**FIRE RISKS:**

**The Hon. Lily D'Ambrosio**, Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change

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 **Andrew Dyer**, Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner

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Dear Minister,

I am writing to ask that you reconsider the proposed route and the construction methodologies (e.g. overhead Vs undergrounding) for the Western Victoria Transmission Network Project (WVTNP) due to the significant fire risk and subsequent risk to lives, homes, bush land and agricultural land this will pose.

There are two main issues to consider around fire risk concerning the WVTNP:

1. high voltage power lines causing fires, and
2. restrictions that transmission lines and towers cause when fighting fires and trying to save lives and homes.

Along the proposed 190km corridor which includes 80 metre high towers, there are both Extreme and High to Very-High Risk areas identified in the Victorian Fire Risk Register.  Many are listed in the High to Very-High Fire Risk category, of note the Wombat and Lerderderg National parks sits in the top ten highest risk areas in the state. In the planning for the upcoming bush fire season the recently released CFA 2021 summer fire season risk analysis shows many areas along the proposed route fall within the high fire loss category. Under the State Government Climate Change Projections, the region is expected to experience increased summer temperatures, decreased rainfall days, especially in Spring, but with increased rain intensity (storm) events. These factors are likely to increase further the fire risk classification for this region.

Fires can be, and are regularly, caused by high voltage power lines. For example, AusNet Services Group reported to Energy Safe Victoria and the Australian Energy Regulator, that there were 79 ‘fire-start’ incidents in the 6 months between January and June 2016.  Of these, 59 were attributed to: lightning strikes; contacts with birds, animals, or objects, HV fuse failures; and other infrastructure failures. It is noted that the arc distance for a 500kV overhead power line that is hit by lightning is up to 50m from the base of the tower.

Fighting fires under the proposed 500Kv high voltage lines and 80 metre high towers is high risk and provides many unknown hazards. Throughout the proposed corridor there is difficult to access terrain including areas adjacent the state and national parks which amplifies the risks with fighting fires. Consequently, there is a growing list of CFA firefighting groups along the proposed route that say they will not tackle blazes near these transmission lines. We have seen live examples of this occurring including in Lexton/Avoca in December 2019 when an extra 2,000 acres were lost due to both aerial and land firefighting not being able to fight near transmission lines due to the risks involved.

The proposed route will have significant devastating impacts through some of Victoria’s most beautiful tourist destinations and pristine natural bushland, impacting culture and heritage, local tourism, regional businesses, and prime agriculture.

I ask you, what will you say to families when their homes and livelihoods will be lost along this route because these transmission lines caused a fire and because of these lines the CFA could do nothing to fight them? What about the devastating loss of vegetation and habitat and loss of fauna this will also cause? The impacts of such we are only just beginning to understand after ‘Black Summer’.

Underground energy transmission [is best practice around the world](https://www.tdworld.com/grid-innovations/transmission/article/20966809/reimagining-the-grid) and [Australian scientific studies support this.](https://www.moorabool.vic.gov.au/files/content/public/about-council/large-projects-impacting-moorabool/western-victoria-transmission-network-project/wvtnp-high-level-hvdc-alternative-scoping-report.pdf?utm_source=open_letter&utm_medium=letter&utm_campaign=link_click) Underground energy transmission is more reliable, safe and efficient and will not be impacted by extreme weather, or increase the risk of catastrophic bushfire.

I urge you to please step forward and help drive the future thinking required to provide a renewable energy solution that not only Victorians, but all Australians and our natural environment deserve.

Do you want to be responsible for another devastating bushfire like we have seen over the last few years with ‘Black Saturday’ and ‘Black Summer’ by neglecting the evidence and best practice surrounding these powerlines and fire impacts? I call upon you to take a stand with all the communities along the 190km of the proposed corridor and stop AusNet’s Towers and take this project back to the drawing board.

Regards,