

# Minutes

## Gippsland Renewable Energy Zone™ project

Community Advisory Group (GCAG)

### Meeting #3

**Date:** Thursday 4 May 2023  
**Time:** 4:30pm – 6:30pm  
**Location:** Century Inn, Airfield Drive, Traralgon, VIC

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- Attendees:**
- Wendy Bezzina (Acting Chairperson) (WB)
  - Lorraine Bull (LB)
  - Ian Croke (IC)
  - Ian Hill (IH)
  - Mathias Wood (MW)
  - Dianne Best (DB)
  - Ian Bye (IB)
  - Nick Dudley (ND)
  - Peter Mooney (PM)
  - Kirra Bott (KB)
  - Tony Cantwell (TC)
  - Hamilton Gerrand (HG)
  - Graeme Stuckey (GS)
- GREZ project team/AusNet attendees**
- Lily Habib (LH)
  - Kellie Nichols (KN)
  - Jimmy Fordham (JF)
  - Renee Kurowski (RK)
  - Brett Millsom (BM)
  - Marisa Feher (MF)
  - Gary Stevens (secretariat)
- Apologies:**
- Colin Young
  - John Petrakos

Item	Discussion
1	<p><b>Welcome, Acknowledgement of Country, Housekeeping/Administration</b></p> <p>WB welcomed attendees to the meeting and acknowledged the Traditional Owners of the land on which the meeting was taking place, the Gunaikurnai people. She also especially welcomed Nick Dudley to his first GCAG meeting.</p>
2	<p><b>Changes to membership and Terms of Reference for the GCAG</b></p> <p>Based on recent resignations from the group and changes to the project's preferred route, the G-REZ team proposed several changes to the GCAG, outlined in a paper circulated to members prior to the meeting. BM presented the following recommendations to the group:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. That the GCAG notes that Mr Nick Dudley from the Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation (GLaWAC) has been appointed by AusNet to the GCAG.</li> <li>2. That the GCAG endorses the approach to appoint a new Chairperson to the group outlined in the discussion paper and in accordance with its Terms of Reference.</li> <li>3. That the GCAG endorses the abolishment of the role of Deputy Chairperson via amendment to the Terms of Reference.</li> </ol>

4. That the GCAG endorses the nomination process for, and subsequent appointment by AusNet, of a new member to the group to be sought from landowners proposed to host transmission infrastructure south of Loy Yang.

Members asked the following:

- Should there be representation on the GCAG from affected businesses such as HVP in order to have an idea of their view of the project? BM explained that corporate landowners were all invited to participate in the CAG prior to its formation. The G-REZ team is in ongoing conversations with both private and corporate landowners proposed to host infrastructure and suggested a corporate representative could be invited to present at a future GCAG meeting.

Relating to recommendation 3 (item 9a – ‘The proposed changes would allow for members to elect a member of the GCAG, or an AusNet representative, to serve as Acting Chairperson for the meeting for which the Chairperson is absent’), members suggested the removal of ‘or an AusNet representative’ in order to retain the group’s independence.

Pending this amendment being made to the Terms of Reference, members endorsed the recommendations.

In accordance with recommendation 2, BM called for nominations for the Chairperson role with the following nomination received:

- **Wendy Bezzina**

WB spoke to her nomination noting that as she is not a landowner in the project area or a power industry representative, she could remain independent.

With no other nominations received, WB was elected Chairperson by means of a majority vote of GCAG members.

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### 3 G-REZ Project Update

LH gave the group an update on the following items:

#### **EES and EPBC next steps**

AusNet received a decision from the Minister for Planning that the G-REZ project would require an Environment Effects Statement (EES). The team is continuing with ecological studies to support it. LH reiterated that the community would have the opportunity to provide feedback during this process.

Members asked for clarification about whether the Minister had insisted that an EES was required. The Statement of Decision and Reasons for Decision are available at the following link:

<https://www.planning.vic.gov.au/environment-assessment/referrals-and-decisions#Ref-2022-R06-Resources>

#### **Access and surveys**

Summer surveys have recently been completed and cultural heritage walkovers have been completed, with more to be done in the future. Autumn surveys will be done from 15 May 2023. AusNet now has access to over 60% of the route distance (via private and non-private landowners who have signed land access agreements).

An incident occurred in February in which a contractor entered a private property that AusNet did not have access to, unbeknown to AusNet. The contractors had been provided with a map showing which properties they could and could not access, but they unfortunately used an earlier map showing properties they had wanted to access and not the revised map provided by AusNet which indicated which properties access had been granted to. AusNet was alerted to this by one of the neighbouring landowners. The G-REZ team investigated and contacted the two landowners who were impacted and completed a risk assessment including biosecurity. The biosecurity risk was assessed as low as the contractors had reviewed the vehicle and did not leave designated access tracks. Since it was believed the contractors were going to be on public land, they did not have a G-REZ employee with them. A policy has since been implemented to include a G-REZ team member for all survey work on both public and private land. AusNet apologised to the landowners and LH reassured members it would not happen again.

Members asked the following:

- Could AusNet elaborate on what the surveys involve? MF explained the environmental surveys included bird callouts, nocturnal animal surveys and vegetation assessments, with camera surveys planned for future rounds.
- Will the CAG see the results of the surveys and if so, when? The information will go to the Technical Reference Group (TRG) which will assess it and then it can be presented to the GCAG in six to 12 months.
- How did landowners react to the incident? LH responded that she had visited one of the landowners and they accepted the apology. The other landowner was interested in the results of the survey.
- Can AusNet disclose the contractors' details? The contractor was a subsidiary of Tetra Tech Coffey.
- What will happen if AusNet can't get access to the remaining 40% of land, and would this mean the project is able to proceed or would it be held up? MF responded that the access is spread across the 86km and not in one location. For environmental studies, this distribution of access allows AusNet to identify and model the gaps using assumptions where access is not granted. This gives AusNet sufficient information to conduct the EES process, although cultural heritage differs. Most infrastructure projects will have areas where access is not granted to undertake ecological studies. Where access is not granted, assumptions will be made regarding the ecological conditions within these areas as part of the assessment and approvals process for the project.
- What access rights does AusNet have if no agreement exists on a particular property? AusNet has no rights under the Section 93 of the *Electricity Industry Act 2000* or Section 86 of the *Land Acquisition and Compensation Act 1986* to access land. All access to date is voluntary.
- Has the TRG been formed yet? There will be a kick-off meeting on 8 June 2023 and the TRG will be set up following this.

#### **VicGrid update**

VicGrid is going to coordinate transmission and AusNet welcomes this. VicGrid is currently undertaking community engagement to get feedback on the route, infrastructure and technology. AusNet is more than likely to submit a tender as part of a competitive process that would likely run in 2024. AusNet meets with VicGrid regularly and updates them on G-REZ. AusNet feels the transmission solution needs to happen quickly so will continue progressing the G-REZ project. GCAG members and members of the community are encouraged to attend VicGrid's community consultation session at Traralgon Performing Arts Centre on Saturday 6 May 2023 between 9.30am and 12.30pm.

Members asked the following:

- VicGrid has said it is now conducting all community consultation, so does that mean AusNet will be pulling back on its public community engagement but continue on behind the scenes? LH responded that AusNet would be pulling back on some of its community activities while also continuing some activities as a requirement as part of the EES.
- There is some confusion around the status of G-REZ as a private or government-led process, can this be clarified? RK suggested some confusion might stem from the name G-REZ being similar to the government's Gippsland Renewable Energy Zone (REZ) so there is currently consideration to adding the word 'Transmission Project' to the project name.

#### **Transmission Augmented Reality visualisation**

AusNet is currently using an app which can be used in various locations to help visualise what transmission lines might look like in those areas for landowners and near neighbours.

Members raised the following concerns:

- By developing the technology, AusNet was not looking at shifting the route based on landowners' feedback, nor considering underground transmission, which sent a message that AusNet was not listening to the community. KN responded that the technology provided a tool to allow the user to move towers around in order to improve visual amenity. LH said there would be no impact on visual amenity from underground transmission infrastructure.
- VicGrid is hearing the emotion from the community. LH responded that if VicGrid wanted to put the transmission underground, AusNet would work with them on it.

Members asked the following:

- Will the surveys look at an underground option? MF confirmed this will be determined in the geological surveys which would look at the strata.
- Will an assessment be done taking into consideration recent climate events, in order to assess the fire risk of overhead transmission, particularly in plantation areas? MF confirmed a bushfire study will be conducted as part of the scoping requirements for the project.

#### 4 G-REZ route update

In March 2023, the G-REZ team announced changes to its preferred route, moving the line south of the Loy Yang mine and south of the Rosedale-Longford Road, as well as an alternative terminal station site in Stradbroke.

KN presented an overview of the changes and an update on the sentiment around them.

##### South of Loy Yang

The change was made based on discussions with stakeholders including landowners, AGL and Latrobe City Council. AusNet has spoken to all new landowners proposed to host infrastructure along the new preferred route. Benefits of the new alignment include reducing the visual amenity impact to the densely populated area of Traralgon east, avoiding current and potential future infrastructure (Loy Yang mine site and proposed Traralgon bypass) and allows AGL to continue mining and mine rehabilitation. Feedback from landowners on the previous northern alignment was positive and that it showed AusNet was listening to them, but they acknowledged the issue had been shifted to other areas. These landowners also wanted an assurance that they would not be impacted by transmission in the future. Landowners who are now part of the southern alignment (Flynn's Creek area) were generally accepting of the project with some resistance, and AusNet has land access in that area. Ongoing questions include why the project cannot connect into Loy Yang.

Members raised the following concerns:

- Some residents on the new alignment say they were not being informed of the changes, and according to one member, three of the landowners are refusing to communicate with AusNet. The project is dividing the community, with some agreeing to the project and others fighting against the alignment. KN responded that discussions are ongoing and the alignment is continually being adjusted based on feedback.
- While visual amenity at Traralgon East was a reason for the change of route, people in the Giffard/Stradbroke community feel their visual amenity impacts are not being considered and landowners along that part of the alignment are not being listened to.
- There was general discussion about the fire risk by putting overhead transmission through HVP plantation land south of the Rosedale-Longford Road and that underground should be considered for that area. Several community members raised a fire incident which occurred in the plantation in 2019 and the effect such events could have on overhead transmission infrastructure. It was suggested a representative from HVP or fire authorities should be invited to make a presentation to the group. Energy Safe Victoria recently released an information sheet on *Electricity Transmission Lines – Bushfire Mitigation and Community Safety* which can be accessed here: <https://www.esv.vic.gov.au/about-us/publications/electricity-transmission-lines-bushfire-management-and-community-safety>

##### Stradbroke Terminal Station

An option for an alternative site at Stradbroke was secured to develop a terminal station that could serve as a connection point for both onshore and offshore renewable energy developers seeking to use the G-REZ transmission line. This option would remove about 12 kilometres from the overall length of the transmission line. Both the Stradbroke and Giffard options will be explored with the view of developing a terminal station at one of those sites. Feedback included clarification on the exact location and size of the terminal station, as well as future land use on the site. There would potentially be batteries located on the site but no other renewable energy developments. There were also concerns over visual impact, noise and EMF radiation, as well as biodiversity and environmental concerns from landowners.

Members asked the following:

- Is an option being explored to develop a connection point for offshore wind before it comes onshore? Investigations are underway to explore this but one of the challenges would be having several energy developments utilising one line to travel onshore.

- Who would own the connection terminal offshore and how far offshore would it be? This is still to be determined as many various models are being used to investigate this. The connection terminals would likely be 5-10km offshore but will depend on where windfarms would be located. Studies on connection point options likely wouldn't be complete for several years. The length that each offshore wind development would travel onshore would depend on where a terminal station is located. VicGrid is the coordinating body for offshore connections. Members were encouraged to raise these questions during VicGrid's community consultation process.

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## 5 G-REZ biosecurity procedures

JF gave a presentation on the procedures in place to ensure biosecurity is appropriately managed when undertaking ecological surveys. AusNet has a responsibility to minimise the risk of introducing pests, animal/plant diseases and weeds onto private or public land during its activities. Movement of vehicles, plant and machinery from one property to the next is the most common way for the spread of pests, weeds and disease. Staff and contractors are actively trained on procedures. Biosecurity procedures were viewed and updated by an independent specialist last year. AusNet has a company-wide and active Biosecurity Working Group to discuss, plan and respond to biosecurity risks. AusNet also monitors government alerts on developing biosecurity updates. Prior to accessing private property, a farm management plan is completed with each landowner. JF also gave an example of the different chemicals that are used in the biosecurity wash-down procedures, as well as detailing the procedures. He noted that in the event of an outbreak, AusNet would refer to government recommendations and guidelines.

Several community members raised issues or incidents with AusNet's distribution contractors or subcontractors entering properties within the G-REZ project area without following biosecurity signage or procedures, which has created a lack of trust and confidence within the community. JF responded that the training and procedures are AusNet-wide and should be adhered to by contractors and subcontractors, and that incidents are taken seriously and had been brought to the attention of AusNet's Biosecurity Working Group. The issue of compliance and how AusNet ensures that staff and contractors working on its behalf act in accordance with the training was raised. LH advised that an AusNet representative would accompany our field crews during all survey work.

Members asked the following:

- What will be done to prevent the spread of the phytothphora fungus which is prevalent in the area? It would be addressed during the risk assessment for entering properties.

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## 6 Member feedback

Kirra Bott and Tony Cantwell were invited to provide feedback to the GCAG regarding what they were hearing about G-REZ and transmission infrastructure within the local community and other networks.

### **Kirra Bott**

The community presented a group letter to Wellington Shire Council highlighting concerns about the G-REZ project in its current form, as well as highlighting potential solutions and pathways. The letter was also sent to government officials, politicians and renewable energy developers. It represented the views of directly affected landholders and neighbours with 178 signatories. During their conversations, other developers expressed surprise that the letter had so much support as they understood from AusNet there was support from 40% of the affected landowners. A more explicit explanation about what the percentage figure of support represents is needed in the future.

Regarding biosecurity, previously the only information provided was a basic flyer on the website. The presentation at the meeting was pleasing to see that this has been improved. Mistakes such as the incident mentioned where ecologists incorrectly entered private land should not happen as it was obvious that they were entering private land, and one mistake can lead to long-term future repercussions. While procedures and training are a step in the right direction, policies need to be in place to make sure practices are adhered to, and staff and contractors are accountable for their actions.

The community has asked for the input, comments and questions made by GCAG members to be included in the meeting minutes.

Based on communications with offshore wind energy developers, they would be supportive of undergrounding transmission infrastructure if it is what the community wants.

Community members have been in contact with VicGrid on several occasions and have a thorough understanding of its plans. It is understood VicGrid has asked AusNet to “back off” on engagement around land access agreements, etc.

Community support for the project is still a problematic issue and the community feels little has been done to increase this. Positive community support is possible (as with Star of the South) but if the lack of social licence is swept under the rug it will continue to be problematic going forward.

**Tony Cantwell**

It has been important to hear the discussion from landholders on the G-REZ project area and to be able to communicate with AusNet staff.

In the community there is a lot of anticipation on VicGrid's role. From an industry point of view there is uncertainty around the timeline for offshore wind. Once feasibility licences are granted to offshore wind developers it will provide more clarity for landowners and community members around accessing transmission lines.

Minister for Energy Lily D'Ambrosio was at Barry Beach on 28 April 2023 launching a ship that will investigate the seabed off the Wellington/South Gippsland area, with results likely in the coming months.

It's also been pleasing to have AusNet consulting with the community as not all projects have undertaken a consultative approach.

**7 Open discussion**

Members raised the following:

- An alternative scoping report by Amplitude and commissioned by Moorabool Shire looked at underground HVDC as an option for transmission in Western Victoria. Would AusNet be taking it into consideration for G-REZ? The report is available here: <https://www.darleypowerfight.com.au/news-and-updates/high-level-hvdc-alternative-scoping-report/#>

AusNet is aware of the report and while HVDC is good for a point-to-point connection, it would be a challenge to have renewable developers connect into it along the route.

**Actions**

Action	Assigned to	Due date
Representatives from HVP and/or fire authorities to be invited to make a presentation at a future meeting	G-REZ staff	8 June 2023