

JULY TO DECEMBER 2023

# Community Engagement Summary Report



# Introduction

The Western Renewables Link (WRL) is a critical upgrade of Victoria's transmission network. It will support Victoria's transition from coal-generated electricity to sustainable, affordable and reliable renewable energy.

The project is a proposed new 190km 500kV double circuit overhead electricity transmission line from Bulgana in western Victoria to Sydenham in Melbourne's north-west.

The project will connect renewable energy generated in western Victoria to the homes and businesses across the state and into the National Electricity Market.

## Purpose of this report

This report covers the period from July 2023 until December 2023 and includes details of engagement undertaken by the WRL team including community information and pop-up sessions, field day attendance and meetings with landholders. The report also details the various project announcements made during the same period.

The Western Renewables Link team is continuing to consider all feedback and encourages anyone interested or affected to contact the project team on 1300 360 795 or [info@westernrenewableslink.com.au](mailto:info@westernrenewableslink.com.au).



## What happened between July and December 2023?

Engagement between July and December focused on providing landholders and the community with information about changes to the scope of the proposed project and the impact of these changes on the Environment Effects Statement (EES). As a result of proposed changes to the project, in August 2023 AusNet referred the Western Renewables Link project to the Victorian Minister for Planning for a new decision on the assessment requirements under the *Environment Effects Act 1978* (Vic). The Minister accepted the new referral in August 2023 and subsequently issued a new decision requiring an EES for the modified project.

In summary, the key changes to the proposed Western Renewables Link project are:

- The capacity of the 220kV section of the transmission line between Ballarat and Bulgana has increased to 500kV
- The new terminal station north of Ballarat is no longer required
- A new 500kV switchyard and associated equipment near the existing Bulgana Terminal Station is now required
- The urgent Sydenham Terminal Station Rebuild will be completed separately and prior to the Western Renewables Link project
- Changes will be required to the proposed route to the north of Waubra.

In September, the confirmation of the Hepburn Lagoon southern option as the proposed route going forward was communicated to landholders and stakeholders. At this time, landholders along the northern option were notified that they would no longer be on the proposed route. The landholder team worked closely with impacted landholders to ensure they were notified individually ahead of the broader communication.

Community information sessions were held along the proposed route in October at Ararat, Stawell, Waubra, Ballarat, Bacchus Marsh and Melton. The sessions were widely promoted to encourage community members to learn about recent changes and discuss other key issues such as undergrounding, landholder compensation, bushfire risk, and farming around transmission lines.

A community information session at Newlyn was cancelled due to a planned protest and an alternative online session was made available for people in that regional community to discuss any specific issues and concerns about the project, as well as general project and EES updates.

Three 'pop-up' information stands held in regional shopping centres in November were supported by staff with expertise in undergrounding, biodiversity, bushfire, electromagnetic fields, compensation and valuation, visual impact, and project design.

For community members unable to attend an information or pop-up session, webinars on 2 November and 28 November provided project and EES updates and the opportunity for attendees to ask questions of project specialists.

We are continuing to work directly with landholders on changes to the proposed route to the north of Waubra.



## Keeping the community informed

Engagement activities and project updates were communicated through a range of channels including mail, email, phone calls, social media, eUpdates and newsletters, updates to the WRL website, and collateral available at community information sessions.

A range of communications activities and materials were produced to support community engagement. They included postcard letterbox drops within 2km of the route, advertorials, advertising in local and regional newspapers, updated website content, social media and digital advertising, updated project fact sheets, eUpdates to subscribers, and a new project newsletter.

## Key engagement activities between July and December 2023

- New [Landholder compensation and payments fact sheet](#) published
- New [Permitted Vehicle and Equipment Heights information sheet](#) published
- New [CFA firefighting and transmission lines FAQs October 2023](#) published
- [Option for Easement](#) video published
- 13 eUpdates issued focusing on project updates, community information sessions, Environment Effects Statement updates, AusNet flyover inspections and safety signage
- 3 project update newsletters published
- Ongoing meetings with landholders (both in person and virtually)
- MacPherson Park tenants and community information session in July
- Community engagement team attended the 3-day Elmore Field Days in October
- 6 community information sessions at Stawell, Ararat, Waubra, Ballarat, Bacchus Marsh and Melton in October
- 3 pop-up sessions held at Wendouree (Ballarat), Bacchus Marsh and Stawell shopping centres
- 2 community information webinars held in November
- Government and industry meetings continued
- Council Advisory Group meetings continued
- 19th Community Consultation Group meeting in August

## Fast facts for July to December 2023



57 emails to the WRL information inbox



13 phone calls to the project hotline



17,836 visits to the project's website



76 key stakeholder meetings



5 Council Advisory Group meetings



82 meetings held with landholders



356 phone calls and 490 text messages to landholders



937 emails and 101 letters sent to landholders

### Project Statistics to date

900+ Individual meetings with landholders  
 1850+ Phone calls to landholders  
 118,789+ Visits to the project website  
 1000+ Meetings with landholders  
 2000+ Phone calls with landholders  
 6500+ Emails to landholders

## Elmore Field Days

Project staff attended the Elmore Field Days from 3-5 October, 200+ individual interactions. The project booth displayed maps of the updated proposed route and provided project guides and fact sheets. The project team were available throughout the three days to answer any questions and address concerns.

Common discussion themes included:

- General project information
- Undergrounding
- Route selection/alignment
- Farming – particularly impact to land and irrigation systems
- Bushfire risk and mitigation
- Renewable energy
- Nuclear energy
- Cost of project and who pays for it
- Visual impact
- Construction timeline
- Early engagement and communication
- Several queries about the proposed VNI West project

Participation in the Elmore Field Days provided an opportunity to engage with community members who are not directly impacted by the project but were interested in the need for the infrastructure.

## Community information sessions

The project team facilitated 6 drop-in community information sessions. The seventh session, scheduled for Newlyn on 19 October, was cancelled due to a planned protest. Newlyn and surrounding communities were offered the opportunity to book an individual online session with the project team and specialists to discuss their specific issues and concerns, however this opportunity was not taken up.

Community Information Session	Date (1-7pm)	Number of interactions
Ararat	9 October	4
Waubra	11 October	8
Stawell	12 October	11
Ballarat	17 October	8
Bacchus Marsh	25 October	25
Melton	31 October	17



## Pop-up stands

In November 2023, the Western Renewables Link project team ran 3 pop-up stands in shopping centres along the project area in Wendouree (Ballarat), Bacchus Marsh and Stawell. Holding stalls in high foot-traffic areas along the project route allows community members unfamiliar with the project to learn about the project directly from team members.

These pop-up stands were advertised in local newspapers, online and on the Western Renewables Link project website.

## Community information webinars

The project team held two community information webinars on 2 November and 28 November, independently facilitated by a community engagement specialist. 47 community members attended the two webinars to hear project specialists present on and answer questions on a range of topics including project and EES updates, bushfire risk and mitigation, undergrounding, farming around transmission lines, and landholder compensation. Recordings of the webinars have been published on the project's website.

Pop-up stands	Date and time	Number of interactions
<b>Ballarat</b> Wendouree Stockland	16 November 9am-7pm	13
<b>Bacchus Marsh</b> The Village Shopping Centre	23 November, 9am-5.30pm	22
<b>Stawell</b> 108 Main Street	27 November 9am-5pm	7

## Key themes

### What the community wanted to talk about during this period

Community and stakeholder feedback and conversations varied depending on the location, however, there were common themes:

- General project and route updates including 500kV update, the area of interest and project timelines
- Cost benefit analysis of project
- Environment Effects Statement
- Community benefits
- Visual impact of towers and transmission lines
- Bushfire risk and mitigation
- Undergrounding
- Land acquisition and access tracks
- Lack of communication, particularly in the early stages of the project
- Compensation
- Biodiversity and biosecurity
- Health concerns related to electromagnetic fields
- Impact on farming
- Tower size, footprint and clearance heights
- Future renewable energy projects
- Benefits to the community
- VNI West
- Community members were also interested in the use of virtual reality to understand what the project would look like when construction has been completed



## Landholder engagement

### Option for Easement proposals

As of 19 December 2023, Option for Easement proposals have been presented to about 70% of landholders along the route. Our Land Liaison Officers are actively working with landholders to discuss tower and access track locations on their properties, and provide detailed information about the operational impact of towers, transmission lines and access tracks to irrigation, machinery heights and other infrastructure specific to their property.

We encourage landholders to seek their own professional advice on the Option for Easement proposals including legal and valuation advice.

The \$10,000 Landholder Professional Fees payment is available to assist landholders in the process of reviewing and negotiating the Option for Easement and is not dependent on signing the Option for Easement.



Overall sentiment regarding the Option for Easement proposals has been positive. Land Liaison Officers are working closely with landholders to ensure they fully understand the compensation they would receive for the easement on their property.

## Environment Effects Statement

### Opportunities for community involvement

The EES process provides an opportunity for ongoing, transparent community consultation and is documented in the Western Renewables Link EES Consultation Plan.

This plan can be found on the [Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Change \(DEECA\)](#) website and on the project website.

Ongoing community consultation helps us identify issues of concern and potential impacts of the project; it also informs the technical studies for the EES.

We are aiming for the EES to be publicly exhibited in late 2024. During the exhibition period, at least 40 business days, the public can review the EES and provide written submissions on the project to Planning Panels Victoria. An EES and Planning Scheme Amendment Inquiry and Advisory Committee (IAC) Hearing will then be held, where submissions from the community can be heard. Recommendations are then made by the Inquiry to the Minister for Planning. The timing of the directions and panel hearing is determined by Planning Panels Victoria.

Further information about the EES is outlined in the Environmental Assessment and Key Project Approvals fact sheet and available on the project website in the resources section.

## How we use stakeholder feedback to inform project development

The proposed route continues to be refined based on input from landholders, communities and other stakeholders as well as technical investigations. Landholder and community feedback has influenced route design in a number of ways including:

- Investigation of 7 major route alternatives and multiple corridors
- Over 95 transmission line designs
- 4,700+ individual tower moves

## Thank you for your input




The WRL team would like to thank everyone who has participated by attending a face-to-face session, meeting, sent an email or engaged with our project team.

## Stay involved

For further information about the project, please call 1300 360 795 or email [info@westernrenewableslink.com.au](mailto:info@westernrenewableslink.com.au). To register for updates, visit [www.westernrenewableslink.com.au](http://www.westernrenewableslink.com.au)



## Western Renewables Link

 [www.westernrenewableslink.com.au](http://www.westernrenewableslink.com.au)  
 1300 360 795  
 [info@westernrenewableslink.com.au](mailto:info@westernrenewableslink.com.au)

Ballarat PO Box  
PO Box 638, Ballarat VIC 3353

## Information straight to your inbox

Sign up for information straight to your inbox at the project website [www.westernrenewableslink.com.au](http://www.westernrenewableslink.com.au).

## Feedback

You can provide feedback on this document via our website [www.westernrenewableslink.com.au](http://www.westernrenewableslink.com.au) or by calling 1300 360 795 or by emailing [info@westernrenewableslink.com.au](mailto:info@westernrenewableslink.com.au).

## Translation and interpretation services



If you need an interpreter, please call 13 14 50.

If you are deaf and/or find hearing or speaking with people on the phone difficult, please contact the National Relay Service on voice relay number 1300 555 727, TTY number 133 677 or SMS relay number 0423 677 767.

## Complaints

If you have a query, a compliment or a complaint, you can let us know by using the online enquiry form on [www.westernrenewableslink.com.au](http://www.westernrenewableslink.com.au). Or you can let us know by:

 1300 360 795  
 [info@westernrenewableslink.com.au](mailto:info@westernrenewableslink.com.au)  
 PO Box 638, Ballarat VIC 3353

You can also lodge a complaint or provide feedback directly to your Land Liaison Officer.

Complaint handling steps:

1. You can lodge a complaint with AusNet as outlined above.
2. We will acknowledge receipt of a complaint within two working days.
3. We aim to resolve the complaint within ten working days.
4. Where we cannot reach a resolution within ten working days, we will keep you informed of the progress being made with handling the complaint and provide a revised timeframe for resolving the complaint.
5. At any time, you may request to have your complaint escalated to the project senior management team.

If your complaint or question relates to the RIT-T process, you can raise it with AEMO by emailing [WestVicRITT@aemo.com.au](mailto:WestVicRITT@aemo.com.au).

If your complaint or question relates to the Environment Effects Statement process, you can raise it with the Department of Transport and Planning by emailing [environment.assessment@delwp.vic.gov.au](mailto:environment.assessment@delwp.vic.gov.au).

If your complaint cannot be resolved, you can escalate your complaint to the Energy and Water Ombudsman Victoria.

## Other sources of information

**Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner** ([www.aeic.gov.au](http://www.aeic.gov.au)) including information about how to make a complaint, best industry practice and resources for landholders.

### Australian Energy Market Operator

([www.aemo.com.au](http://www.aemo.com.au)) including information on the Regulatory Investment Test for Transmission (RIT-T) process for this project.

### Energy and Water Ombudsman Victoria

([www.ewov.com.au](http://www.ewov.com.au)) including information about complaints and dispute resolution.

### Energy Safe Victoria

([www.esv.vic.gov.au](http://www.esv.vic.gov.au)) including information about the safe design and operation of high voltage transmission networks in Victoria.

### Environment Effects Statement Process in Victoria

([www.planning.vic.gov.au/environmental-assessments/environmental-assessment-guides/ministerial-guidelines-for-assessment-of-environmental-effects/understanding-the-ees-process](http://www.planning.vic.gov.au/environmental-assessments/environmental-assessment-guides/ministerial-guidelines-for-assessment-of-environmental-effects/understanding-the-ees-process)) including information about the environment assessment process managed by the Department of Transport and Planning.

### Essential Services Commission

([www.esc.vic.gov.au](http://www.esc.vic.gov.au)) including information about the regulation of transmission licenses in Victoria and the Electricity Transmission Company Land Access Statement of Expectations.

### Valuer General of Victoria

([www.land.vic.gov.au/valuations/first-time-here/about-valuer-general-victoria](http://www.land.vic.gov.au/valuations/first-time-here/about-valuer-general-victoria)) including general information about how land is valued in Victoria.

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