

Minutes

Gippsland Renewable Energy Zone™ project

Community Advisory Group (GCAG)

Meeting #4

Date: Thursday 8 June 2023

Time: 1:00pm – 3:00pm

Location: Latrobe Valley Enterprises, Princes Drive, Morwell, VIC

Attendees:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wendy Bezzina (Chairperson) (WB) • Lorraine Bull (LB) • Nick Dudley (ND) • Lorrae Dukes (for John Petrakos) (LD) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dianne Best (DB) • Ian Bye (IB) • Ian Hill (IH) • Colin Young (CY) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kirra Bott (KB) • Ian Crooke (IC) • Peter Mooney (PM)
GREZ project team/AusNet attendees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lily Habib (LH) • Kellie Nichols (KN) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Renee Kurowski (RK) • Gary Stevens (secretariat) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marisa Feher (MF)
Apologies:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mathias Wood • Graeme Stuckey 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • John Petrakos • Hamilton Gerrand 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tony Cantwell • Brett Millsom
Guests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ewan Waller, Independent fire management consultant and former Chief Fire Officer, Department of Sustainability and the Environment 		

Item	Discussion
1	<p>Welcome, Acknowledgement of Country, Housekeeping/Administration</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 thanked those attendees who went on the tour of Latrobe Valley Enterprises' facilities prior to the meeting.</p>
2	<p>Matters arising from previous meeting</p> <p>RK and KN gave brief presentations to address questions raised at GCAG Meeting #3.</p> <p>RK gave a brief overview of the roles and responsibilities of the various parties involved in renewable energy and transmission infrastructure development in Gippsland. RK also addressed a recent article in the Weekly Times (7 June 2023) about VicGrid and its role in transmission, for which AusNet was approached for a comment about G-REZ. AusNet had been asked by the journalist if it was a privately-led project before VicGrid became involved in the coordination of transmission, to which AusNet responded that it was privately-led however it welcomed coordination by VicGrid. RK reiterated that AusNet was working to put itself in a good position to win VicGrid's tender process for a transmission</p>

solution in Gippsland. AusNet would be able to progress its project to meet timelines for offshore wind developers and the Victorian Government's climate targets.

KN gave an update on land access statistics for AusNet's preferred G-REZ alignment, reiterating that this access was for survey work. The statistics are as follows:

- **Number of private landowners** - 52
- **Total length of route on privately-owned land** - 42km
- **Total length of route on non-privately-owned land** - 43km
- **Number of non-private landowners** (councils, AGL, HVP, government agencies) - 8 (access secured)
- **Percentage of private landowners who have signed land access agreements** - 52% (27 landowners)
- **Percentage of the total length of the route with land access agreements secured** - 68%
- **Percentage of total length of private land with access agreements secured** - 44%

KN also showed the group a map which indicated the routes proposed by the various new and existing transmission and generation projects in Gippsland.

3 Bushfire risk and management around transmission infrastructure

Ewan Waller, independent fire management consultant and former DSE Chief Fire Officer, led an informal discussion and answered questions from members on firefighting and bushfire risk management near transmission infrastructure.

EW gave some background on some of the major fire events that had occurred in eastern Victoria in the last two decades and said fire behaviour was becoming more dangerous and unpredictable. He outlined five components to be taken into consideration when discussing bushfire and transmission lines, and how these related to G-REZ:

1 – Will the presence of transmission lines increase the risk of fire? EW said bushfire was unlikely to start from transmission infrastructure such as that proposed for the G-REZ project and that the chances of fire were very low.

2 – Will transmission lines make controlling fire more difficult? EW said towers would be an obstacle to work around but there would be little vegetation in the vicinity of towers and transmission lines, making it easier to control.

3 – The safety of firefighting personnel both in aircraft and on the ground. EW believes crews would be able to work with greater safety within an easement rather than in bush.

4 – The impact on the nearby community. EW said this impact would be greater from fires starting away from the easement rather than within it.

5 – Are there benefits from having an easement necessitated by transmission infrastructure? EW said if the easement vegetation was correctly managed and maintained then it could be utilised to burn back and create a larger fire break, reducing the impact of fire. He said this was why maintenance compliance would be important.

EW admitted that due to several fires (including on Black Saturday) having been caused by powerlines (i.e. distribution not transmission infrastructure), this would be front of mind for the community when thinking about fire risk.

EW said he believed firefighting assets would not be diverted to protect transmission lines or towers rather than houses or people, as towers were built to withstand such conditions and there had been no evidence that fire had brought them down in the past. He said substations however might be targeted for protection.

EW summarised by reiterating that transmission towers and lines such as those proposed for G-REZ would be very low risk in starting fires, could withstand fire and could in fact be of benefit to those fighting fires by providing an easement as long as the easement was well-maintained.

Questions from members to Ewan were as follows:

What would the impact be from fire started not by transmission infrastructure but by other means such as deliberate or by lightning strike? An example was given of severe bushfire through plantation near Rosedale in 2019 and whether such a fire would destroy any infrastructure once plantation vegetation was at full-growth. EW responded that this might be an issue, but it could be mitigated by vegetation management within the easement.

Did Ewan have any knowledge of 500kV arcing to the ground due to smoke? EW said this wouldn't be the case as his understanding was that arcing would occur horizontally (between conductors) rather than vertically (from conductors to the ground).

Was the cause of bushfires from power infrastructure in the past due to lower voltage distribution lines rather than high voltage transmission such as G-REZ? EW responded that yes, this was the case.

What training does the CFA give its members around fighting fire near transmission lines. EW could not provide an answer to this.

Would aerial firefighting be used as part of a tactic around transmission lines? EW said he had been reassured that pilots would 'water bomb' or 'aerial spray' from the air close to the lines and that towers would simply present another obstacle to work around.

Has there been any direction from government about placing transmission lines underground rather than overhead to mitigate fire risk? EW responded that the placement of distribution lines was preferred underground and it had been mandated in some cases, but for transmission lines this was unknown.

Would heat from fire affect transmission cables if placed underground? EW responded that the heat would not go deep enough to cause an issue.

Would transmission easements provide the benefit of better access and egress by fire personnel to fight fire? EW responded that infrastructure easements had been used in the past to effectively access and fight fire and that it could make a difficult job much easier.

Would the impact on community be different if fire occurred under transmission lines? EW responded that any grassy understorey within the easement would provide fire crews with a significant advantage to control fire rather than in dense bush as it would likely burn more quickly through an easement.

Could crews enter an easement to fight fire? EW responded that if the fire was moving quickly toward the easement from bush, crews would likely be removed from it, although fire would be easier to fight in a cleared easement than in dense bush.

Is the control of vegetation on easements currently adequate? EW responded that he believed it was and that with a modified environment such as an easement, fire management was safer.

The following questions were asked by members to AusNet staff:

How often are transmission easements mowed and how are they maintained? RK took this question on notice to be addressed at a future meeting. She said in some instances the transmission line might have to be de-energised to allow for firefighting.

Who has responsibility for ensuring easement maintenance? RK responded that it would be AusNet's responsibility to ensure maintenance was being undertaken.

Is easement maintenance audited yearly? MF responded that a yearly fly-over was undertaken over the easement to identify any areas that need attention.

Do farmers have an avenue to report any maintenance issues? MF responded that they could contact AusNet.

After Ewan's discussion with members, the following issues were raised:

It was reiterated that transmission easements were not new and existed all over Victoria. The community wants to make sure that AusNet remained compliant with requirements of the maintenance of easements and that AusNet needed to ensure there was regular contact with landowners to ensure they had a clear understanding of the requirements and maintenance schedule.

4 Member feedback

Ian Bye and Di Best provided feedback to the GCAG regarding what they were hearing about G-REZ and transmission infrastructure within the local community and other networks.

Ian Bye

From a local government perspective, Wellington Shire Council's role is to act in the best interests of the community and get the best outcome, by advocating on the community's behalf. IB and other councillors will travel to Canberra in the week of 12 June to meet with Federal Government ministers to advocate for government support for the establishment of the renewable energy industry in the region.

Many of the developers who have applied for offshore licences have met with Council to outline their plans in greater detail.

Council has adopted a position statement on renewable energy (available at https://global-uploads.webflow.com/6021ed7c89cc1c1c01fccf29/647d2e2df7de8d62eaf1aebc_Council_Position_Statement_Renewable_Energy.pdf). IB said most residents have acknowledged that establishment of a renewable energy industry is imminent in the shire and are conscious that it needs to be developed correctly.

While most of the construction of offshore wind farm components looks likely to be done out of Hastings, an ongoing operations and maintenance supply hub could be established at Barry Beach (in South Gippsland). This would place added pressure on nearby towns such as Yarram and Foster where the workforce would likely be based. Council has sought government funding for town planners to prepare for this but has so far been unsuccessful.

Council recently adopted the Wellington Renewable Energy Impact and Readiness Study (available at <https://wazfiles.blob.core.windows.net/pubwebcontent/Publications/Wellington%20Renewable%20Energy%20Impact%20&%20Readiness%20Study.pdf>), which has been distributed to the state and federal governments, outlining what will be needed to accommodate an influx of developments. Council has also developed the Wellington Renewable Energy Forum which brings renewable energy proponents together every two months to progress the various projects within Wellington Shire. Council will also host the second Gippsland New Energy Conference in August.

Council is awaiting the announcement of successful offshore wind licences later this year and has asked the Federal Government to ensure that any Community Benefit Funds established by successful developments are adequate to help build some of the infrastructure needed to accommodate the offshore wind industry.

Council has also met with VicGrid and made it clear to VicGrid that it does not want the 'spaghetti effect' of various transmission lines across the region. Council has asked for clarity on whether VicGrid will release the full plan for transmission solutions in Gippsland or only the plan for the first 2GW.

There was general discussion about some of the proposed renewable energy developments and timing. Members asked Ian the following questions:

How could towns be safeguarded for the future when the renewable energy construction boom ends? IB responded that since construction was unlikely to occur in this region, local towns would not experience the boom and bust.

Had Council had to redirect resources to focus on renewable energy? IB responded that this had occurred when Gippsland had been identified as a Renewable Energy Zone.

Di Best

DB visited locals in the Giffard area to gauge their feelings and opinions and found there was a lot of frustration and confusion. There are so many proponents and no clear picture of what might happen in the area in the long-term, which makes it difficult because farming requires long-term planning. Residents would like the chance to meet with Wellington Shire councillors before they meet with government next week.

The community believes the different levels of government have made promises that they will listen to the community, but fear they will get 'railroaded' by future decisions. Landowners have been unable to sell their properties due to the long-term uncertainty, while the interest in the surrounding area by international developers has pushed up land values which the community fears will result in high council rate increases.

There is also concern that larger infrastructure developers have greater access to legal and technical expertise to progress their projects, while landowners don't have anyone advocating for them.

6 Open discussion and future agenda items

Concerns were raised about the consultation process undertaken by AusNet throughout the G-REZ project and it was suggested someone could present to the group about community consultation. LH responded that AusNet had had access to land voluntarily granted by landowners and based on discussions with them, had moved the alignment several times.

The community wants to know more information about underground parameters and have in-depth discussions about areas in which G-REZ could go underground. KN responded that in-depth consultation on this is already underway with individual landowners but these conversations could not be disclosed for privacy reasons.

Members reiterated their interest in learning more about easement management and maintenance at a future meeting.

Actions		
Action	Assigned to	Due date
AusNet staff to provide a presentation at the next meeting on transmission easement maintenance including processes, standards/requirements and compliance.	G-REZ staff	10 August 2023