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5 April 2023

Australian Energy Market Operator Victoria Planning (AVP)  
Sent via email: [VNIWestRITT@aemo.com.au](mailto:VNIWestRITT@aemo.com.au)

Dear Sir / Madam,

**RE: VNI WEST CONSULTATION REPORT – OPTIONS ASSESSMENT SUBMISSION BY PYRENEES SHIRE COUNCIL**

Pyrenees Shire Council provides this submission in response to the Options Assessment Report February 2023.

Council acknowledges the challenges at a state and national level to meet emissions targets and to provide reliable and affordable power for all Australians. Transmission is a necessary element of this to transmit power from where it is generated in renewal energy zones to where it is consumed.

This assessment considers several options for a Victoria – New South Wales interconnector connecting to the proposed Western Renewals Link (WRL) transmission line in Victoria.

The proposed route for the WRL from Sydenham to Bulgana includes a new above ground transmission line through the centre of Pyrenees Shire.

The options assessment undertook an updated benefit cost assessment and considered environmental, social and engineering matters resulting in a reconsidered preferred option (option 5) involving a connecting terminal station at Bulgana and upgraded WRL from 200kv to 500kv for the section north of Ballarat to Bulgana.

Communication

Council acknowledges and appreciates this assessment is an additional step in the process following the Project Assessment Draft Report (PADR) provided as part of the Regulatory Investment Test for Transmission (RIT-T).

Council did not make a submission to the PADR in July 2022, primarily because that report proposed a terminal station at north Ballarat and was not seen to be impacting on communities in the Pyrenees Shire.

The Options Assessment however is considered to have a significant impact due to the proposed terminal station being moved further west.



During the preparation and exhibition of the PADR there was minimal consultation with Pyrenees Shire Council and our communities by AEMO.

In December 2022 however, it was brought to Council's attention through social media that further options were being considered, including a terminal station in the Waubra / Lexton area. Council immediately expressed concern and sought an urgent briefing from AEMO. This lack of early engagement / consultation was considered unacceptable by Council.

In December AEMO representatives provided a briefing for Councillors and gave a presentation to our open Council Meeting on 13 December 2022 which was received and livestreamed for our residents to see and to hear from AEMO directly.

While this presentation provided context which was well received, it also raised a number of concerns as further outlined in this report.

In the subsequent weeks and months, Council has had numerous contacts with residents expressing concerns including about the level of consultation with affected landowners and communities.

In many instances, Council has been left with the task of providing information and connecting with our residents to ensure they are appropriately informed. During the period December – April our rural and farming communities have been struggling to recover from the impacts of the October / November flood events, including reinstating fences and clean up, in addition to their seasonal challenges of harvesting which has been made more complex due to the unusual wet ground conditions.

These landowners are not necessarily in a position to properly understand or respond to the potential impacts of the Options Assessment Proposals.

Prior to and during the exhibition of the Options Report, the AEMO team provided briefings for Council and sought input from Council regarding communication and engagement with communities. Information sessions were held at Beaufort, Avoca and Waubra, information was shared across print media circulating in the shire and webinars were also provided across various media. While Council acknowledges the increased efforts by AEMO to engage and communicate with our communities, many individuals continue to ask questions.

Council considers there is a need for more messaging ongoing. At the highest level, more work would be done to describe the broader objectives of transmission and the steps needed to achieve emissions targets and reliable power supply at a national and state level.

Fact sheets that communicate in clear concise terms on aspects of the project that are of most interest to those who need to know, assist our communities to better understand. The Fast Facts titled 'Farming and electricity transmission' is a good example but provided late in the consultation period.

### Option 5 - Bulgana

Council provides cautious in principal support for this option. Council's caution is due to the assessment information being relatively high level.

Council also appreciates that this route from Dinawan to Bulgana via a new terminal station near Kerang will impact communities beyond the Pyrenees Shire.

This option is preferred to option 3 or 3A which included a terminal station at Waubra / Lexton. This would be an unacceptable option for Pyrenees due to the impacts of the terminal station and additional transmission through highly productive agricultural land.

Option 5 includes increasing the capacity of WRL to 500kv. This has the effect of higher towers and wider easements that was previously proposed for WRL, creating further impacts on landowners. The specific details of these impacts are to be properly assessed through the WRL Environments Effects Statement (EES) being prepared by Ausnet, and Council will have further comment on those once the EES is placed on exhibition. However, those key impacts are raised in broad terms below.

### Visual Impact of Overhead Powerlines

The central and northern part of the Pyrenees Shire contains much valued landscapes with natural beauty and cultural significance. The Pyrenees Planning Scheme comprises large parts of land with environmental significant overlays among the Pyrenees ranges which provide the upper catchment of the Avoca and Wimmera River systems and the Bet Bet Creek in the north and the Mt Emu Creek in the south.

These landscapes are valued by communities and visitors to the Shire.

Tourism, including grape growing and wine production is one of the key propulsive sectors in the Pyrenees with approximately 20 wineries, as well as accommodation and nature-based tourism enterprises present across the Shire. The landscapes of the Pyrenees are an important element of this tourism product.

The impact of overhead powerlines on the tourism economy is not properly understood in this Options Assessment Report and needs further consideration.

That an underground option is not considered as part of the assessment is disappointing.

While the cost associated with underground transmission may be considered prohibitive, the landowners and communities impacted by the visual intrusion of above ground transmission continue to ask the question and make comparisons to investment in underground transmission in other parts of the world.

### Impact on Farming

With the increase to 500kv for WRL this will exacerbate the impacts for farmers. While Ausnet has done a great deal of work to understand the impact through the EES process, Council is likely to have further comment once the EES is placed on exhibition. Landowners continue to express concern about use of large agricultural equipment, irrigators, and crop sprayers in areas where transmission lines are present. Expansion of the easements to 100m wide often bisecting enterprises requires farmers to change farming practices impacting on efficiency and productivity.

### Compensation

While compensation may be out of scope for the Options Assessment report the transmission options proposed will have impacts on landowners that should be compensated.

The announcement by the Victorian government to increase the compensation by \$8,000 per kilometre, per year for affected landowners is a welcome acknowledgement of the impact on landowners.

The compensation landholder guide produced by Ausnet in March 2023 for the WRL is also welcome information.

Whether the level of compensation on offer properly reflects the impact to landholders is still to be tested and Council will look to continue to advocate for proper and adequate compensation.

### Community Benefit

While transmission is necessary, the impacts are felt in rural communities and yet the benefits are shared across the state / country.

Council strongly advocates for the need to compensate impacted communities. The benefits to Pyrenees residents due to the transmission of power are no greater than any other Victorians, yet the impacts are significant. Council argues that revenue is owed back to our affected communities (not just to directly impacted landowners that host towers).

Council urges attention be given to this by the Victorian government and seeks to be engaged in the process.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission and we look forward to further engagement on the matters raised should the project progress to further stages.

Yours faithfully,



Jim Nolan  
Chief Executive Officer