

7 OFFICER REPORTS

7.1 WESTERN RENEWABLES LINK ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS STATEMENT - COUNCIL SUBMISSION

DIRECTOR DEVELOPMENT AND COMMUNITY

In providing this advice to Council as the Director Development and Community, I Ron Torres have no interests to disclose in this report.

ATTACHMENTS

1. Submission to Western Renewables Link Inquiry and Advisory Committee - Environmental Effects Statement [7.1.1 - 3 pages]

OFFICER'S RECOMMENDATION

That Council:

1. *Notes Council's resolution of May 2021, supporting the transition to renewable energy and new infrastructure, but continues to strongly oppose the proposed Western Renewables Link Project (formerly known as the Western Victoria Transmission Network Project), its route, and its above-ground configuration. The Project will have a devastating impact on Hepburn Shire, and on our farming and wider communities;*
2. *Notes that officers are currently finalising Council's comprehensive submission to the Western Renewables Link Environmental Effects Statement. Once finalised, it will be distributed to Councillors, made available on Council's website, and lodged with the Department of Transport and Planning by 8 September 2025;*
3. *Endorses the attached abridged version of Council's submission, which contains the key elements that will form the basis of Council's final, comprehensive submission to be lodged with the Department of Transport and Planning, and,*
4. *Notes that Hepburn Shire Council will have legal representation at the upcoming hearing, and will be calling subject matter experts to give expert evidence.*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Western Renewables Link Project is a proposed new 190 kilometre overhead, high-voltage electricity transmission line from the Northern Grampians to Sydenham, with part of its route running through the western part of Hepburn Shire.

Since 2021, Hepburn Shire Council has strongly been opposed to the project due to its route, above-ground configuration, and the devastating effect it will have on Hepburn Shire, and on our farming and wider communities.

This report provides an overview of the Project, the state government statutory process that is currently underway (known as an Environmental Effects Statement), the key focus areas that will form the basis of Council's written submission, and Council's intended approach at the upcoming hearing.

BACKGROUND

The Western Renewables Link Project

The Western Renewables Link Project is a proposed new 190 kilometre overhead, high-voltage electricity transmission line that will carry renewable energy from Bulgana in western Victoria to Sydenham in Melbourne's north-west; traversing six local government areas. The proponent for the project is AusNet Transmission Group. Transmission line towers up to 80 metres in height are proposed.



Through Hepburn Shire, the proposed route travels east-west, bisecting Clunes and Creswick, before heading south near Newlyn.

The proposal is currently undergoing a formal statutory process overseen by the Victorian State Government, known as an Environmental Effects Statement (EES); a process which enables government to assess the environmental, social and economic impacts of major projects.

An integral part of the EES process is the public exhibition of the proposed project and its accompanying information and technical reports. The exhibition process commenced on 30 June 2025, and closes 25 August 2025. There is an ability for

submitters to seek an extension of time for their submission, and Council has been granted an extension to 8 September 2025.

A nine-week hearing will commence on 27 October 2025, enabling the proponent and submitters to be heard in person, and experts to present their evidence and be cross-examined. Following the hearing, the Victorian Government will review the Hearing Panel's recommendation, and make an independent, final decision on the project.

Hepburn Shire Council Position

At the 18 May 2021 Council Meeting, Council resolved as an item of urgent business:

- 1. Supports the transition to renewable energy and acknowledges the need for new infrastructure, however, we hear our community's concerns and strongly sympathise with the real distress the Western Victoria Transmission Network Project proposal is causing to our farming and wider communities;*
- 2. Write to AusNet and appropriate decision-making authorities such as DELWP, the Australian Energy Market Operator, and State and Federal MP's urging:*
 - a. the WVTNP Environmental Effects Statement process to properly consider and apply existing and emerging technologies and construction methods that are making underground methods of power transmission a viable option;*
 - b. the decision-making authorities to consider the wider impacts beyond the electricity market such as non-market economic, social, and environmental impacts to enable the actual cost of WVTNP to our community to be assessed; and*
 - c. noting Council is opposed to the construction of a terminal station in valuable farming or heritage sensitive areas;*
- 3. Include funding from within Council's Strategic Planning budget towards preparing a strong submission to the Environmental Effects Statement highlighting the bushfire risk, threat to agricultural land, and impact on historic and sensitive landscapes and this funding is detailed in a report to Council that outlines the scope and priorities of the Strategic Planning Works Program;*
- 4. Communicate with its communities what action it has taken, what action it intends to take, provides opportunities for community feedback to Council, and provides links to support organisations.*

Since the 2021 Council resolution, Council has strongly advocated to government and maintained its opposition to the transmission lines being above ground and along the (various) routes proposed, as well as the poor placement of the proposed (at the

time) terminal station. Council has emphatically maintained that the proposal will have a significant impact on some of the highest value agricultural land in Australia, significant landscapes and the health and wellbeing of local people. The proposed transmission lines and terminal will also impact tourism, a significant part of our local economy, by diminishing overall amenity and the visitor experience.

Hepburn Shire Council has worked closely with other affected councils, and has provided input to the project through a Technical Reference Group to ensure the technical assessment process is thorough and properly considers the impacts on our local community. The Technical Reference Group consisted of affected councils and 16 agencies.

Furthermore, Councillors and Council officers have regularly engaged with our community since 2021, including through a Western Renewables Link Project community working group.

More recently, in August, Council held three community workshops in Creswick and Newlyn to assist communities with their understanding of the project, how to best navigate through the complex array of information in the Environmental Effects Statement documentation, and guidance on how to lodge a submission.

KEY ISSUES

- The Western Renewables Link Project will be one of the most significant and impactful infrastructure projects for Western Victoria, with a 190km transmission line spanning six local government areas; from the Northern Grampians to Melton.
- Should the proposed Western Renewables Link Project be approved by the Victorian Government, it will have a devastating impact on Hepburn Shire, and on our farming and wider communities.
- The social and economic impacts will be far reaching, together with a range of serious impacts on areas such as biodiversity, our visitor economy, sensitive landscapes, cultural heritage, bushfire management, the long-term viability of our strategically important agricultural land, our road network, and the Victorian Goldfields World Heritage Bid.
- In accordance with Council's resolved position, officers are preparing a vigorous and robust case against the project. This will be in two parts: a comprehensive written submission, and legal representation at the hearing.
- Council's final, comprehensive written submission is currently being reviewed and finalised by Council's legal representatives. It is important that this is carefully prepared, as it will form the basis of Council's attendance and presentation at the hearing. Once the written submission is completed, it will be distributed to Councillors and shared publicly on Council's website. An extension of time to lodge Council's submission has been granted for 8 September 2025.

- The abridged written submission attached to this report contains the key focus areas that will form the basis of Council's final written submission. These focus areas will be comprehensively elaborated on in the final document.
- Whilst there are a multitude of potential issues that could be covered in a submission, Council's submission will focus on the most significant outcomes of the Project that will detrimentally impact Hepburn Shire.
- At the hearing, Council's attendance will be supported by subject matter experts who will provide expert evidence on behalf of Council. The final group of experts is still being finalised as we are also currently exploring the possibility of collaborating with another affected council and sharing expert witnesses to represent us both. However, the expert disciplines currently being investigated are:
 - Tourism
 - Visual Impacts
 - Social Impacts
 - Undergrounding
 - Agriculture
 - Economics
 - Bushfire

The availability of each expert and Council's financial constraints will be considerations for the final group.

COUNCIL POLICY AND LEGISLATIVE IMPLICATIONS

Council Plan 2025-2029

Hepburn Life

1. Connected Communities that are resilient, adaptable, and empowered - able to respond to and recover from climate-related impacts, emergencies, and other community challenges.
3. An informed and engaged community.

Future Hepburn

1. Preserve the unique character of our towns and communities, plan for future growth and protect our productive rural landscape.
2. Responsible management of infrastructure and environment to support wellbeing now and for future generations.
3. A dynamic, vibrant and resilient economic environment.

The statutory requirements and process of an Environmental Effects Statement are prescribed under the *Environmental Effects Act 1978*.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Since 2021, Council has anticipated that the EES process will require appropriate budget allocation to prepare a submission and be suitably represented at a hearing. Council has allocated appropriate funding for this 2025-2026 financial year. The endorsed budget acknowledges an important initiative of 'Completion of submission to the environment effects statement (EES) in opposition to the Western Renewables Link'.

COMMUNITY AND STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Since 2021, Council has engaged community and stakeholders about the project.

Officers from Hepburn Shire Council and other affected councils have been part of a technical reference group for the project, seeking to ensure a rigorous technical assessment of the project.

Regular community working group meetings have been held.

The current, formal EES exhibition period is a state government process, not a local government one.

RISK AND GOVERNANCE IMPLICATIONS

Council has identified the potential significant impacts of the project on Hepburn Shire and its communities. In response, Council intends to lodge a written submission through the EES process, and Council will be represented at the upcoming hearing in support of its submission.

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

The proposed Western Renewables Link project is part of the Victorian Government's transition to renewable energy. As stated in the May 2021 Council resolution, Council *"supports the transition to renewable energy and acknowledges the need for new infrastructure, however, we hear our community's concerns and strongly sympathise with the real distress the Western Victoria Transmission Network Project proposal is causing to our farming and wider communities."*

GENDER IMPACT ASSESSMENT

The requirements and process of an Environmental Effects Statement are prescribed under the *Environmental Effects Act 1978*. A Gender Impact Assessment has not been prepared by the proponent as part of this process.