicate deceitful assertions about transmission towers and the Terminal Station, minimising the risks that the towers and the Terminal Stationpresent in relation to fire hazards (started by electrical failure), fire management, and impacts on the environment.
* Face-to-face “Drop In” sessions held from 2:00 – 7:00 PM weekdays, are unsuitable for most who work or commute during these times and therefore only represent a partial demographic.
* Some community members able to attend were turned away due to lack of staff.
* This poor consultation has led to widespread anxiety and stress within the community.

The WVTNP ‘community consultation’, to date, has been a mere formality. It is very apparent that community concerns, no matter how genuine, credible, or grave, can only hope to affect superficial, if any, change on the current WVTNP scope.

For clarification, the only mechanism for AusNet to action tangible change is to activate an ‘exit clause’. The current consultation process simply allows AusNet to tick a box. The process as it stands is disingenuous and insulting, pushing the community and their objections aside.

I therefore seek your assistance for a step change in the consultation process, **to allow AusNet to appropriately resource and address the many and varied concerns** **or to replace AusNet’s role in community consultation with a more component, responsive and empowered body** who act on the many and varied concerns raised by the thousands of residents and landowners directly and indirectly affected by the WVTNP.

If your review of the situation regrettably finds that genuine consultation is not achievable, I ask that you do everything within your power to enact the WVTNP exit clause. From there, we envisage the pathway forward would be to utilise all feedback gathered to date, from all affected communities, to inform a considered scope that weighs community, economic, social, and environmental concerns.

If appropriate action is not taken by decision makers, AusNet will be permitted to install a suboptimal solution, with a relatively short life span, that risks the safety and livelihood of thousands of people and the environment. Affected communities will be left with an overly negative legacy, with generational implications.

A response from your office to advise what action you intend to take in response to my letter would be much appreciated.

Yours sincerely,