Environment Effects Statement





CHAPTER 30 Conclusion

30 Conclusion

This chapter provides a conclusion for the Environment Effects Statement (EES) completed for the Western Renewables Link Project (the Project), in accordance with the Scoping Requirements issued by the Minister for Planning (DTP, 2023a) (scoping requirements), under the Environment Effects Act 1978.

The purpose of the Environment Effects Statement (EES) is to assess the potential impacts of the proposed Project. Through the EES process, AusNet Transmission Group Pty Ltd (AusNet) has:

- Completed an assessment of the potential environmental, social, and economic impacts of the Project through the preparation of 20 technical reports
- Evaluated the Project's potential impacts, including potential cumulative impacts
- Developed Environmental Performance Requirements (EPRs) to define the environmental outcomes
 as well as other environmental management requirements that must be achieved to avoid, minimise
 or manage these impacts
- Developed an Environmental Management Framework that outlines a transparent governance framework for the implementation of measures to manage environmental effects and comply with EPRs for construction, operation and decommissioning of the Project.

Through this process, AusNet has addressed the EES scoping requirements and demonstrated that the potential Project impacts can be managed through compliance with the EPRs.

For the purpose of the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC Act), the EES will serve as the accredited assessment process under a Bilateral Assessment Agreement between the Commonwealth and Victorian governments.

30.1 Project design

An area of interest for the location of potential Project corridors was defined by the start and end points to be connected. A straight line between these points is the starting point for route selection. Refinements were made to avoid and minimise adverse impacts as much as possible, considering the need to avoid highly constrained areas of regional, state and national importance.

To refine the area of interest into a Proposed Route, ongoing engagement with community members, landholders, and other local key stakeholders commenced in 2020. Engagement activities assisted in gaining an understanding of community values, and to identify environmental, social and heritage constraints. AusNet developed interactive mapping tools, including the Project's Social Pinpoint online mapping tool, to collect data and feedback from the community and other stakeholders about the opportunities and constraints in the area. This highlighted important destinations, sites and features to the community relating to environmental features, historic sites, land and economic uses, and recreational or social sites. Ultimately, the opportunities and constraints identified through this process, along with information from technical reports, fieldwork and ground truthing, formed the criteria for refining the area of interest into a Proposed Route. Additionally, the outcomes of engagement informed several changes to the Proposed Route.

After extensive investigations and engagement, the Proposed Route was selected. The Proposed Route has sought to:

- Avoid sensitive land uses as much as possible, including dwellings, towns and settlements, and land in the Environmental Significance Overlay, Significant Landscape Overlay or Heritage Overlay
- Avoid severing or separating large areas of productive properties
- Avoid parks and reserves, including Wombat State Forest, Werribee Gorge State Park, Lerderderg State Park and the Long Forest Flora and Fauna Reserve, and identified areas of the Critically Endangered Grassy Eucalypt Woodland of the Victorian Volcanic Plain and Endangered Natural Temperate Grassland of the Victorian Volcanic Plain
- Avoid fragmenting large contiguous areas of native vegetation and habitat
- Avoid impacts on Aboriginal Places, historical heritage places and areas of cultural sensitivity
- Co-locate with existing 220kV transmission lines to mitigate impacts, where possible
- Use the natural terrain and existing vegetation to screen the transmission towers from views from houses and public viewing areas, where possible
- Minimise impacts on waterways and associated habitat, and to avoid steep slopes, floodplains, areas with erosion potential, known areas of contamination and geologically significant sites.

30.2 Evaluation against the scoping requirements

The Project was assessed against the evaluation objectives set out in the scoping requirements for the EES. The evaluation objectives provide a framework for an integrated assessment of environmental effects and for evaluating the overall implications of the Project.

The draft scoping requirements were publicly exhibited in November 2020. After considering public submissions, the Minister for Planning issued the scoping requirements in December 2020. The scoping requirements established a framework for the integrated assessment of potential adverse effects, guiding the investigations conducted as part of the EES. On 11 August 2023, a new referral was submitted to reflect changes to the Project which excluded the construction of a new terminal station north of the existing Sydenham Terminal Station. On 22 August 2023, the Minister for Planning determined that an EES was required for the Project due to the potential for a range of significant environmental effects. Following the new EES decision by the Minister for Planning, updated final EES scoping requirements were issued in 2023. This EES has been prepared to address the final scoping requirements issued in 2023. The scoping requirements also note the accreditation of the EES process under the EPBC Act, the bilateral agreement, and the matters of national environmental significance to be assessed.

A summary of the Project's assessment against the evaluation objectives is provided below.

30.2.1 Biodiversity and habitat

Evaluation objective – Avoid, and where avoidance is not possible, minimise potential adverse effects on protected native vegetation and animals (particularly listed threatened species and their habitat and listed ecological communities), as well as address offset requirements consistent with state and Commonwealth policies.

As part of the extensive route selection and refinement process for the Project, a key design parameter has been avoiding large contiguous areas of native vegetation and habitat. The Project is located in Western Victoria where a lot of native vegetation has been removed historically to enable the establishment of agriculture, settlements and other land uses. Avoiding remaining areas of large areas of vegetation prevents the creation of easements fragmenting national parks, state and regional parks, and state forests. Where possible, towers and access tracks have been sited to avoid wetland and riparian areas, patches of native grassland and known nesting trees. Particular locations where further consideration was given to avoiding and minimising impacts to native vegetation, threatened species habitat and Threatened Ecological Communities (TEC), include but were not limited to:

- Locating the Project to avoid Wombat State Forest, Werribee Gorge State Park, Creswick Regional Park, Lerderderg State Park and the Long Forest Nature Conservation Reserve) and identified areas of the critically endangered EPBC Act listed Grassy Eucalypt Woodland of the Victorian Volcanic Plain
- Locating the Project to avoid fragmenting large contiguous areas of native vegetation and habitat, including a number of smaller conservation reserves such as Mt Beckworth Scenic Reserve and Ben More Bushland Reserve
- Identifying a high-quality area of the critically endangered EPBC Act listed Natural Temperate Grassland of the Victorian Volcanic Plain on the Kingston Road Travelling Stock Route and establishing this as a no-go area for all Project activities
- Making changes to the Project around Merrimu to avoid important biodiversity values around Long Forest Flora and Fauna Reserve
- Making changes to the Project around Hayden's Hill, including reducing potential impacts to the Southern Greater Glider and threatened flora species
- Co-locating the Project with an existing 200kV transmission line within the Lexton Bushland Reserve, to reduce fragmentation in the surrounding areas of high-quality bushland
- Locating towers and access tracks to avoid wetland and riparian areas, patches of native grassland and known nesting trees.

The extent of existing native vegetation has been assessed using a combination of desktop assessments and field surveys. The assessment has also used modelling data to map the extent of vegetation, TECs and threatened species habitat where access was not available and surveys have not yet been undertaken. The assessment adopted a highly conservative approach for calculating the level of vegetation, assuming all vegetation within the easement will be directly impacted.

While the Project has been designed to avoid biodiversity and habitat values, impacts to *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988* (FFG Act) and EPBC Act listed species and habitat, including within DEECA wetlands, are unavoidable due to the size of the Project. Vegetation clearance is required to facilitate the construction of the Project, and the ongoing management of this vegetation during operation to meet the requirements under the Australian standard AS/NZS 7000:2016 Overhead Line Design and AusNet's Electricity Safety Management Scheme. Prior to the start of construction, surveys are required to confirm the presence and location of ecological values that have been assumed due to access limitations. The results of the surveys will inform further design refinements to avoid native vegetation and habitat, reduce the area of impact, and inform the establishment of no-go zones, where native vegetation and species habitat will be retained. Measures to prevent unauthorised access to no-go zones will be implemented in accordance with the EPRs, and documented in the Vegetation Management Plan. Species, salvage of hollows, and biosecurity measures to prevent spreading weeds and pathogens, will be documented in the Threatened Fauna Management Plans and the Biosecurity Management Plan, in accordance with the EPRs.

When assessed against the EPBC Act Significant Impact Guidelines 1.1 - Matters of National Environmental Significance criteria, the Project is likely to have a significant residual impact on the Grey Box Grassy Woodlands and Derived Native Grasslands of South-eastern Australia and Natural Temperate Grassland of the Victorian Volcanic Plain. The potential for significant residual impact is likely, given field surveys have confirmed the presence of the TEC in some areas, therefore there is a potential for a reduction in extent, fragmentation and change in species composition associated with vegetation removal and ongoing vegetation management. A significant impact on the White Box-Yellow Box-Blakely's Red Gum Grassy Woodland and Derived Native Grassland is possible, given the presence of the species has been assumed based on available information. Measures to minimise further impacts during construction, such as controls to prevent unauthorised disturbance and identifying no go zones, will be implemented as part of the Vegetation Management Plan.

While threatened flora, threatened fauna, TECs and associated habitat will be impacted, the severity of impacts is unlikely to significantly alter the local or wider landscapes. This is largely due to the existing modification and/or reduction in native vegetation cover in the Project Area, and avoidance measures implemented early in the Project, which have been supported by ongoing refinements to the design of the Project to further reduce impacts to biodiversity values. The removal of two FFG Act listed threatened flora species, Brittle Greenhood and Melbourne Yellow Gum, would result in a high residual impact.

There is the potential for species of birds and bat to collide with the operational transmission line infrastructure. The assessment found the perception abilities of many flying species and the flight behaviours of most species in the area, will result in relatively limited interactions with the transmission line conductors. To manage and minimise impacts, areas of high bird utilisation which pose key risk collision areas will be identified, and measures such as vertical line markings, to minimise the potential for collision risk, will be documented and implemented through a Collision Risk Management Plan, in accordance with the EPRs.

Offsets for Commonwealth and state species and communities will be obtained for areas of impact that cannot be avoided or mitigated. The outcome of all completed surveys will verify the total amount of vegetation removal required and refine final offset requirements in accordance with the Guidelines for the removal, destruction or lopping of native vegetation (DELWP, 2017a). A draft Offset Management Strategy has been prepared in accordance with the EPBC Act Environmental Offsets Policy and Victorian Guidelines for the removal, destruction or lopping of native vegetation to outline how all offsets will be obtained as part of the Project. The offset requirements for the Project will be met in accordance with approval conditions.

Refer to the following EES chapters for further detail - Chapter 8: Biodiversity and habitat, Chapter 27: Matters of National Environmental Significance and Technical Report A: Biodiversity and Habitat Impact Assessment.

30.2.2 Cultural heritage

Evaluation objective – Avoid, or minimise where avoidance is not possible, adverse effects on Aboriginal cultural heritage and historic heritage values.

Through the development of the Proposed Route and preparation of the EES, AusNet has engaged with the Registered Aboriginal Parties, Traditional Owners, First Peoples - State Relations, Heritage Victoria, councils, land holders, stakeholders and other relevant statutory authorities to avoid and minimise potential impacts on Aboriginal cultural heritage and historical heritage values through design, where practicable.

Aboriginal heritage values identified in the assessment comprise of both tangible and intangible values. Intangible values are cultural elements that are not physical, but link the practices, representations, expressions, knowledges and skills to places, landmarks, landscape features or broader landscapes. Generally large scale evidence of tangible values across the study area, such as huts, weirs and traps, has not survived due to high levels of surface and below ground disturbance. However, field investigations identified archaeological materials in the study area, including surface and subsurface artefacts, scarred trees and ring trees, earth features, quarries and stone features. Predictive modelling also indicates Aboriginal Places are likely to be found on rises, hill slopes and crests, ridgelines and terraces or on elevated landforms within 200m of water sources. Historical heritage in the study area comprises of tangible evidence and places associated with Australia's history since the arrival of European settlers, including the parts of the Victorian goldfields, which as of 2025 was added to Australia's Tentative World Heritage List. The Project Area contains a range of historical heritage places including archaeological sites (e.g., former gold mines and diggings) and buildings and structures (e.g., historical homesteads and precincts, churches, residences, mills, bridges and dry-stone walls).

An Aboriginal cultural heritage and a historical heritage assessment were completed to understand the potential impacts of the Project on both Aboriginal cultural heritage and historical heritage values during construction and operation, and identify measures to avoid and minimise potential impacts. The assessments were informed by desktop assessments and field surveys. Where the Project design cannot avoid known heritage values, there is the potential for impacts from physical disturbance during construction. Impacts to these values will be managed through the implementation of measures including exclusion zones, surface and sub-surface salvage and other measures specific for each value, in accordance with the EPRs.

For Aboriginal cultural heritage, nine Cultural Heritage Management Plans (CHMPS) are being prepared concurrently with this EES that correspond to Registered Aboriginal Party boundaries and/or construction stages for the Project. The CHMPs will include general and specific management conditions to mitigate or minimise harm to known Aboriginal Places and unexpected finds discovered during construction. Consultation will occur with each RAP or TO group to manage and protect broad and specific intangible cultural heritage values as identified through the Cultural Value Assessments (CVA).

During operation, the Project will be visible from areas with both intangible Aboriginal cultural heritage values (cultural landscapes), identified during the CVA process, and historical heritage sites. The CHMPs will address the recommendations identified during the CVA process, including process measures to minimise the visual impacts of the Project on intangible cultural heritage values, including the Pyrenees Ranges landscape, Hepburn Lagoon and Werribee River. Additionally, the Project will not detrimentally impact the understanding of the relationship between these heritage places and their historic settings, resulting in a residual impact of low to nil for historical heritage sites. Where possible, design refinements, landscaping and screening with vegetation will be considered to reduce the visual impacts of the Project.

For historical heritage, AusNet will apply for consents for Victorian Heritage Inventory sites and permits for Victorian Heritage Register places, where direct impacts are proposed. The consents may require the development of an Archaeological Management Plan to document measures to minimise impacts to existing historical heritage values, including excavation method, reporting and artefact management. The CEMP will include requirements for managing unexpected finds protocol and requirements for historical heritage and awareness training for relevant construction workforce personnel.

Refer to the following EES chapters for further detail - Chapter 9: Aboriginal cultural heritage, Chapter 10: Historical heritage, Technical Report B: Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Impact Assessment, and Technical Report C: Historical Heritage Impact Assessment.

30.2.3 Landscape and visual

Evaluation objective – Avoid, or minimise where avoidance is not possible, and manage potential adverse effects on landscape and visual amenity.

The Project spans landscapes of varied character and visual conditions including highly modified landscapes with a low sensitivity to change. It also crosses landscapes valued for their natural features, cultural values, amenity, biodiversity and recreational uses, with a high sensitivity to change. The Project has been iteratively designed to reduce landscape and visual impacts on landscapes and landforms that hold significant value for communities, residents, and landholders by:

- Avoiding areas within the Public Conservation and Resource Zone which includes significant landscapes such as national and state parks, scenic reserves, flora and fauna reserves and bushland areas
- Limiting and avoiding direct impacts to areas that are identified by a Significant Landscape Overlay and areas under Environmental Significance Overlays that mention views and amenity as one of the objectives in the statement of significance
- Avoiding direct impacts on historic landscape features and areas within the various Heritage Overlays in the Project Area.

Construction works for the transmission line infrastructure will progressively move along the Proposed Route. These changes in visual amenity from these activities will be short-term in duration. The primary visual impacts for the Project are associated with the construction activities at the laydown areas and workforce accommodation facilities. Existing vegetation screening will minimise the potential visual impact for most dwellings and public viewpoints near these locations. However, works will be visible from two dwellings south of the laydown area at the new 500kV terminal station near Bulgana. Following the completion of construction works, temporary infrastructure will be removed, and the sites will be rehabilitated and returned to their prior use, where practicable. Contingent on eligible land title holder approval, landscape screening would assist to partially screen or filter views.

During operation, the Project may be visible from residential dwellings and significant landscapes valued for their environmental values, vegetation, landforms, open spaces and cultural significance, including recreational viewing locations. For many, the Project will predominantly be a glimpse or a brief experience as they drive around the local road network, or a longer view from a recreational area such as an elevated lookout or picnic areas. Landscape screening will reduce impacts at some locations, including Merrimu Reservoir. However, for some viewpoints, such as Bolwarrah Weir, the proximity and prominence of the Project in views from publicly accessible areas may render potential measures, such as landscape screening ineffective. The EPRs require landscape screening measures to be offered to, and be developed in consultation with, relevant public domain land managers or landholders, and eligible private domain land title holders, to reduce the visual impact of the Project to the extent reasonably practicable.

From most dwellings in townships and urban areas, views toward the Project will be screened by fencing and vegetation in neighbouring allotments or roadside vegetation. Residual impacts on neighbouring dwellings during operation are considered high where landscape screening does not effectively mitigate views from private living areas. The areas of high visual impacts include neighbouring dwellings in farming areas that are immediately adjacent to the Project, and dwellings in the elevated areas in Darley generally to the west of Links Road. There are 27 dwellings on the northern side of Pamela Court and Augusta Place and three at the northern end of St Andrews Way. Of these dwellings, three were accessed and directly assessed. Each dwelling assessed in this area has been established to take in views across the Lerderderg River, cleared farming land and the Lerderderg State Park.

Typically, the established dwellings in farming areas are set amongst existing vegetation that provide protection against winds. This vegetation will also assist in screening or filtering views in the Project's direction. Landscape screening will be offered to eligible land title holders with dwellings located within 2km of the Proposed Route with towers that are visible from habitable rooms within the dwelling or attached areas of private open space within curtilage of the dwelling. EPRs require the design and siting of landscape screening to be undertaken voluntarily and in concert with the relevant eligible land title holder.

Refer to the following EES chapters for further detail - Chapter 11: Landscape and visual and Technical Report D: Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment.

30.2.4 Land use and socioeconomic

Evaluation objective – Avoid, or minimise where avoidance is not possible, adverse effects on land use, social fabric of the community, businesses including farming and tourism, local and state infrastructure, aviation safety and to affected and neighbouring landholders during construction and operation of the project.

The Project traverses a combination of agriculture, residential, industry and natural environment areas (conservation and open space), containing a range of economic and social conditions. Changes to land use from the Project will be both temporary, occurring during construction, and long-term, occurring over the course of operation. These changes may affect the social fabric of the community, businesses, local and state infrastructure, aviation safety and directly affected and neighbouring landholders during construction and operation of the Project.

The development of the Project has sought to avoid severing or separating large areas of productive properties, however construction activities for the Project will result in temporary changes or disruptions to existing land uses due to the occupation of land, which will impact on use and access. Impacts to land use will be generally confined to the land used for construction and the easement, however impacts may occur for Project components outside the easement, such as workforce accommodation facilities. A Property Access and Management Plan will be developed to outline measures to minimise impacts to property and farm access for all affected properties, as required by the EPRs. An Agriculture and Forestry Business Mitigation and Support Strategy will also be prepared and implemented as required by EPRs, that will identify practical mitigations to minimise production and financial impacts. Land title holders will be financially compensated for loss or redundancy of productive land and foregone income, disruptions that result in expense or time impositions, and the removal of or detrimental alterations to farm infrastructure.

During construction, the presence of a peak workforce of approximately 700 personnel has the potential to lead to impacts to housing, community facilities and services, and social cohesion. To avoid and minimise these potential impacts, the Project will provide two workforce accommodation facilities. Accommodation facilities are proposed in the western (Lexton) and eastern (Ballan) portions of the Project. Each facility will have capacity for up to 350 personnel and will include individual accommodation units, a communal kitchen and meals area. An Operational Management Plan for workforce accommodation facilities will be developed in consultation with local councils, and document specific requirements for the management of the Project workforce and the facilities themselves. AusNet's expectations of staff when interacting with members of the local community will be set out in the Code of Conduct for the Project workforce, to further reduce any potential for adverse effects on the social fabric of the community.

The aviation assessment considered the potential impacts of the Project on aerodromes, air navigation, and air traffic management services. The presence of the transmission line infrastructure, particularly the transmission towers up to 80m in height, may require pilots to make minor adjustments to planned routes. These adjustments will be required to maintain clearance from Project infrastructure, however, the presence of this infrastructure would not prevent these activities from occurring. The EPRs require Airservices Australia to be notified of the relevant aspects of the Project that may pose a hazard to aircraft operations, which will inform minor adjustments to planned routes.

The construction and operation of the Project will contribute both directly and indirectly to new employment opportunities, and increased investment and consumption for both the region and wider Victoria. In accordance with the EPRs, initiatives will be developed and implemented for the Project to prioritise to the extent practicable the procurement of goods and services from local providers. During construction and operation of the Project, there is the potential for changes in amenity to result in a negative economic impact for the 'accommodation and food services' and 'arts and recreation services' industries within 2km of the Project. These impacts are expected to be highly localised and will depend on each business' specific characteristics, including viewpoints impacted, proximity to the Project and operating hours. A Business Mitigation and Support Strategy for directly affected businesses, and a Business Mitigation and Support Strategy for eligible businesses within 2km, will be implemented to avoid and minimise impacts on businesses that could be directly affected by the Project. The strategies will address impacts that could occur as a result of the transmission line easement being placed on land

associated with the business, and for businesses within 2km of the Project that rely on the existing character of the natural landscape to attract customers. These strategies will include, but are not limited to, measures to avoid and minimise air quality, noise and vibration and traffic impacts on business operations, maintain access for business operations, avoid impacts on business assets or reconfigure, relocate, re-orientate or re-establish assets in an agreed location, and provide early and ongoing information and notification about proposed works in proximity to the business.

Refer to the following EES chapter for further detail - Chapter 12: Land use and planning, Chapter 14: Economic, Chapter 15: Agriculture and forestry, Chapter 16: Aviation, Chapter 21: Social, Technical Report E: Land Use and Planning Impact Assessment, Technical Report F: Social Impact Assessment, Technical Report G: Economic Impact Assessment, Technical Report H: Agriculture and Forestry Impact Assessment, and Technical Report J: Aviation Impact Assessment.

30.2.5 Community amenity, safety, roads and transport

Evaluation objective – Avoid, or minimise where avoidance is not possible, adverse effects for community amenity, health and safety, with regard to construction noise, vibration, dust, lighting, waste, greenhouse gas emissions, transport network, operational noise, fire risk management and electromagnetic radiation.

The construction of the Project will result in short-term changes in amenity as works progressively move along the Proposed Route. The noise and air quality assessments found that changes to amenity due to noise and dust generated by construction works will pose a minor nuisance, and impacts will be managed through the implementation of measures to comply with EPRs. Measures include, but are not limited to, watering, sealing and / or revegetating exposed and disturbed areas, modifying the intensity of activities based on observed dust levels and weather conditions, stockpile management and sensitive receptor setback requirements.

During operation, social impacts may arise as the Project will be visible from residual dwellings, local roads, the periphery of settlements and some community facilities and open spaces. This may detract from local residents' enjoyment of a valued rural lifestyle, the area's landscape qualities, particular recreational facilities, and from their sense of place. In some instances, changes to the scenic quality of these locations may be substantial and may not be readily accepted. The Project may challenge a shared sense of identity among landholders and may result in some changes to the composition, capacity and cohesiveness of the community, as individual landholders adjust to altered conditions. Consultation with affected landholders will inform measures to manage visual impacts in the public and private domain, and reduce amenity impacts where possible.

The transportation of materials, equipment, and the workforce to the region for the Project will generate additional traffic on the road network. Roads may experience a potential increase in peak hour traffic; however, this increase will not impact traffic performance, will not cause major congestion or road degradation, and interactions between Project traffic and vulnerable users will be minimised to reduce any impacts to road safety. Traffic Management Plans will document alternative routes and heavy vehicle restrictions, where practicable, to further minimise the potential for impact. These plans will require safety audits to monitor compliance with relevant road and transport authority requirements.

Waste generated during construction will be disposed of subject to the classification of waste material in accordance with EPA Victoria Publications 1827 and 1828. All wastes generated during construction of the Project would be transported, managed and disposed of in accordance with the relevant EPA Victoria requirements.

The design process has aimed to maximise cancellation of magnetic fields and minimise public exposure to magnetic fields at ground level through route selection and terminal station site selection, and selection of design heights above minimum statutory requirements. Project design will be informed by the outcome of a Project-wide EMI and EMF verification assessment at the detailed design stage for all the proposed infrastructure, identifying existing sensitive receptors and committed future developments within the study area. With the implementation of standard controls into the design of the Project, the Project is not expected to impact human and animal health. There is the potential for operational infrastructure to interfere with DGPS correction signals for land navigation directly under the transmission line in heavy rain conditions. However, the potential impacts are short-lived and the DGPS will correct itself once the equipment clears the area transmission line.

Most of the surrounding landscape for the Project has been designated by the Victorian Government as bushfire prone, which is subject to frequent smaller fires and infrequent large fires. In accordance with the EPRs and draft Incorporated Document, fire safety and emergency management measures will be put in place to minimise the opportunities for fire ignition and bushfire escape. Prior to construction, the Principal Contractor will develop a Construction Bushfire Management Plan to implement controls for the storage of flammable liquids to avoid an ignition source, on-site fire fighting response capability and vegetation stockpile management to prevent on-site accumulation of bushfire fuels. Additionally, a Construction Emergency Management Plan will be developed and implemented prior to construction, including requirements for daily readiness and preparation for bushfires.

As the Project's operator, AusNet will comply with the *Electrical Safety Act 1998* (Vic) and its regulations, including the requirement for Bushfire Mitigation and Vegetation Management plans. The Bushfire Mitigation Plan will document how AusNet will manage bushfire risks across its entire transmission network. The Vegetation Management Plan will document measures required to maintain prescribed clearance spaces and compliance with the Electricity Safety (Electric Line Clearance) Regulations 2020. These measures will be supplemented by fire detection and suppression activities by emergency services. The clearance and maintenance of the transmission line easement may provide a control line to further assist planned burning and bushfire fuel management across some parts of the Project.

The assessment also considered the potential of the Project's infrastructure to impact fire suppression activities, and priority bushfire access and egress routes. The Proposed Route intersects strategic fire control lines and fuel breaks identified in local government Municipal Fire Management Plans. To minimise the potential for obstruction, design criteria have been applied to place transmission towers outside of public road reserves, greatly reducing the chance of accidental contact by vehicles, and towers are typically located at sufficient distances from fire access routes and fire control lines. Although CFA crews may safely drive below transmission lines, electrical safety procedures do not permit CFA crews to work within the transmission line easement, as such it may be necessary for CFA to develop specific fire response tactics to address potential disruptions in these areas. AusNet will coordinate with Councils and the relevant fire authority to develop conditions under which municipal fire danger period and periods of elevated fire weather. With implementation of the planned design, construction and operational measures, bushfire risk in many parts of the landscape surrounding the Project will remain high but will not be materially increased by the Project.

Lighting at works sites will be minimal as construction works will be conducted during normal working hours, where practicable. Where required, construction lighting will be short-term and temporary. The EPRs require the implementation of measures to minimise lighting impacts, such as the use of targeted directional lighting and placing lighting hardware to minimise light spill. During operation, lighting at the terminal stations will be limited to operational and safety lighting, which is activated during an emergency or routine maintenance.

By facilitating connection to the western Victorian Renewable Energy Zone, the Project will contribute to both Commonwealth and state net-zero emission targets. Construction activities for the Project will generate greenhouse gas emissions. During the construction, the Project is estimated to generate 464 kilotonnes CO2e, or 55 kilotonnes of CO2e in Scope 1 and 2 emissions, annually. As requirement of the *National Greenhouse and Energy Reporting Act 2007* (NGER Act) and documented in the CEMP, AusNet will monitor, and report greenhouse gas emissions produced during the construction stage of the Project.

Refer to the following EES chapters for further detail - Chapter 6: Project description, Chapter 11: Landscape and visual, Chapter 13: Bushfire, Chapter 17: EMI and EMF, Chapter 18: Air quality, Chapter 19: Noise and vibration, Chapter 20: Transport, Chapter 26: Greenhouse gas, Chapter 28: Climate change, Technical Report D: Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment, Technical Report I: Air Quality Impact Assessment, Technical Report K: Bushfire Impact Assessment, Technical Report L: EMI and EMF Impact Assessment, Technical Report M: Greenhouse Gas Impact Assessment, Technical Report N: Climate Change Impact Assessment, Technical Report O: Noise and Vibration Impact Assessment, and Technical Report P: Transport Impact Assessment.

30.2.6 Catchment values and hydrology

Evaluation objective – Maintain the functions and values of aquatic environments, surface water and groundwater quality and stream flows and prevent adverse effects on protected beneficial uses.

The Project crosses several waterways and water bodies across the Wimmera, North Central, Glenelg Hopkins, Corangamite and Melbourne Water Catchment Management Authority regions. Project infrastructure has been sited to avoid wetlands and waterways, and avoid the diversion or blockage of flows, where practicable.

To manage potential impacts on surface water flow, minimum recommended setback distances of towers, terminal stations and access tracks from waterways, are required by the EPRs, where practicable. Additionally, measures to maintain existing flow paths, and minimise impacts to water quality associated with erosion and sedimentation, stormwater runoff, and contamination entering the surface water system, will be documented in the Surface Water Management Plan (SWMP). To manage potential flood risks during construction and operation, the Project's detailed design stage will include a flood assessment, to avoid flood impacts on adjacent landholders, waterways or floodplain function. Flooding response and measures to manage flood impacts will also be included in the Project's Emergency Response Plan.

There is the potential for the Project to intersect groundwater at several transmission tower locations. Whilst dewatering is not proposed for the preferred construction method for the tower (bore piled foundations), pre-construction geotechnical investigations will inform the appropriate tower foundation type for each site, and the depth and dimensions of all below ground works. If dewatering is required, they are expected to be localised in nature and short duration. Planned protocols will be followed to adequately minimise and manage impacts on groundwater levels, flow and recharge during construction, and groundwater levels are expected to return to current levels. The removal of patches of vegetation in three areas along the Proposed Route may result in an increase in groundwater levels, however, only temporary changes to water levels are expected.

To minimise the potential for physical disturbance to groundwater bores or Groundwater Dependent Ecosystems (GDEs), buffer distances between construction works and these receptors are required by the EPRs. Where buffers cannot be achieved, site-specific assessments are required to be undertaken and monitoring and mitigation strategies will be implemented where impacts are identified.

Standard controls will be applied to manage potential groundwater contamination, including for herbicide application, liquid storage and handling, and on-site wastewater storages will minimise the volume of a leak or spill to occur. These will be documented and implemented through the Groundwater Management Plan.

Refer to the following EES chapters for further detail - Chapter 22: Geology and soils, Chapter 23: Contaminated land, Chapter 24: Groundwater, Chapter 25: Surface water, Technical Report Q: Geology and Soils Impact Assessment, Technical Report R: Contaminated Land Impact Assessment, Technical Report S: Groundwater Impact Assessment, and Technical Report T: Surface Water Impact Assessment.

30.3 Principles of ecologically sustainable development

The Commonwealth Minister for the Environment and Water will consider if the Project should be approved under the EPBC Act. Under section 136 of the EPBC Act, the Minister is required to consider the principles of ecologically sustainable development (ESD) when deciding whether or not to approve the Project. This section outlines how the Project addresses the principles of ESD and provides a net community benefit.

Section 3A of the EPBC Act defines principles of ESD. Table 30.1 outlines how the EES has considered long-term and short-term economic, environmental, social and equitable considerations, including the principle of inter-generational equity and the conservation of biological diversity and ecological integrity.

Table 30.1 Principles of ecologically sustainable development

Principle	Project approach	Relevant section of the EES
a) Decision-making processes should effectively integrate both long-term and short-term economic, environmental, social and equitable considerations (the 'integration principle').	The development of the Project has considered the potential social, economic and environmental impacts during construction, operation and decommissioning. To inform the design of the Project and the development of the Proposed Route, Australian Energy Market Operator (AEMO) and AusNet have sought early and ongoing input from the community, landholders, Traditional Owners, local councils, non-government organisations, government entities and industry. Engagement with stakeholders and Traditional Owners has shaped project development activities including design modifications such as single circuit towers near Melton aerodrome, avoidance of parks and nature reserves. Landholder, community and stakeholder feedback, combined with the findings of technical reports, field surveys and investigations, have informed potential alternatives to the Project and the selection of the Project's Proposed Route since 2020. Corridor and route selection involved the progressive refinement of feasible alternatives within the area of interest considering the environmental, social, cultural, land use and planning constraints, including:	Chapter 2: Project rationale
		Chapter 5: Project development
		Chapter 7: Stakeholder and community engagement
	Aboriginal heritage Aviation	Chapter 14: Economic Attachment I: Project development and assessment of alternatives
	 Bushtire Community and stakeholder Flora and fauna (including parks and reserves) Historical heritage Landscape and visual Land use planning Urban and built-up areas. Following this constraints analysis, the design of the Project has: Excluded urban and built-up areas, such as Creswick, Newlyn, Ballan, Bacchus Marsh and Melton Excluded large areas of forested public land that have high environmental and cultural heritage values, such as the Brisbane Ranges National Park Included areas where a new transmission line could be located alongside existing electricity infrastructure, such as the Bulgana to Waubra line and the Ballarat to Horsham line. 	
	A quantitative economy-wide analysis, and a qualitative assessment of industry-level business impacts was completed to understand the potential short-term and long-term economic effects of the Project. The Project will provide major economic investment in western Victoria, creating additional jobs and driving higher levels of economic activity during and after construction. Local goods and services are expected to be used throughout the Project's construction, including but not limited to materials suppliers, fuel suppliers and cafes and restaurants. AusNet will work with businesses in western Victoria to maximise local participation in the Project, including working with First Nations communities and organisations to seek input from, and secure benefits for, First Nations Peoples throughout the Project's construction and operation. The Project will also support the development of future energy resources in western Victoria, creating additional economic investment and opportunities in the region. New benefits may also result from renewable energy developments in other ways. For example, landholders may experience increased income when they have wind turbines installed on their land,	

which could serve to stabilise farm revenues.

Principle	Project approach	Relevant section of the EES
b) If there are threats of serious or irreversible environmental damage, lack of full scientific certainty should not be used as a reason for postponing measures to prevent environmental degradation (the 'precautionary principle').	Environmental assessments have been conducted across the Project Area, targeting locations where there is limited existing knowledge or uncertainty about values. Technical reports have adopted conservative assumptions and a precautionary approach by assuming the presence of species where information gaps or uncertainties exist. This conservative approach has been used in the assessment of impacts. Experienced technical specialists were engaged to undertake these assessments and to draw on their experience. The findings of the technical reports have been used to develop EPRs for the Project. EPRs set out the environmental outcomes to be achieved through the implementation of mitigation measures during construction, operation and decommissioning. EPRs prescribe the environmental outcomes that must be achieved during each Project stage, rather than providing prescriptive measures that must be employed. Where necessary, some EPRs include more specific measures that must be implemented. This approach encourages innovation as it allows for flexibility in how outcomes are achieved, regardless of the final design of the Project. The Principal Contractor and Ausnet can determine the best way to achieve EPRs and manage impacts, which allows for freedom to optimise design solutions and construction methods. Compliance with the EPRs will be required as a condition of the Project's approval. The EPRs include requirements for ongoing community, stakeholder, and landholder engagement across all Project stages. Where relevant, the EPRs require the development and implementation of management plans for the further avoidance or mitigation of potential impacts. The final design and construction methods adopted during the Project's delivery must comply with the EPRs. The EPRs will be included within the Environmental Management Framework, which will be approved by the Minister for Planning together with the proposed draft Planning Scheme Amendment and Incorporated Document. The Environmental Management Framework also outlines the	Chapter 4: EES assessment framework and approach Chapter 8: Biodiversity and habitat Chapter 11: Landscape and visual Chapter 13: Bushfire Chapter 29: Environmental Management Framework
c) The principle of inter- generational equity – that the present generation should ensure that the health, diversity and productivity of the environment is maintained or enhanced for the benefit of future generations (the 'intergenerational principle').	By providing a new transmission line servicing the Western Victoria Renewable Energy Zone (REZ), the Project aims to support the transition towards increased renewable energy generation in the state. The Project will provide additional transmission capacity to increase access to existing renewable energy generation, and for the development of additional new renewable energy generation projects in the Western Victoria REZ. The construction of additional transmission lines as proposed by the Project has the potential to address constraints currently facing the transmission network, reduce the rate of curtailment and maintain network reliability and security. There are significant inter-generational benefits associated with Victoria moving to a more diverse energy supply mix and meeting its target of net-zero emissions by 2045. The benefits for Victorians of decarbonisation include new jobs, energy bill savings, improved health and environmental benefits (Victorian Government, 2023). The implementation of measures to comply with EPRs during design, construction, operation and decommissioning of the Project will minimise environmental impacts in the short and long term. Through the protection of environmental values as far as reasonably practicable during all stages of the Project, and the anticipated decarbonisation, social and economic benefits of the Project, the health, diversity and productivity of the environment will be maintained or enhanced for the benefit of future generations.	Chapter 2: Project rationale Chapter 4: EES assessment framework and approach Chapter 21: Social Chapter 26: Greenhouse gas Chapter 28: Climate change

Principle	Project approach	Relevant section of the EES
d) The conservation of biological diversity and ecological integrity should be a fundamental consideration in decision- making (the 'biodiversity principle').	In addition to the principles and objectives of ESD and environmental protection, the evaluation objectives for the Project identify desired outcomes in the context of key biodiversity legislative and statutory policies. The avoidance of native vegetation and significant flora and fauna has been a paramount design parameter for the Project from its inception. In the first instance, the Project sought to avoid large contiguous areas of native vegetation and habitat and prevent the creation of easements fragmenting national, state and regional parks, and state forests. The conservation of biological diversity and ecological integrity has therefore primarily been achieved early in the Project through this avoidance, driving the Project to refine the design and development from a broad area of interest, to a corridor, to a Proposed Route, to avoidance of specific high-value areas, including known locations of EPBC Act listed TECs not within parks and forests. Ongoing options-assessments and micro-siting to the Proposed Route since late-2021 have resulted in the additional avoidance of ecology values, including areas of EPBC Act and FFG Act listed TECs, high density occurrences of threatened flora, and threatened fauna habitat that would be unduly fragmented (e.g., Brush-tailed Phascogale and Southern Greater Glider habitat) or destroyed (e.g., Powerful Owl nesting trees). In addition to changes to the Proposed Route, avoidance of ecological values has also been achieved within the Proposed Route through the modification of infrastructure and access track placements. For example, modification of infrastructure and access track placements. For example, modification of tower and access track placements within FFG Act listed Western (Basalt) Plains Grasslands Community TEC has reduced impact by 47.35ha (i.e., from 54.58ha to 7.23ha, of which 6.33ha is confirmed impact and 0.9ha is potential impact).	Chapter 8: Biodiversity and habitat Chapter 27: Matters of National Environmental Significance EES Technical Report A: Biodiversity and Habitat Impact Assessment
	throughout the Project.	
e) Improved valuation, pricing and incentive mechanisms should be promoted (the 'valuation principle').	The Project is part of a long-term plan to improve power transmission and generation in Victoria and the NEM. It is forecast to create cost savings of approximately \$1.71 billion by deferring or avoiding new generation and maintenance costs. The Project will enhance the use of existing wind generation in Western Victoria and reduce the need for new energy projects a characteristic for the project.	Chapter 2: Project rationale
	 \$1.29 billion in deferred or avoided capital costs and \$418 million in deferred or avoided operation and maintenance costs \$418 million in electricity transmission construction cost savings \$114 million in fuel cost savings \$60 million in savings from unserved energy and demand side participation. The Project will also generate significant economic value, including \$2.2 billion in gross market benefits and increased local economic activity. The Project will support future renewable energy developments and provide economic opportunities for local communities, including First Nations Peoples. The Project is expected to increase the Gross Regional Product by \$0.9 billion and boost government and private consumption by \$1.4 billion and \$3.7 billion, respectively. 	Economic

30.4 Environmental Management Framework

... the proposed environmental management framework (EMF) in the EES should describe a transparent framework with clear accountabilities for managing and monitoring the environmental effects and risks associated with the construction and operational phase.

This Environmental Management Framework is proposed to provide a transparent governance framework for the management of environmental effects of the Project during construction, operation and decommissioning. It is one component of the overall governance framework developed for the delivery of the Project to meet statutory requirements, protect environmental values and provide stakeholder confidence.

Following the assessment of the EES by the Minister for Planning, **EES Chapter 29: Environmental Management Framework** will be updated to address any matters and recommendations made by the Minister for Planning and converted to a standalone 'Environmental Management Framework' document to take forward through to construction, operation and decommissioning of the Project.

The Environmental Management Framework outlines the roles and responsibilities for managing and monitoring the Project's environmental performance. It also sets outs the requirements and accountabilities for implementing measures, including monitoring, reporting and auditing.

EPRs define the environmental outcomes as well as other environmental management requirements that must be achieved during the design, construction, operation and decommissioning stages of the Project. The EPRs intend to avoid and mitigate identified impacts and the risk of harm to human health and the environment so far as reasonably practicable. The EPRs provide opportunities for the Principal Contractor to explore innovative approaches as to how the required standards are achieved. Measures to reduce the potential impacts have been proposed in accordance with the mitigation hierarchy (avoid, minimise, manage, rehabilitate and offset) to inform the development of EPRs. However, alternative mitigation measures could be implemented to comply with the EPRs based on the specific site conditions, available resources, and the Principal Contractor's expertise.

The development of the Environmental Management Framework has been guided by the scoping requirements and relevant legislation, policy and guidelines, and informed by the impact assessments undertaken by the technical specialists. It also reflects advice and input from regulators, provided through the consultation process conducted to prepare the EES.

Compliance with the Environmental Management Framework and EPRs will be verified by an Independent Environmental Auditor (IEA) and enforced through the contractual requirements for the delivery of the Project. It will also be mandated by the terms of the Incorporated Document requiring the Project to be developed in accordance with the Environmental Management Framework and EPRs approved by the Minister for Planning.

AusNet considers that the proposed Environmental Management Framework is a robust framework for ongoing management of the potential impacts of the Project, allowing it to achieve its objectives while minimising the environmental effects.

30.4.1 Obligations under the Electricity Safety Act

The operation of the Project will be subject to stringent regulatory requirements. As the Project's operator, AusNet will be required to comply with Victoria's energy safety legislative framework, including meeting the requirements of the *Electricity Safety Act 1998* (Vic) and subordinate regulations.

Energy Safe Victoria is the statutory body that monitors and enforces compliance with the state's energy safety legislative framework. AusNet must implement processes and procedures as required by Energy Safe Victoria and has an existing operational framework of policies and procedures to meet these obligations. At the core of AusNet's operational framework is the Electrical Safety Management Scheme (ESMS), which was established by AusNet in 2011 and formally accepted by Energy Safe Victoria initially in 2011 and most recently in 2024. The ESMS explains how AusNet protects:

- The public and persons working on or near the network
- Property and network assets
- The community from bushfires ignited by the electricity network
- The community from safety aspects arising from the loss of electricity supply.

AusNet will operate the Project's transmission assets under this ESMS.

30.5 Next steps

The EES will be on public exhibition for 40 business days. During this time, members of the public can view the EES and make written submissions. At the end of this period, the Minister for Planning is expected to appoint an Inquiry and Advisory Committee to evaluate the effects of the Project, having regard to the EES, the draft Planning Scheme Amendment and public submissions.

Following a desktop review of written submissions, the Inquiry will comprise of a formal hearing where the proponent and submitters can speak and present testimony of expert witnesses. A formal hearing is expected to be required due to the level of community interest in the Project and its scale and complexity. The duration of the formal hearing would depend upon the number of public submissions and would be determined by the Inquiry and Advisory Committee. Similar projects have required four to six weeks.

Following receipt of the Inquiry and Advisory Committee's report, the Minister for Planning would prepare an assessment of the environmental effects of the Project that considers the EES documents, public submissions, the proponent's response and the Inquiry report. This assessment is usually provided within 30 days of the Inquiry report being finalised. The Minister's assessment may conclude that the Project:

- Would have acceptable environmental effects, having regard to overall Project outcomes
- Would have unacceptable environmental effects
- Would need major modifications and/or further investigations to establish that acceptable environmental outcomes would be achieved.

If the Minister's assessment on the acceptability of the environmental effects of the Project concludes that the Project's environmental effects will be acceptable, AusNet will then seek to obtain the necessary statutory approvals required for the Project outlined in **EES Chapter 3: Legislative framework and approval requirements.**

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