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## Food giant McCain says western Vic powerline project could jeopardise potato production

A \$550m plan to drive down energy prices for Victorians has potato farmers and food giant McCain spitting chips.

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 1 comments



Mt Prospect potato farmer Joee Aganetti-Fraser has ploughed a protest sign against AusNet. Picture: Alex Coppel

A mega powerline proposed through one of Victoria's top food bowls has McCain spitting chips, with the food giant warning more than 60,000 tonnes of annual potato crop is in jeopardy.

Farmers and local communities between Melbourne and Stawell are up in arms over the \$550m proposal for the Western Victoria Transmission Network to be built by AusNet Services.

The Australian Energy Market Operator has contracted the company to supply the new transmission line to connect renewable energy suppliers more easily to the city and drive down energy prices.

But the 190km line will run through dozens of farms in the state's west, and would require towers about 380 towers up to 75m high.

The overhead lines also require large lots and exclusion zones that have ignited the fury of farmers around Ballarat who believe they will no longer be able to access their potato crops with machinery needed for watering and harvest.

Mt Prospect potato farmer Joee Aganetti-Fraser, whose property is next to a proposed terminal station, feared construction of powerlines would ruin her land.

"We won't be able to supply McCain with our full contracts," she said.

"We won't be able to farm or produce the tonnage needed."



Potato farmer Anthony Fraser in front of a protest sign against AusNet. Picture: Alex Coppel

Almost all of the region's potatoes are bought by McCain, a global leader in packaged potato products, with the company lashing out at Ausnet in a blistering submission obtained by the Herald Sun.

In the document lodged with the state government, McCain argues AusNet's own rules would forever stop potato farming on 1000ha of land, equivalent to 60 per cent of the company's production area in Ballarat.

"AusNet's proposed overhead transmission line directly threatens the loss of the McCain's potato production facility in Ballarat, over \$250M in economic impact and more than 1100 jobs," the submission said.



“McCain is aligned with our growers that these constraints directly prohibit and/or significantly burden Ballarat potato production, directly threatening the potato industry.”

The company wants other options considered as part of an environmental effects statement, saying the project needed to have the “least possible impact to agricultural land in a premium food production and food security region of Victoria that needs to meet a growing and evolving market”.

The company has asked the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning to consider alternatives such as underground transmission lines or improvements to other ageing parts of the network.

AusNet, which owns and operates the Victorian electricity transmission network, is 32.3 per cent owned by Singapore Power and 19.9 per cent belongs to the State Grid of China.

In 2015, the company made a \$300 million settlement with the Marysville victims of the Black Saturday bushfires.



Swiss Mountain Hotel owner Jim Frangos with local farmers Kevin Clohesy and Anthony Fraser. Picture: Alex Coppel

It was alleged that a fault on a power pole had sparked the fire, but the company denied liability as part of the settlement.

Opposition to the transmission network project is growing among a coalition of farmers, residents and business people in western Victoria who also fear it will harm tourism and could pose a fire risk.

Chris Taylor, from activist lobby the Western Victoria Economic and Cultural Group, said the transmission



towers were bigger than MCG light towers, and would “rip out the guts of this whole area”.

“This area produces \$1.8b in tourism and \$800m in food production, and (the powerlines) are going to cut right through historic goldfields, which have been preserved so well as a tourist attraction,” he said.

The activist group claims that Ausnet’s community consultation has been poor, and there is lingering concern about its link to the Black Saturday bushfires.

Group member Will Elsworth, from Smeaton, said a big concern was a proposed new terminal station at Mt Prospect, north of Ballarat.

“It’s 12 times the size of the MCG, all the power from South Australia, the ACT and western Victoria’s going to feed into that terminal station,” he said.



Local farmer Will Elsworth protests against the powerline. Picture: Alex Coppel

Mr Smeaton said locals feared the station would attract more transmission network development, while solar industry firms were already canvassing locals to allow solar panels onto their properties.

“They don’t want to have solar panels because land values have doubled in recent times, and if this all goes through it will destroy land values,” he said.

The protest group wants the powerlines put underground or down the middle of the Western Highway.

An Ausnet Services spokeswoman said the company understood community concerns and remained committed to the consultation for the project which was an ongoing part of the environment effects statement (EES).

“The EES involves detailed investigations by experts that will look at the concerns of landowners and the wider community, including farming practices and a range of land use impacts,” she said.

“This essential upgrade to the transmission network in Victoria’s west will help keep the lights on and prices down as coal generators are replaced with renewables.

“McCain have publicly confirmed the Ballarat processing facility is not at risk of closure and we will continue to engage with McCain and all potentially affected stakeholders as the EES progresses.

“We currently work with many businesses, farmers and communities across the state who already live, graze cattle and operate businesses under our 6,500kms of existing transmission lines.”

It’s estimated the project has the potential to unlock around 900 megawatts of renewables in western Victoria, enough to power more than 50,000 homes.

AusNet has held several community drop-in sessions and has invited people to identify areas of concern or interest on an interactive map on its website.



Farmer Joee Aganetti-Fraser is fighting for her farm and potato crop. Picture: Alex Coppel

## **WE FEEL HELPLESS IN FIGHT FOR FARM**

Joee Aganetti-Fraser left school last year to start working on the family spud farm, but already is in the fight of her life.



The Mt Prospect farm is next to AusNet's proposed terminal station, and the 17-year-old is convinced that powerlines running through her property mean trouble for her potato crop.

"We won't be able to farm under the powerlines with their easements and how big they are, because we aren't allowed to run any of our farm machinery under it," she said.

"The powerlines will ruin the land, and we won't be able to supply (food company) McCain's with our full contracts."

Joe is among hundreds of farmers, residents and business owners campaigning hard to stop AusNet's project.

She has even ploughed a "Piss Off Ausnet" protest message into a hill.

For Joe, the future of a five-generation family farm is at stake.

"When they come in with their big cranes and excavators and everything, it will just ruin the ground," she said. "We feel helpless, it's like we've got no say in it, and it's our farm.

"It really shouldn't have been considered to go through here. It will cause a lot of financial stress if we can't produce the amount we need to keep the farm and everything running."

Joe, who runs the farm with mum Leah and other family members, said she was worried about others, too.

"It's causing a lot of stress for farmers, especially the older generations still here," she said.

"They've said they can't even sleep at night, or they've been woken up by the stress.

"The mental health and physical health of everyone, whether it be the older generation farmers or the ones to come, that's what we have to worry about."

Joe accused Ausnet of poor consultation, saying she had heard nothing back after making her concerns felt.

"We want (the powerlines) to go down the middle of the Western Highway and we don't want a terminal station here at all," she said.

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