

## Community Information Sessions Summary October 2023

Between 10 and 19 October 2023 TCV held **six** community information sessions including a [webinar](#), attended by close to **500** people. The purpose of this report is to provide a summary of the outcomes of this engagement and respond to common items of community concern.

### Project description

Victoria NSW Interconnector West (VNI West) is a project to build a new transmission line between Victoria and New South Wales.

VNI West will:

- Harness 3.4 gigawatts of renewable energy generation, enough to power approximately 2.3 million homes.
- Collect and share clean, low-cost renewable power from the wind and solar-rich areas of north-west Victoria.
- Strengthen the connection between Victoria's and NSW power grids.
- Improve the security and reliability of the electricity network as coal-fired power stations are retired.

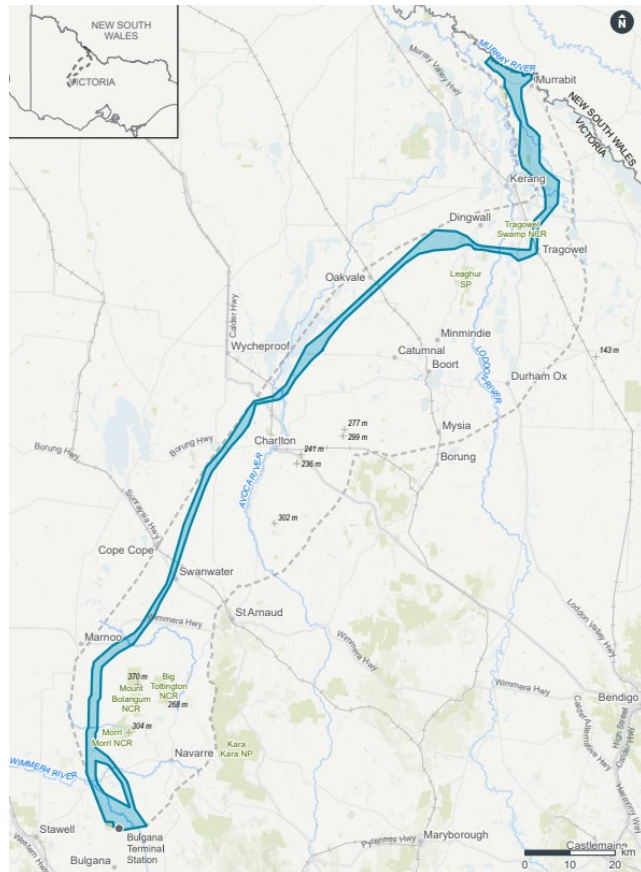


Figure 1 - VNI West Purpose and Draft ~2km Corridor

## Purpose of events

- Raise awareness and inform the community of the ~2km corridor announcement.
- Communicate the need for VNI West.
- Communicate how community feedback was used to inform route refinement.
- Provide information on VNI West and key topics of interest, including route refinement, environmental constraints, bushfire and transmission and landholder engagement.
- Listen to community feedback and respond to questions.

Events were held in Charlton (10/10), Stawell (16/10), Boort (12/10) and Kerang (17/10). An event planned for St Arnaud on 11 October did not proceed based on police advice.

The TCV project team answered questions at these meetings along with representatives from VicGrid and independent technical experts. This was the third round of community events this year, following drop-in information sessions held in March and July.

Events consisted of both a town hall and an informal drop-in information session. The town hall included a presentation by the project team and time for Q&A. The drop-in session allowed space after the town hall session for community members and landholders to have one-on-one conversations with members of the project team.

These community meetings are an important element of TCV's work to find the best location for VNI West with the least impact on farms, landholders and communities.





Figure 2 - Charlton Community Event

# Key themes

At a general level, TCV recognises that many attendees at these sessions expressed opposition to the project and raised substantial concerns about the potential impacts of the project.

The following is a summary of feedback received from the community events program.


**Table 1 - Key themes**

Item of feedback	Description	TCV's response and how we will use this feedback
 <p><b>Corridor selection process</b></p>	<p>Community members questioned the corridor selection process, particular matters of interest included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why the shortest route was not selected.</li> <li>• Why VNI West can't be situated along roadsides.</li> <li>• How ecology and cultural heritage was considered.</li> </ul>	<p>The draft corridor was identified based on feedback from landholders, community members, government agencies and stakeholders, as well as data from ongoing technical, engineering and environmental assessments.</p> <p>A range of factors have been considered including ecology, agricultural activities, sites of known Aboriginal cultural heritage, flooding, landscape and proximity to residential areas and towns.</p> <p>TCV acknowledges that it will not always be possible to avoid all sensitivities, however, where we can't avoid particular areas, there are a range of technical and engineering solutions we can investigate to seek to mitigate impacts.</p> <p>The priority in determining the draft corridor was to avoid sensitives where possible and determine a route that minimises impact.</p> <p>Similarly, roadsides are often too narrow to safely locate towers near passing traffic and they frequently contain important remnant vegetation so they are generally not appropriate for transmission infrastructure. Siting towers within existing easements (such as roadway easements), may be possible in some locations and explored as the project continues, however, it is unlikely these locations would be suitable for the majority of VNI West.</p> <p>For more information on the draft ~2km corridor and the selection process, please refer to the <a href="#">Corridor Report</a> on the TCV website.</p>
 <p><b>Impacts on farming</b></p>	<p>Community members and landholders expressed concerns that transmission infrastructure will significantly reduce productive land and introduce restrictions which will make it difficult to continue farming the land. Particular restrictions of concern included machinery height, drone usage, irrigation and future farming practices.</p>	<p>TCV has heard the concerns about how transmission may impact farming and agricultural activities and we are committed to working collaboratively with farmers and property owners to minimise impact on farm activity and farmers' ability to work the land.</p> <p>The corridor for VNI West will be narrowed from ~2km to an approximately 100m wide easement. That area will still be available for farming and will not be fenced off. We are targeting narrowing to an approximately 100m wide draft easement by mid-2024.</p> <p>A key part of this process includes engaging closely with landowners to identify a location for infrastructure that minimises impact.</p>

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	<p>It was also noted the draft ~2km corridor traverses some properties diagonally. Concerns were presented that this would impact several long lateral irrigators and cause significant impact to property usage.</p> <p>Other items of concern included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interference with GPS, radio and RFID tag signals;</li> <li>• Biosecurity concerns; and</li> <li>• Land access.</li> </ul>	<p>As part of these discussions, Landholder Liaisons will work with farmers to develop an understanding of existing infrastructure, such as irrigation, and attempt to identify possible solutions to avoid or minimise any impacts.</p> <p>There will be some restrictions on how the land can be used within the easement, but many farming activities can continue, including cropping, grazing and the use of machinery up to about 5m in height or up to 8.6m subject to a safety assessment.</p> <p>More information on topics such as GPS, biosecurity and land access, can be found on the Biosecurity and Farming with Transmission fact sheets on the <a href="#">TCV website</a>.</p>
 <p><b>Approvals process and future consultation</b></p>	<p>Community members raised questions about the approvals process and future opportunities for community consultation. There were concerns that community consultation could not provide any tangible or genuine influence in the process, particularly regarding whether the project receives final approval to go ahead.</p>	<p>TCV is at the beginning of a comprehensive environmental and planning approval process for VNI West, this is expected to run over the next 2 years.</p> <p>This will include ongoing engagement and consultation with landholders, local communities, Traditional Owners and other stakeholders.</p> <p>The project cannot proceed without planning approvals from State and Commonwealth Governments. There will be numerous avenues for consultation to influence this process, including a formal public submissions process, before a final Ministerial decision on whether the project will proceed.</p> <p>It is anticipated that VNI West will be subject to an Environment Effects Statement (EES) and TCV is planning to submit an EES referral to the Victorian Planning Minister in coming months. For more information on the EES process, including the rigorous engagement process, please refer to the <a href="#">Department of Planning and Transport website</a>.</p>
 <p><b>Landholder engagement and compensation</b></p>	<p>Concerns were raised about landholder engagement to date, including the methods of contact and allegations that Landholder Liaisons had targeted vulnerable community members and denied them the chance to have a support person at face-to-face meetings.</p> <p>Concerns were also raised about landholders who only found out they were in the corridor days before the corridor was made public. Questions were raised about the process moving forward and whether the delivery of an information package was the end of engagement.</p> <p>Questions and concerns were also raised regarding the adequacy of compensation, particularly that a payment for loss in market value can only compensate for financial loss at the time it is paid and will not</p>	<p>TCV's Landholder Liaisons used publicly available databases to find contact information for landholders. These details do not include the age, marital status or gender of landholders. It is the responsibility of TCV to first engage with all known landholders, which generally in the first instance is the registered owner of the property. However, we also need to speak to any other landholders that have an interest in the property that may be impacted (such as tenants), and we encourage those landholders to reach out to TCV. Landholders are welcome to bring along a support person if they have any concerns about speaking with a TCV representative one-on-one.</p> <p>In the six weeks leading up to the release of the ~2km draft corridor, the Landholder Liaisons did everything they could to contact landholders in this new, narrowed area, resulting in contact with about 40% of landholders.</p> <p>Each Landholder Liaison focused on a particular geographical part of the draft corridor and where possible, initial contact was always by phone. If there was not a publicly available phone number for a landholder, TCV Landholder Liaisons may have visited a property to leave a contact card or an information pack. When this occurred Landholder Liaisons complied with any signposted biosecurity requirements, and only visited properties where legally able to do so.</p> <p>At the community information sessions numerous additional landholders also reached out to TCV to provide their contact details and engage in initial discussions.</p> <p>We greatly encourage impacted landholders who have not yet been able to have a discussion with their Landholder Liaison to reach out. A conversation with your dedicated Landholder Liaison will not increase the likelihood of the project going ahead or being located on your land.</p>



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	<p>compensate for the future growth in property value.</p> <p>There was a misunderstanding from some attendees that the only payment available is the Victorian Government payment of \$8000 per linear kilometre, per year, for 25 years.</p>	<p>It is an opportunity to share details of how farms and properties operate and how your land is being used to reduce the impact of the final location of the line.</p> <p>It is TCV's intention to ensure that all impacted landholders are fairly compensated.</p> <p>There are various payments which make up the total compensation package. The Victorian Government's proposed annual payment of \$8,000 per linear kilometre per year for 25 years is only one of those payments. Compensation will also include any loss in land value and any impact the line may have on farming operations.</p> <p>More information on compensation can be found in the <a href="#">'Easement Compensation – Option Agreement'</a> fact sheet and Landholder Guide.</p>
 <p><b>Bushfire risk</b></p>	<p>Concerns around bushfire risk and transmission infrastructure were raised by community members at all events. Specifically, people expressed fear that bushfires could not be fought around transmission, particularly due to perceived limitations of aerial firefighting and high-pressure hoses. Community members also noted that visibility becomes a significant issue in the event of a bushfire, and worried that towers would act as an obstacle to emergency vehicles and firefighters on the ground and that thick smoke could cause dangerous electrical arcs.</p>	<p>TCV appreciates the importance of ensuring transmission infrastructure does not impede the ability to manage bush fires.</p> <p>In Victoria, there are currently around 6,500 kilometres of transmission lines. Bushfires have been managed and successfully fought around transmission infrastructure for decades.</p> <p>The CFA has recently published a FAQ document on fire and transmission that states:</p> <p>"In the case of a bushfire response, an assessment will be made by the Incident Controller - and if it is considered safe to do so, responding crews can operate near transmission lines.</p> <p>Firefighters receive training on the control measures for fighting fires near transmission lines. Victoria's fire authorities also have appropriate policies and operational procedures in place."</p> <p>Transmission Network Service Providers also have a commitment to provide its customers with a reliable and safe electricity supply. In the event of a bushfire, they work closely with Emergency Management Victoria (EMV), Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV), Country Fire Authority (CFA) and Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMV) and follow all agreed and mandatory directions. If required, this can include turning off the power across parts of the transmission network.</p> <p>Engagement with fire authorities also includes ensuring aerial firefighting can occur. Aircraft can and do operate around power lines and there is transmission mapping available for pilots.</p> <p>Bushfire risk will be considered at every stage of planning and design for VNI West. Design standards for transmission as well as the operation and maintenance of lines and towers mitigate the risk of fire and enable assets to withstand bushfire conditions.</p> <p>The project must conduct a major bushfire risk assessment as part of the regulatory process before the project can be approved by Government. This will be conducted by an independent expert and requires consultation and input from fire authorities including the CFA.</p>
 <p><b>Health Impacts</b></p>	<p><b>EMF and health concerns</b></p> <p>Community members raised concerns about the potential impacts of Electro Magnetic Fields (EMF) on both human health and livestock.</p> <p><b>Mental Health</b></p> <p>Concerns were also raised about the impact the project may have on the mental and emotional wellbeing of community members and landholders.</p>	<p><b>EMF and health concerns</b></p> <p>There are no significant health risks to those living close to high voltage transmission lines.</p> <p>After reviewing a significant number of studies on the concerns and potential health impacts on individuals, the Australian Radiological Protection and Nuclear Safety Advisory (ARPANSA) has said there is no scientific evidence to establish that exposure to electromagnetic fields around the home, the office or near power lines causes adverse health effects.</p> <p>Despite this, a precautionary approach will be applied to managing electromagnetic fields, including targeting minimum setbacks from residences and monitoring power lines for electromagnetic field intensity.</p>

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	<p>Attendees questioned how the project could adequately consider social impacts during the approvals process given the significant impact it has already had on affected communities.</p>	<p>EMFs are naturally occurring and found wherever there is electricity. Natural occurrences include from lightning, solar activity and the earth itself. Wherever electricity is flowing or there is an electrical force, EMFs are produced.</p> <p><b>Mental Health</b></p> <p>TCV understands the prospect of new transmission has caused significant stress for some community members and landholders, particularly in these early stages of the project where there is still quite a high degree of uncertainty.</p> <p>We acknowledge that the project will have a genuine impact on community members and landholders and appreciate that that these impacts may affect mental health. It is our hope to alleviate these impacts by engaging thoughtfully with the community to answer questions and seek input into the project. We will also work closely with landholders to seek a location for transmission that minimises impacts.</p> <p>We acknowledge that although we will do our best to mitigate impacts to mental health through the engagement process, professional support may be more useful for some community members and landholders.</p> <p>We encourage anyone experiencing challenges to their own, a friend or a family member's mental health and wellbeing to utilise the professional health and wellbeing support service engaged by TCV.</p> <p>Members of the community can contact the Community Support Service to make an appointment to speak to a professional counsellor for free and confidential advice. Please call 1300 687 327 and reference "VNI West".</p>
 <p><b>Alternative options</b></p>	<p>Feedback related to the consideration of alternative options, which would avoid the need for VNI West or minimise impacts. Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Opinion of other industry representatives such as Bruce Mountain and Simon Bartlett (Plan B)</li> <li>Undergrounding</li> </ul>	<p>A range of options were considered during the Regulatory Investment Test for Transmission (RIT-T) for VNI West. Viable solutions needed to meet energy system needs and provide net economic benefits to consumers, who ultimately pay for this investment through their electricity bills.</p> <p>The pending retirement of coal fired generation in Victoria is also driving the timeframe for planning and building new transmission, which discounts the viability of nuclear or emerging technologies. The option selected for VNI West met the criteria outlined above and was forecast to deliver the greatest benefit to consumers.</p> <p>AEMO conducted an analysis of Plan B and disagreed with its findings. Specifically, AEMO's <a href="#">review of the Plan B Report</a> shows it would result in lower levels of renewable generation entering the grid and would likely require the acquisition of people's homes on the outskirts of Ballarat and Bendigo. AEMO also found that it would likely result in long periods of power system disruption. Plan B also failed to provide the electricity system security benefits of a second interconnector to NSW.</p> <p>The Victorian Government is undertaking a further review of this report to determine its merit and expects to publish the findings later this year. As it stands, VNI West has the full support of the Victorian and Commonwealth Governments and the project is proceeding as planned.</p> <p>On the topic of undergrounding, it is important to note that transmission projects are ultimately paid for by electricity consumers and the cost of building and running underground lines is significantly higher. There are several other considerations with undergrounding, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The timeline for developing the infrastructure is much longer;</li> <li>It does not enable as much connection with renewable generation along the route;</li> <li>It causes significant disturbance to flora and fauna;</li> <li>There are a lot of restrictions associated with farming activities above an underground line; and</li> <li>Maintenance and repairs are more difficult.</li> </ul>

TCV greatly appreciates the time taken by community members, landholders and stakeholders to attend the information sessions and the feedback and insights provided. We will work to update the [fact sheet](#) and [FAQ](#) section of our website to provide further information on topics of interest and ensure people are able to access accurate information.

We acknowledge that many of the people who attended our community meetings are concerned about the idea of having transmission on their land or in their community and we respect these views.

Victoria's transition away from coal-fired generation is occurring and VNI West is a significant part of the solution to keeping the lights on for all of us.

TCV is committed to listening to landholders and communities and providing opportunities for them to speak out and get answers to important questions.

We will soon provide details of our community engagement program for 2024. The CRG will meet again in November and we will keep communities up to date on important activities, including survey work.

Thank you again to the communities and people who took the time to attend our meetings.

# Next Steps

An important focus in the next phase of the project is the conversations with landholders, local communities and Traditional Owners in the draft corridor.

## Working with landholders

TCV will work directly with landholders to find the best practicable location for the transmission alignment to minimise impacts to farming operations and agriculture. TCV is currently talking with farmers and other property owners within the draft corridor to build our understanding of the land and land use. Every landholder in the draft corridor has a dedicated Landholder Liaison, a key contact to help answer questions on important issues, including farming with transmission lines, biosecurity arrangements, access agreements, compensation for an easement and other payments.

Landholders and community members are also encouraged to contact the Community Reference Group (CRG) if they have something to raise with TCV. The email inbox for CRG enquiries is [CRGchair@rmcg.com.au](mailto:CRGchair@rmcg.com.au)

## Working with communities

In the next stage of the project, TCV will also continue to engage with landholders and communities in the draft corridor to provide information and seek input into important considerations such as opportunities for community benefits and ongoing route refinement. The corridor will be narrowed considerably over the next two years, from a ~2km average width to an eventual easement of 70-120m. Not all the properties that are currently in the draft corridor will be in the final route for the transmission lines. Through direct engagement with all those within the draft corridor, TCV will build its understanding of how the land is used today to verify location constraints, and discuss how to minimise land-use, cultural and environmental impacts through planning and design.

## Working with Traditional Owners

With the ~2km draft corridor identified, consultation with Traditional Owner groups is essential to improve TCV's understanding of the cultural significance of the Country within the corridor and identify specific areas of cultural significance where impacts should be avoided or mitigated. This engagement will also consider how VNI West may be able to provide positive outcomes and opportunities for Traditional Owner groups.

## Environmental and technical studies

A comprehensive environmental assessment is required under Government regulation. In coming weeks TCV will refer the refined draft corridor to the Victorian Minister for Planning to consider whether an Environment Effects Statement (EES) will be required for the project. The EES is a rigorous and consultative regulatory process to comprehensively assess the potential environmental, cultural and social impacts of the project. In October TCV commenced environmental field studies and will be seeking access to some properties within the corridor to carry out some basic, non-invasive field testing.