

**INQUIRY AND ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON WESTERN RENEWABLES LINK ENVIRONMENT
EFFECTS STATEMENT AND DRAFT PLANNING SCHEME AMENDMENT GC209**

HOLDING SUBMISSION ON BEHALF OF HEPBURN SHIRE COUNCIL

1. Hepburn Shire Council (**Council**) has sought and been granted an extension of time by the Panel to 8 September 2025 to file a fulsome submission to the EES. However, at the request of the Panel, Council provides this submission on the closing date of 25 August 2025 to foreshadow its main points. Please note changes to Council's position may arise between this holding submission and Council's fulsome submission to be filed on 8 September 2025.
2. Council is and remains opposed to the Proposal in the overhead form it has been exhibited. A number of concerns that Council has raised over a period of years remain outstanding and unaddressed. Following its resolution in May 2021, Council raised its wide-ranging concerns and this potential solution to the proponent, AEMO, DELWP and 33 state and federal ministers by letter dated 29 July 2021 and has since continued to advocate for these issues to be addressed.
3. Council's key concerns with the Proposal have been and continue to include the following:
 - 3.1. The significant likely impacts of the Proposal on tourism within Hepburn Shire and the broader region, and the potential undermining of the UNESCO Victorian Goldfields World Heritage Bid, which has been the result of 35 years of advocacy and the work of 15 councils in conjunction with the Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation, the Victorian Goldfields Tourism Executive and Heritage Victoria. If successful, the World Heritage Bid will not only protect the heritage fabric and tourist attraction of the Victorian Goldfields, but is anticipated to add \$25m in visitation to the Goldfields each year;
 - 3.2. The increased risk of bush or wildfire caused by the Proposal, and the impact of the proposed towers on the capacity and safety of the Country Fire Authority and Fire Rescue Victoria personnel to fight bush and wildfires where they do arise. This impact extends not only to the potential for tower failure and collapse in extreme bushfire conditions, but to the risk of smoke caused arcing during fire events and the 'no go' zones required around the towers at all times to ensure the safety of firefighters restricting access and preventing the use of aerial firefighting strategies;
 - 3.3. Visual impact on the amenity of residents and visitors to the shire and impact on significant heritage and cultural landscapes;
 - 3.4. The impact on prime agricultural land within the Shire, which forms part of the Central Highlands food bowl, an area of great importance to the Victoria, both economically and in terms of food security. All land within the Shire has been identified as Class 1 – the highest level of productive land in an Agricultural Land Capability Assessment also produced by Agricultural Victoria (October 2018). The Proposal threatens to cause significant impacts on the productivity of large areas of prime agricultural land through the imposition of easements taking prime agricultural land out of production, as well as by restricting agricultural activities such as irrigation and tractor use on the remaining land around the Proposed infrastructure;
 - 3.5. Impacts on biodiversity and habitat, including potential aerial strike impacts on brolga, wedge-tailed eagles and black swans and the fragmentation of core habitat connectivity;
 - 3.6. Land use planning, including the need to minimise the potential for land use conflicts and reconcile the protection of agricultural land uses in the Shire with the installation of the proposed infrastructure;

- 3.7. Social impacts. Council highlights the strong opposition to the Proposal within the local community and the repeated request for undergrounding to be appropriately explored. Council notes this opposition will likely cause delivery delays and additional costs due to issues securing land access and social licence. Over the course of the life of the Proposal so far, Council has seen a rising angst and deep feeling within the community in relation to the Proposal's local impacts and in relation to a lack of genuine consultation;
- 3.8. The imperative for the transmission infrastructure to be underground, rather than overhead, to mitigate the Proposal's adverse impacts, and among other things to:
- a. improve the reliability and resilience of the infrastructure against bush fires or severe weather events;
 - b. remove the risk of bushfire ignition and restrictions on access for emergency services and aerial firefighting;
 - c. significantly reduce impact to flora and fauna by aligning the cabling along roadways;
 - d. remove all visual impact from the transmission line, and consequential impacts on tourism and amenity of residents; and
 - e. effectively eliminate potential land use conflicts once construction is completed.
- 3.9. Concerns in relation to the substance and form of the draft planning scheme amendment, including that the proposed Specific Controls Overlay Schedule 8 exceeds the area required for the project, imposing unnecessary referral requirements to Ausnet and the referral of all planning permit applications in the area to the Minister for Planning for determination.
4. Hepburn Shire Council is deeply proactive on climate issues and supportive of renewable energy, having made a commitment through the Z-Net pilot in partnership with the community and business to pursue 100% renewable energy targets. Since commencing the Z-Net pilot with the Hepburn Wind project, which provides the local community with energy, Council has expanded its footprint for innovation in stationary energy, transportation, agriculture, waste and wastewater and land use change space.
5. Notwithstanding its deep commitment to renewable energy, Council considers the Proposal does not deliver a quality renewable project in its proposed overhead form and in fact is likely to cause greater detriment to our community (and the wider Victorian community) than benefit.
6. Hepburn Shire is one of the significantly impacted municipalities arising from the Proposal, with both planned transmission lines of 220kv and 500kv being proposed within its area, impacting some of the highest value and most productive agricultural land in Australia.
7. Council considers that, if it is to be considered at all, the Proposal must be delivered using underground cabling technology. By taking the transmission lines underground, the Proposal will minimise its wide-ranging negative impacts and maximise its capacity, reliability and resistance to technical faults, natural disasters and inclement weather.

CONCLUSION

8. Council will provide a fulsome submission outlining its position and reasoning on 8 September 2025.

25 August 2025

HARWOOD ANDREWS

on behalf of
Hepburn Shire Council