

Tuesday, 20 September 2022

To Whom it may concern,

## **Grampians New Energy Taskforce**

### **Response to the Australian Energy Market Operator's Project Assessment Draft Report to assess the technical and economic viability of expanding interconnector capacity between Victoria and New South Wales**

The Grampians New Energy Taskforce (GNET) is charged with leading and driving a region-wide approach to understanding and facilitating a transition to a low-carbon economy, in the best interests of the region.

GNET's membership includes nominated representatives from each of the Wimmera Southern Mallee and Central Highlands Group of Councils, the Victorian Wimmera Southern Mallee and Central Highlands Regional Partnerships, the Committee for Ballarat, the Wimmera Development Association, Regional Development Australia Grampians, the Clean Energy Council and Federation University. GNET's representation across the three tiers of government, community and business, allows us to reduce barriers to investment and work collaboratively to ensure that benefits are shared by communities across the region.

We understand that the Victoria – New South Wales Interconnector (VNI) West (via Kerang) is a proposed new high capacity 500 kilovolt (kV) double-circuit overhead transmission line between Victoria and New South Wales. We are also aware that the project would connect the Western Renewables Link, from a new terminal station north of Ballarat, Victoria, and EnergyConnect's new transmission line at a new Dinawan substation, between Jerilderie and Coleambally, NSW.

GNET recognises and supports that a 500kV double-string overhead transmission network solution, as proposed in Option 1, is the preferred option for reinforcement of the transmission network. GNET acknowledges that, as modelled, this is the most cost-effective and efficient solution, and that non-network or lower voltage solutions will provide no time or outcome advantage and do not provide the optimal cost benefit outcome for consumers.

However, GNET strongly urges AEMO to consider longer-term statewide infrastructure and renewable energy generation planning. Significant benefits could be achieved through extending the current Western Renewables Link 500kV section to Bulgana, and then connecting VNI-West at a terminal station at Bulgana. This would provide numerous advantages by:

- Opening up improved renewable energy generation opportunities in the west of Victoria, where there is a comparatively high degree of social acceptance for renewable energy and large tracts of suitable land
- Removing the need to skirt around the west of Bendigo, which presents planning issues on that growth fringe
- Potentially removing the need for the terminal station north of Ballarat, which has very low social acceptance
- Reducing community impacts in Hepburn Shire, which will host Western Renewables Link, the terminal station and the southern section of VNI-West
- Using a largely existing corridor on part of the currently proposed 220kV double circuit to Bulgana, which reduces project complexity

The Victorian government's election commitment to increase the Victorian Renewable Energy Target (VRET) to 50% by 2030 is driving increased investment in renewables in the Grampians region. GNET is concerned that, by the proposed completion date for Option 1 (VNI) West of 2031, the system will be already experiencing constraints and further transmission and distribution upgrades will be almost immediately required. We are also aware that approvals processes for new infrastructure construction can take considerable time to see through from beginning to end, and would urge a more considered, forward-looking approach that plans for future generation opportunities in the west of the state.

GNET, as a peak representative body on new energy for all eleven councils in the Central Highlands and Wimmera Southern Mallee, is ready and willing to work with AEMO and the successful tenderer in understanding the local landscape for the parts of the project that extend through our region.

Given that Option 1 for VNI-West involves construction of new transmission lines through a new corridor, the project may reach the threshold for an Environmental Effects Statement. GNET invites AEMO and the successful tenderer to engage early with our partner councils and local Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) officers in a structured, systematic way to ensure you are on track to meet your regulatory obligations in a way that supports affected communities, and therefore your construction timeline.

GNET is ambitious to see VNI-West delivered in as timely a manner as possible, with the best outcome for communities and business, noting that a more westerly route may have no impact upon constructability and will open up increased renewables generation, with greater social acceptance. However, whichever from the project takes, GNET remains ready and willing to work with AEMO and the successful tenderer to support delivery of the project.

Yours sincerely



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