

Moorabool and Central Highlands Power Association (MCHPA) Annual General Meeting Reports

REPORTING PERIOD JULY 1ST 2021 – JUNE 30TH 2022

(Note: several additional undertakings from July 1st 2022 through – February 28th, 2023 are also referenced within the report, a comprehensive report of undertaking for this period will be provided within the next Chair's Report)

Chairs Annual Report

We are a community led group, incorporated in July 2020, to bring together affected communities, organizations and individuals who demand the project to build transmission and related infrastructure of high voltage electricity between Melbourne and Western Victoria is undertaken in a significantly less impactful manner. We advocate on behalf of our communities, rural businesses, individuals and our environment for these projects to be undertaken in way that delivers minimal impact and low to no risk.

The Moorabool & Central Highlands Power Alliance (MCHPA) also known simply as The Alliance is chaired by local Myrniong resident Emma Muir. She lives on a generational farm and is actively involved in the local community and the Pentland Hills Landcare Group. The Alliance is made up of a Steering Committee, four working groups (Legal, Technical, Campaign and Fundraising) and is supported by professional experts in legal, technical, advocacy and campaign areas.

The committee represents members across the entire 190km length of the proposed Western Renewables Link (WRL also previously known as the Western Victorian Transmission Network Project) and aligns with many other community advocacy groups that want to see this project done better. The Alliance ensures each region can connect and work with their local communities and fight as one under the Alliance umbrella.

The Alliance are increasing pressure on Government, AEMO, and AusNet to ensure high voltage power transmission lines and associated infrastructure are undertaken with serious considerations given to address the impacts and risk. All alternatives (including undergrounding and existing easements and overall project viability) must be fully explored, and the infrastructure must not cause heightened impact or risk to communities, business and the environment.

The Alliance represents communities that support real action on climate change. Our communities are regional and farming communities – we see, feel, and experience the negative effects of climate change every day. We see climate change in weather patterns that make farming more difficult, in rain that falls less predictably, in bushfire seasons that start earlier, end later, and deliver more devastating fires and generally in more extreme weather events.

Our communities support renewable energy and understand the importance of an energy grid that delivers renewable energy to where it is needed. Real action on climate change and the delivery of renewable energy should not come at the cost of food security, cause catastrophic damage to the environment nor put lives at risk from an increased bushfire risk.

Real action on climate change should not be an either or – where the livelihoods of those in regional and rural communities are sacrificed and unnecessary environmental damage is undertaken for outdated and high-risk transmission.

The proposed transmission corridor will cause irreversible environmental damage to established bio links, endangered flora and fauna and include the removal of 155,000 mature native trees. There is a better way to deliver the WRL – one that delivers the same benefits, the same action on climate change, without destroying our environment and communities.

There are other less impactful options that can deliver a similar outcome.

It's time to say enough is enough and bring an end to these giant transmission lines scarring our landscape and putting our environment, livelihoods and lives at risk.

I am pleased to report that the Moorabool and Central Highlands Power Association (Incorporated Association) has made significant progress in numerous areas, specifically; the establishment and ongoing stability of the Steering Committee and the four working groups who have guided the success of a campaign that has raised awareness and highlighted the unwanted and dangerous effects of the proposed Western Victorian Transmission Network Project (WVTNP) now erroneously known as the Western Renewables Link to the community, government and energy bodies.

Throughout the past year I have been reminded of the commitment and enthusiasm demonstrated for our cause by the many dedicated committee members, volunteers, supporters and our members. It is very rewarding to see this ongoing dedication to our cause and to ensure we deliver a positive result for the community. It's satisfying to know that all of the work we undertake has a positive effect on the community and I am confident our messages are being heard throughout local, state and federal government.

The MCHPA has also acted in the role of umbrella group to numerous smaller community groups who are representing various local communities along the proposed corridor, but has always respected individuals and other groups to do their own thing for the common cause.

Association's Purpose

The MCHPA represents the considerable and diverse community concerns along the 190km route of the proposed WRL. Our primary objective is to influence key decision makers to undertake alternative suitable options for the project that significantly minimize or remove impacts to these communities.

The MCHPA has delivered a community-led campaign to have the WRL delivered without towers and the terminal station be built on existing public land – if the terminal station is required at all.

Strategic Plan

The Steering Committee (SC) have developed a strategic plan that guides the undertakings of the SC and the four working groups. We remain flexible to capitalise on all new opportunities.

Highlights of undertakings from July 1st 2021 through June 30th 2022

- In August 2021 members of the Alliance including local potato growers and the VFF's Emma Germano met with Agriculture Minister Mary-Anne Thomas at Parliament House to express the impacts of the project on the agriculture industry.
- August and Oct 2021 engaged Harwood Andrews to help with AusNet's land access issues and EES advice
- September 2021 MCHPA held the bonfire event along the newly announced corridor
- September 2021 met with AER to discuss the reapplication of the West Vic RIT-T
- October 21 engaged with ESC about access issues and section 93 of the EIA and requested the ESC take immediate action to develop a comprehensive access code and ascertain if AusNet was legally able to use section 93 powers to access land.
- October 2021 MCHPA attended an online meeting with AEMO CEO Mr Daniel Westerman, Mr Alex Wonhas and Mr Chappel which took 6 months to arrange where we raised concerns about the West Vic RIT-T, the material changes we identified in Feb 2021 and March 2021 and to confirm which part of AusNet had signed the contracts and had power under Section 93.
- Through Mrs Beverley McArthur MLC, the MCHPA has raised several questions in parliament regarding the project, the uprating of the 220kv line to 500kv and the need for the terminal station.
- In November 2021 AusNet announced a narrower route.
- In November & December the MCHPA held its first road show of 5 community sessions, Clunes, Myrniong, Darley, Springbank and Melton to update the community on the work that was being done.
- In December 2021, the Alliance organised the first tractor rally outside an AusNet community session in Miners Rest.
- In March 2022 the second tractor rally was held in Melbourne at Parliament House.
- Feb 2022 the MCHPA participated in the consultation of the ESC and the statement of expectations.
- In March 2022 the MCHPA finally met with Minister D'Ambrosio online with the message that the project needed to go back to the drawing board.
- In April 2022 met with the Hon. Chris Bowen and local Labor MP hopeful Sam Rae to express our concerns with the RIT-T process and the need to go back to the drawing board.
- MCHPA made submissions to the ESC's draft Statement of Expectations.
- Fundraising activities occurred throughout the year, with support for the Qurindi Event and the Springbank/Newlyn Football match and Hoe Down event

Campaign, Marketing and Communications

The Campaign, Marketing and Communications focus has divided its undertakings into two primary parts; an internal focus on community, organizations and business affected by the proposed WRL and an external focus on decision makers (government, AusNet and AEMO), influencers of decision makers and the media. Whilst the messaging across the two parts has been consistent there has been a varied approach in reaching each group.

The mainstays of our campaign message have revolved around an emphasis on the impacts; environmental, economic and safety and to also championing solutions and alternative approaches to the proposed WVTNP.

We established a branded and recognizable campaign slogan and theme "Stop AusNet's Towers". The Stop AusNet's Towers brand has been employed as a slogan for our undertakings.

Campaign undertakings with an external focus to decision makers in government and energy bodies, including the proponent AusNet, AER and AEMO have included lobbying and activities that support lobbying such as meetings (in person and via video conferencing), regional tours with local, state, and federal politicians. Political meetings have included both the incumbent and opposition government. Extensive discussions have also been had with government departments such as DWELP and the Australian Energy Commissioner's office. In reaching these key stakeholders we have used a multi-tiered approach which has included direct approaches through letter writing and meetings. In addition, we have communicated our message to these decision makers through community letter writing campaigns and media.

We have had significant media coverage over this period in local, state and federal levels in all formats: radio, print, TV and social.

We continue to engage with opposition government and engage their support and our messaging to both the sitting government and the opposition is consistent.

Lobbying efforts. The Alliance began to engage with multiple parties via online meetings, in-person meetings and/or in writing via emails and letters. We contacted and raised our concerns about the WRL Project with:

- (a) politicians (including Mrs Bev McArthur MLC, the Hon Catherine King MP, Ms Michaela Settle MP, Ms Louise Staley MP, and Mr Stuart Grimley MLC), we have around 70 politicians on our mailing list;
- (b) responsible State and Federal Ministers (Planning, Energy and Agriculture);
- (c) senior government officers and advisors, including Jack Krohn, Senior EES Impact Assessor at the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (**DELWP**);
- (d) local Councils, especially the Shires of Moorabool and Hepburn;
- (e) the Australian Energy Regulator (**AER**);
- (f) Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner, Andrew Dyer
- (g) local businesses; and
- (h) the community.

We have utilized social platforms to reach politicians, this has included paid social media campaigns.

We have several public rallies.

Our internal campaign focused on communities, affected business and organizations has included the development of a comprehensive website with in-depth information and resources.

We have an excellent presence and high volume of activity on social media. Our ability to be topical, timely and to have collaborative information sharing and 'call to actions' through this media has proved positive. We have published e-Newsletters. Managed the production, distribution and sale of collateral such as stickers, core flute signs and banners.

We have delivered many community information events and local rallies along the line.

All the Alliance's lobbying, campaigning and engagement activities continued through 2022. There was a particular focus on politicians on a bi-partisan basis in the lead up to both the Federal and State elections. To keep communities updated on the Alliance's activities and the status of the WRL Project we held two additional rounds of 'road show' information sessions. In one week, finishing on 6 March 2022, we held six meetings at locations from one end of the line to the other – in Melton, Bacchus Marsh, Ballan, Springbank, Kingston and Waubra.

In another week in early November 2022 the Alliance held a further road show of five community information sessions, again at locations from one end of the line to the other - in Melton, Bacchus Marsh/Darley, Ballan, Newlyn and Waubra. Throughout 2022, communities and local action groups held fundraising events in support of the Alliance, including a gala dinner, a football match, a hoe-down, and an open garden.

To bring wider attention to the WRL Project, the Alliance held large 'tractor rallies' in 2022, one in Miners Rest on 12 December 2021, one in Melbourne on 8 March 2022 and another in Ballarat on 15 July 2022. These were attended by hundreds of people and were reported in state and national media. A smaller tractor rally was held in Daylesford on 19 November 2022 in the lead up to the Victorian election.

Legal

The Legal Working Group has focused on two broad activities since July 2021:

1. legally challenging AEMO's RIT-T process that authorises the WRL, to force the WRL to be stopped now and that the RIT-T must be reapplied – to take it back to the drawing board.

Progress:

- ❖ MCHPA's original 2020-2021 comprehensive complaints made to AER and AEMO have formed the foundation of substantive legal work to bring this legal action
 - ❖ Engagement of expert legal team
 - ❖ Determination of legal strategy
 - ❖ Engagement of experts to assist legal strategy implementation
 - ❖ Execution of strategy
 - Jul 21 – Jul 22: Expert consultations and legal case development
 - Aug 22: Legal demand to AEMO with substantiation that RIT-T must be reapplied
 - Nov 22: AEMO detailed decision in response to the demand received
 - Dec 22: Application for judicial review of AEMO decision lodged with Supreme Court
 - Feb 23: Supreme Court Directions Hearing (deferred due to Vic Ministerial Order)
 - Mar 23: Legal review of challenge to Minister's Order
2. We have contested access to land, easement agreements and other issues raised by AusNet's EES Process including supporting the community with information and engaging with Councils and responsible authorities.

Work undertaken:

- ❖ Further work with legal counsel and detailed legal advice sought and provided.
- ❖ Development of Land Access Information Fact Sheets and legal support process for landowners to seek advice

- ❖ Significant MCHPA submission and constructive engagement with Essential Services Commission(ESC) re: the preliminary Statement of Expectations for access under Sec.93 of the *Electricity Industry Act 2000* (Vic)
- ❖ More recent engagement with ESC re: development of a formal Code of Conduct for access under Sec. 93.
- ❖ Ongoing work undertaken around AusNet’s EES consultation and investigations processes including membership on the AusNet Community Consultation Group and the Hepburn Shire Working Group continued co-ordination and liaison with all Councils, continued liaison with Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner, etc.

Additional activities undertaken since July 2022 have focused on the VNI West interconnector RIT-T following the publication of the Project Assessment Draft Report (VNI West PADR) in July 2022. The VNI West project was always proposed to link into WRL but there are now new options described in a recently published Consultation Report that will have significantly greater impacts on the WRL.

Work undertaken:

- ❖ Submission to PADR
- ❖ Engagement with a VNI West working group of experienced industry experts critical of the VNI West RIT-T
- ❖ Engagement with AEMO (along with the VNI West working group) on engagement and consultation concerns ahead of and during the engagement process on the VNI West Consultation Report.
- ❖ Community support including information pdf overviewing the impact of the new VNI West options and meeting attendance to disseminate information
- ❖ Preparation of submission to the VNI West Consultation Report (due 5 April)

Technical

Committee members have provided fact based and substantiated technical advice and evidence of alternate options to support the MCHPA’s. Researching the high volume of industry and project information and providing advice to counter false and biased information provided on the WVTNP and to help the MCHPA mount the political, legal, and social arguments to achieve its objective.

Technical Focus Areas and Key outcomes so far

- ❖ Reviewed the WVTNP Regulatory Investment Test for Transmission (RIT-T) reports, AEMO plans and submissions from other energy agencies to support Legal and Campaign Working Group efforts to mount objections to the current proposal and promote alternate options to overhead transmission lines.
- ❖ Analysed the viability of alignment options and implications of easement Set-Back recommendations.
- ❖ Investigated and reported on facts relating to the benefits of undergrounding, both HVDC and HVAC, in a general feasibility sense, and specifically as a viable alternate option to the WVTNP.
- ❖ Challenged and refuted technical, engineering and risk misinformation promoted by AusNet, AEMO to inform external stakeholders and the community and provide them with accurate and referenced technical advice.
- ❖ Analysed easement restrictions in farming areas, understand underground easements restrictions.

- ❖ Monitored industry developments to promote alternate options to overhead transmission lines.

Fundraising, Finance, Audit and Risk

The primary purpose of the Fundraising, Finance, Audit and Risk Working Group is to assist the Steering Committee to optimise the fundraising, financial performance, and risk management of the Alliance.

The Steering Committee has assumed all responsible under this area to ensure that all decisions it makes or recommends align with the overall strategic goals and objectives to provide independent assurance and discharging its responsibilities with respect to all aspects of fundraising, financial reporting, risk control and audit functions.

Good Governance

All Steering Committee and working group members actively participated and played a significant role in the annual operation of the Association's activities throughout 2021-22. SC Meetings were held once each fortnight and on an as needed basis as required.

The Association has established a terms of reference and charters for each working group and the steering committee along with a code of conduct and a series of policies to guide the work of the Association.

Financials

The financial performance of the Association continues to be stable and managed on a sound financial basis. For the financial year of July 1st, 2021, through June 30th 2022 the Association experienced income of \$312,697 and expenditure of \$259,978.

All expenditures are approved in line with the adopted Association's delegation policy and all expenditures more than \$500 are brought before the MCHPA Steering Committee for approval.

All expenditures are in line with the MCHPA's principal activities. The principal activities of the entity during the financial year included expenditures on professional services for legal and technical as well as campaign support.

I want to acknowledge the many community members and business that have kindly donated to our campaign, your contributions have made it possible for us to further the Alliance's principal activities.

It is important to note that in addition to the donations recorded here they have been many generous contributions to the cause, made independent of the Alliance, that have secured services and or in-kind services that have furthered the Alliance's activities and purpose. These transactions are not recorded here as they have taken place between individuals and the respective service.

In Closing

In closing, I would like to thank my fellow SC members for their significant contributions in time and effort and the support they have given to me and the Alliance's objectives over the last 12 months. Every committee member gives up their time free of charge to contribute to the ongoing affairs and management of the MCHPA. I would also like to acknowledge all of the volunteers on the varied MCHPA committees, for the 21/22 year there was in excess of 30,000 hours of volunteer service, this equates to around 15 full time people working to stop or dramatically alter this project for our community, this is a strong demonstration of the commitment to the cause.

Finally, I would like to thank all of you, our members, those who have donated funds and/or services, the committees and fellow SC members for your support, advice and helping make my term as Chair a gratifying and rewarding experience and importantly for furthering this very important undertaking.

**Emma Muir, Chair
MCHPA**