**MENTAL HEALTH & COMMUNITY WELLBEING**

To: **The Hon Martin Foley MP, Minister For Health**

 via e-mail minister.health@health.vic.gov.au

 **The Hon. Maryanne Thomas, Minister for Regional Development, Agriculture & Resources**

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Dear Minister,

I am writing to ask what price you would put on the mental health of tens of thousands of Victorians? The proposed high voltage transmission line and terminal station project being undertaken by AusNet’s services running through western Victoria, is causing a profound increase in community mental health issues along its 190km route. Is the net outcome of this project worth the ongoing significant mental health impacts this will cause to these Victorians?

The Western Victoria Transmission Network Project (WVTNP) will have a devastating and irreversible effect along the whole route impacting tens of thousands of regional Victorians, hundreds of businesses and the natural environment. Parts of the proposed route run through Victoria's most high-risk bushfire areas as well as prime agricultural land.

I ask you to imagine for a minute that you are a third generation farmer that is raising your family on the land that you have such wonderful memories growing up on. Imagine that even with all the ups and downs that farming has, you love your “job” and you love being on the land and providing food and agriculture for Australians. You chose to live this ‘quiet’ life, away from the city and love the serenity you have created on your property. Now imagine you receive a letter from AusNet advising there will be a high voltage transmission line running directly through your productive livelihood and your piece of the quiet life. I ask you to think what this would do to you and your family’s mental health over the many years that this process takes and the ongoing and lasting impacts this will have.

Alternatively, I ask you to imagine for a minute, your home. The place where you have created memories in, the place you chose to live because of the serenity and the visual amenity it offered so close to national parks and away from urbanisation. The place where you and your family have loved being a part of the local community. Now imagine for a minute that you find out that all this will be destroyed by AusNet’s proposed transmission lines and up to 80 metre high towers. Everything that you have loved and cherished about the part of the world you have chosen to live in such as the serenity and visual amenity particularly the views to national parks and/or rural vistas will be taken away from you without consideration of the impacts to you and your community. Add to this the stress of the increased risk of bushfires these transmission lines and towers pose. I ask you to think what this would do to you and your family’s mental health over the many years that this process takes as well as the ongoing and lasting impacts this will have.

This is a David and Goliath battle with AusNet having the backing of experience, specialists, large budgets and a full time workforce. The people impacted by the proposed route have to keep their livelihoods going, juggle full time jobs and family life all while trying to digest the myriad of information and understand the complexity of the process. How is this process equitable?

 AusNet and its associated consultants manage the complexities of large scale infrastructure projects such as this on a regular basis. For the vast majority of people potentially impacted by this project, they have not dealt with anything like this in their lifetime, and for many we feel AusNet are listening but are not hearing what the community is saying. This is a tiring, stressful process for people not used to this level of bureaucracy and lacks meaningful engagement with AusNet who appear to have no regard for the community’s wellbeing.

The mental health of so many local people is being seriously impacted by AusNet’s behaviour and the proposed high voltage transmission project. AusNet’s final preferred overhead transmission path announcement is a continued demonstration of their unwillingness to absorb and suitably respond to the many thousands of voices opposed to the project.

Communities along the 190km route are dealing with these serious mental health challenges daily, creating high levels of stress and mental fatigue. Please consider again, what would you do if faced with the threat of losing everything you have worked for as a result of the WVTNP? This situation is at crisis point for so many. I ask you again – what price do you put on the mental health of one Victorian, let alone tens of thousands of Victorians?

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, safer and more 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 and importantly, support mentally well regional and rural communities.

I call upon you to take a stand with everyone along the 190km of the proposed corridor and stop AusNet’s Towers and take this project back to the drawing board to deliver the project in a way that minimises the impact on our communities and the environment.

Regards,