

**WRL EES Inquiry and Advisory Committee
via Manager, Major Projects
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Submission by the Western Victorian Community Alliance to the Inquiry and Advisory Committee Evaluating AusNet's Environmental Effects Statement for the Proposed Western Renewables Link Project

We, the members of the Western Victorian Community Alliance (WVCA), present this submission to the Western Renewables Link (WRL) Environmental Effects Statement (EES) Inquiry & Advisory Committee (IAC) not as abstract participants in a regulatory process, but as the collective submission of some 10,000 community members that have lived with the threat of the WRL for five years. For generations, we have been the custodians of this land, our homes, and our livelihoods.

The WVCA's members connection to this land is not merely one of ownership but of deep, generational stewardship. We live and work on farms and in communities nestled within a unique and irreplaceable landscape, a mosaic of productive agricultural plains, forests, and waterways. We are personally and generationally invested in its health and sustainability, having dedicated our lives to tending to it and passing it on to the next generation in a better state.

AusNet's WRL EES refers to this land in utilitarian terms, describing it as a "corridor" or an "area of interest". We reject this dehumanizing framing. For us, it is home. Our personal, cultural, and economic well-being is inextricably linked to every ridge, every creek, and every vista. The failure in AusNet's EES to adequately represent this profound connection and the true significance of our custodianship is a foundational flaw that invalidates its subsequent analysis.

The Human Cost of the WRL

The immense personal risk and lived experience we face are conspicuously absent from the EES's sterile descriptions. For five years, we have lived under the immense psychological and emotional strain of this project's looming threat. Our properties, often our most significant family assets and the foundation of our livelihoods, have been devalued. Our farm operations, tourism businesses, and local services are under constant threat of irreversible disruption. The very fabric of our communities has been strained by the relentless uncertainty.

AusNet's EES refers to the permanent presence of 80-metre-high steel towers as a technical "visual impact" to be mitigated. We reject this. To us, it is a direct and permanent assault on our sense of place, our safety, and our way of life. Every year we worry about the existential threat of bushfire. To this, the added worry about increased bushfire risk which would be introduced by the WRL and the loss of the peaceful amenity of our homes and properties is a daily burden.

The EES systematically downplays these personal, permanent, and deeply felt impacts, prioritizing a narrative of economic expediency over the real, tangible costs borne by us.

This submission is born from our direct experience and a diligent analysis of the WRL EES. It is our story, a narrative of resistance to bad decisions and planning, and a call for accountability.

Purpose of our Submission

The purpose of this submission is to demonstrate that AusNet's EES for the proposed WRL is fundamentally flawed. Its rationale is disconnected from our reality, and its failure to genuinely consider alternatives shows a profound lack of respect for our community and the environment we steward.

This submission seeks to highlight to the IAC our community's concerns with the rationale and development of the WRL project and AusNet's inadequate consideration of less-impactful alternatives, and our wholesale disagreement with, and objection to, the Environmental Performance Requirements (EPRs) and management framework proposed.

The WRL is a story of a large-scale project imposed from above, with a justification built upon a shaky foundation of regulatory processes that deliberately excluded environmental concerns from the outset.

AusNet's subsequent EES analysis is considered grossly inadequate and systematically downplays the impact of the proposed WRL on our environment, dismisses the risk to our community, and seeks to pass the responsibility for managing those understated impacts and risks on to our community.

We believe the EES prepared by AusNet is not an impartial assessment of the environmental impacts of the proposed WRL but a retroactive justification for a pre-determined outcome.

On the basis of the evidence outlined in this submission the WVCA argues that the IAC should reject AusNet's EES as a basis for WRL planning approval.

Submission Structure

The WVCA submission consists of 13 Sections. **38** Consolidated recommendations for the IAC and Minister for Planning are presented at **Section 13**.

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Disclaimer

This submission is provided in good faith as a constructive contribution to the consultation process for the Western Renewables Link (WRL) Environmental Effects Statement (EES) inquiry. It is intended to assist the Inquiry and Advisory Committee and Minister for Planning in evaluating the environmental, technical, social, and regulatory implications of the WRL proposal.

Commentary, critique, and analysis contained herein represents the collective views and considered opinions of the Western Victorian Community Alliance (WVCA) members based on our analysis of the published WRL EES documentation and publicly available sources. The WVCA concerns, where raised, are presented as evidence-based opinion and fair comment on matters of public interest, consistent with the principles of lawful advocacy and democratic participation. No defamatory intent is expressed or implied toward any person or entity.

SECTION 1

WVCA CONCERNS OVER PROJECT RATIONALE, IMPACTS, AND FAILURE TO APPROPRIATELY CONSIDER ALTERNATIVES

Section 1 is structure in five parts:

1. A Disconnected Rationale
2. The Failure to Avoid: Analysis of Alternatives
3. The Real Impact
4. Conclusion
5. Recommendations

PART 1: A DISCONNECTED RATIONALE

1.1 The Overarching Narrative vs. Our Reality: A Justification Built on Abstraction

The WVCA observes that AusNet's EES, specifically Chapter 2, "Project Rationale," opens with broad justifications based on high-level global, national, and state commitments. It invokes the Paris Agreement, COP28, and the Victorian Renewable Energy Target (VRET) as the unquestionable drivers for the project. This narrative positions the WRL as an inevitable and globally mandated solution, framing its purpose as a necessary step in the energy transition.

However, we contend that this high-level framing is a cynical and deliberate strategy to deflect from and dismiss the project's devastating local impacts. While we wholeheartedly support the transition to renewable energy and believe in a decarbonised future, we fundamentally dispute AusNet's assertion that their EES demonstrates that the project, in this specific form, is the best or least harmful way to advance those goals. AusNet has used the urgency of these targets to justify a hasty and flawed process, rather than to genuinely explore alternatives that could achieve the same goals with less harm and impact to our community and environment.

1.2 The RIT-T Outcome - a Foundational Flaw and a 'Millstone around this project's neck'

A damning admission in the EES is the acknowledgment that the project's foundation is built on a process that was, by its very design, blind to our concerns. AusNet's EES states that the Regulatory Investment Test for Transmission (RIT-T) process, which first identified the need for the WRL and defined the project form, "excluded matters related to social and environmental impacts on local communities unless it conflicts with the law".

The RIT-T process, which made the initial decision to advance this project, deliberately ignored the very social and environmental impacts the EES is meant to assess. and led to the selection of a "preferred investment option" and project cost in July 2019.

However, by blindly adhering to the original cost, design and route dictated by the RIT-T, AusNet effectively locked in a solution and has failed to genuinely assess whether that solution was the best environmental and social outcome, or whether reasonable adjustment could make it better. AusNet's rigid mindset and adherence to the RIT-T form for the project has meant that its EES assessment has fundamentally been a compromised activity. AusNet's statutory duty to avoid harm has effectively been abandoned by slavishly adhering to the overhead design, making any subsequent claims of "minimising" impacts a hollow and insufficient gesture.

Whether it has just been unwillingness on AusNet's behalf to genuinely consider alternatives, or a lack of freedom and authority to do so, this has rendered AusNet's EES analysis as a self-serving exercise in justifying a pre-determined environmentally ignorant outcome rather than a tool for genuine impact assessment and impact avoidance.

Key alternatives, such as full undergrounding or the Southern corridor, were arbitrarily set aside, not based on a genuine environmental comparison, but on a narrow basis of cost and convenience. AusNet's EES fails to provide a transparent or proportionate environmental evaluation that accounts for the immense and permanent harm the overhead line will inflict on the community. The systematic failure to uphold the statutory duty of avoidance and minimisation, in the WVCA's view, constitutes a breach of both the letter and the spirit of the Victorian Environment Effects Act 978. Consequently, the EES, in its current form, is a defensive document, not one of honest inquiry, and is therefore inadequate for approval.

1.3 The Flawed Dismissal of Alternatives: A Contradiction in the Rationale

AusNet's brief and dismissive treatment of alternatives is a major contradiction. In Chapter 2 and Attachment II of the EES, AusNet's discusses undergrounding as an option, but only to justify its dismissal. The EES argues that a High Voltage Direct Current (HVDC) underground cable would not meet the state's "urgent need" due to an "estimated seven-to-eight-year lead time" and would be "substantially more expensive". It also states that a full underground line was "not assessed" in Attachment I because it "would not meet the Project objectives".

This reasoning is circular and entirely self-serving. The EES Scoping Requirements explicitly call for the EES to document the "likely environmental effects of feasible alternatives, particularly where these offer a potential to avoid or minimise adverse environmental effects". AusNet itself acknowledges that an underground project "would provide benefits associated with reduced greenhouse gas emissions, improved visual and landscape outcomes, and better outcomes for some land uses, aviation, and natural hazards".

By using project objectives that prioritise cost and speed to deem a major, impact-reducing alternative "not feasible," AusNet has created a logic that violates the very intent of the EES process. The WVCA believes this is a clear failure to uphold the principle of impact avoidance.

1.4 Design Development Process

The EES Scoping Requirement mandates that the EES must "document the proponent's design development process leading to the proponent's preferred form of the project". The EES describes a "progressive refinement" process that began with a broad "Area of Interest" and was progressively narrowed to a "Proposed Route," claiming this process was informed by community values and technical advice. However, this description of a methodical process is, in the community's expert view, a retroactive justification for a pre-selected project.

By blindly adhering to the original cost, design and route dictated by AEMO and the RIT-T, AusNet has effectively locked in a solution and has failed to genuinely assess whether that solution was the best environmental and social outcome, or whether reasonable adjustment could make it better.

This approach created an irreversible path dependency, meaning the EES was never a genuine investigation of project type, but merely a justification of an already decided outcome.

AusNet's EES analysis has been structured in a way that violates the fundamental purpose of the Environment Effects Act 978. The EES's role should be to use a genuine assessment of impacts and alternatives to inform a final decision. Instead, the document was used as a tool to defend a decision that had already been made in substance.

The reliance on the RIT-T conclusion as a mandate for the final form of the project has meant that the "alternatives" analysis has largely been designed to defend that choice. This is a profound procedural breach that fundamentally undermines the integrity of the EES. The WVCA believe that if this constraint was removed, AusNet could have found a better way to get power from Western renewable energy zones to Melbourne.

1.5 Environmental Effects of Feasible Alternatives

The Scoping Requirements stipulate that the EES must "document the likely environmental effects of feasible alternatives, particularly where these offer a potential to avoid or minimise adverse environmental effects". In practice, this means any alternative that could substantially reduce impact must be rigorously assessed for its environmental benefits and drawbacks.

The EES's treatment of the full undergrounding option or even partial undergrounding options - the primary alternative our community has advocated for - is a clear breach of this requirement. The EES dismisses this option by asserting it would not meet project objectives and would cost "up to 10 times more per kilometre than overhead lines". This dismissal is based on opaque and poorly substantiated costings. This is a strategic use of information asymmetry, where a conclusory cost figure is used as a "black box" argument to avoid a genuine cost-benefit analysis that monetizes the immense social and environmental benefits of undergrounding. The EES does not attempt to quantify the value of avoiding impacts on our landscapes, our agricultural land, our mental health, or our property values.

Likewise, the evaluation of the Southern corridor alternative is deeply flawed. AusNet's EES dismisses it by asserting that it would have "overall impacts greater than the Proposed Route". However, this conclusion is reached without a clear, evidence based, side-by-side comparison of quantifiable impacts. While AusNet acknowledges the southern route would avoid impacts in areas like Darley, it immediately emphasizes that it would introduce new impacts elsewhere, implying that any benefit is nullified by an equal or greater downside. This is an act of false equivalence.

AusNet has not attempted to grapple with the critical question: is the new impact potentially less damaging or more mitigatable than the significant, permanent impacts it would have avoided? A transparent, multi-criteria environmental assessment would have answered this question, but AusNet has instead used a selective and biased evaluation to find fault with the alternatives. This approach is not a genuine comparison; it is an exercise in justifying the chosen route by foregrounding the negatives of alternatives while downplaying the negatives of the preferred route.

1.6 Basis for Preferred Alignment

The Scoping Requirements demand that the EES "explain the proponent's criteria for evaluating the feasibility of potential alternatives". The EES claims to have used a logical multi-criteria process to identify a "least constrained corridor". However, this methodology lacks a transparent weighting framework. The EES provides no information on how different constraints - such as a "High" biodiversity constraint versus a "High" landscape constraint - were weighted

against each other. Without a clear framework, the process of declaring one corridor the "least constrained" is inherently subjective and impossible to verify. We will highlight later in this submission that some of these individual component assessments were flawed, and consequently, their weighting error has potentially resulted in a less favourable corridor being chosen.

The outcome of this opaque process is a route that concentrates severe, unresolved, and unmitigated impacts on the community's land. This demonstrates that the process was not an impartial search for the best outcome but was, in fact, designed to lead to an already decided conclusion.

Furthermore, the rationale for preferring the overhead mode is almost entirely cost-and convenience-driven, not rooted in comparative environmental merit. The proponent's circular reasoning - that overhead was chosen because underground isn't "feasible" under its self-serving objectives - defies the very intent of the EES process.

Instead of using the EES to justify the overhead line by evaluating alternatives, AusNet has constructed justifications around why undergrounding wouldn't work, citing issues like cost and timing as conclusive barriers rather than challenges to be weighed. This approach reveals a closed-mindedness that fundamentally contradicts the spirit of the EES process.

1.7 Documentation of Identification and Analysis Process

The EES Scoping Requirements state that the "process for identification and analysis of the project alternatives will need to be documented" with a level of investigation proportionate to the significance of potential effects. The EES presents Attachment I as the primary document detailing this process.

A close examination reveals that the core methodology for route selection was never subject to the independent peer review required by the Minister's own Scoping Requirements. This critical procedural non-compliance invalidates the entire process and provides strong grounds for the Minister to reject AusNet's EES as inadequate. Given the extreme community controversy and the immense harm the community will suffer, the route selection methodology is arguably the most critical component of this EES.

While AusNet has produced a lengthy document purporting to document the alternative analysis process, a closer examination indicates this documentation is more of a defensive catalogue than a truly analytical report. The number of alternatives listed in Attachment I gives the illusion of a comprehensive process, but in reality, it serves to obscure the lack of depth in evaluating any single alternative. Each alternative is summarily "shot down" by pointing to a single, show-stopping drawback, whether it be cost, timing, or a perceived conflict with a pre-existing directive. This pattern suggests that the analysis process was not an open search for the best outcome but rather a systematic process of rationalizing the elimination of alternatives the proponent was not inclined to pursue.

The documentation also lacks any quantitative scoring or decision matrix that would be expected in a robust multi-criteria analysis, and the EES relies on qualitative, value-laden statements rather than transparent data to support its conclusions. This is a classic hallmark of a retroactive justification: the conclusion (that the preferred route is best) is reached first, and the narrative is built backward from that conclusion, selectively citing facts that support it. The convenient absence of quantitative evidence and comparative data means that the conclusions

drawn through qualitative analysis cannot easily be disputed. This is not conducive of a document intended to be independently reviewed for credibility. It simply expects the reader to blindly trust the material as being factual, without offering any opportunity for proper cross-examination.

2: THE FAILURE TO AVOID: ANALYSIS OF ALTERNATIVES

2.1 The Illusion of Choice: A Process of Post-Hoc Justification

AusNet's EES presents a narrative of a careful design development process in Chapter 5 and Attachment I, claiming that various alternatives were considered. AusNet asserts that it mapped constraints and, through this process, selected the "least constrained corridor".

Our analysis, however, reveals this to be an illusion of choice. AusNet's documents confirm that this was a process of post-hoc justification for a decision that had already been made. The EES states that by "June 2021 AusNet had already announced this corridor as the preferred single overhead corridor for the Project". This public announcement occurred well before the detailed EES studies were complete, proving that the subsequent "alternatives" analysis was, in fact, a series of rationalizations for a choice that was a *fait accompli*. This approach fundamentally betrays the spirit of a transparent and open-minded alternatives assessment.

2.2 Why Our Alternatives Were Disregarded: The Systemic Dismissal of Feasible Options

WVCA members have repeatedly raised alternatives that could have significantly reduced the project's impact on our community and environment. The EES has systematically and superficially dismissed them, demonstrating a lack of genuine consideration.

2.3 Southern Corridor Alternative

AusNet mention a "Southern Corridor alternative route" but quickly dismisses it by concluding its "overall impacts [are] greater than the Proposed Route". It acknowledges that this route would have "avoid[ed] impacts in the Bolwarrah, Myrning, Darley and Melton areas," but claims that it would simply "introduce impacts in the Gordon, Ballan, Fiskville and Eynesbury areas". AusNet's analysis of this alternative is deeply flawed and biased. It lists "Provide cost efficient connections – Longer, more costly route" as a disadvantage, conflating a non-environmental factor (cost) with environmental viability.

Critically, AusNet provides no actual, side-by-side quantification of the environmental impacts for the southern route versus the preferred route. We are left without the necessary information to truly understand the trade-offs, which is a direct and inexcusable failure to meet Scoping Requirement 3.4.

2.4 Undergrounding Alternative

AusNet's treatment of the undergrounding alternative in its EES is even more problematic. AusNet flatly states that a fully underground 500kV line was "not assessed" in Attachment I because it "would not meet the Project objectives". This is a direct non-compliance with the Scoping Requirement's intent.

To declare the single most effective way to avoid the most significant visual, landscape, and bushfire impacts as "not feasible" based on AusNet's self-defined objectives is a dereliction of their duty to explore impact avoidance. AusNet's analysis of even partial undergrounding at

Darley was limited to a superficial cost-benefit analysis, rejecting it on the grounds of adding "~\$300 million and 2-year delay".

The cost analysis performed by AusNet was not made available for public for analysis, nor compared with any independent 3rd Party assessments, so there is no way to substantiate the credibility of the figures presented.

As far as the community is concerned, it's possible that an independent review may have shown that partial undergrounding is cheaper and more expeditious, resulting in lower maintenance costs over the term of the contract, and would present far less adverse social and environment impact.

The WVCA argues that this demonstrates prioritisation of a pre-determined schedule and cost over genuine environmental and social outcomes.

2.5 The Missing EES: A Lack of Proportionality

The EES cites Scoping Requirement 3.4, which states that the "depth of investigation of alternatives should be proportionate to their potential" to minimize impacts. The WVCA believes AusNet has applied this principle in reverse.

They dedicated minimal investigative effort to the most significant, impact-reducing alternatives, such as full undergrounding or a different corridor, while investing maximum effort into justifying minor tweaks to their pre-chosen route.

This is not proportionality; it is a selective scoping exercise designed to avoid a difficult and expensive conversation about superior design options. This approach fails the spirit of the requirement, which was meant to ensure that genuinely impactful alternatives are not dismissed with cursory treatment.

2.6 A System Designed to Ignore Us: The Disregard of Community Input

The EES and Attachment I acknowledge that our community and other stakeholders raised numerous alternatives, including a more southerly route or routing along existing infrastructure. However, AusNet has then catalogued these alternatives and rejected them with minimal analysis, often citing technical or cost grounds. This confirms that the voices of those people that would be most impacted had negligible influence on the project's core design.

Our input was not used to "refine the preferred alignment" in any meaningful way, but rather to demonstrate a superficial engagement process that systematically dismissed our suggestions.

This renders the public consultation component of the EES a box-ticking exercise rather than a genuine dialogue.

PART 3: THE REAL IMPACT

3.1 The Project Benefits: A Myth of Economic Prosperity Borne on Our Backs

AusNet's EES presents a selective view of the project's economic impact, touting benefits such as an increase in Gross Regional Product of "\$0.9 billion (to Financial Year (FY) 2050 in net present values)" and a peak of "346 workers" during construction. It frames these as benefits for "Victorians" and the "region," creating a narrative of widespread economic prosperity.

This narrative is a myth. AusNet presents generalized, long-term economic gains as justification while completely omitting any calculation of the direct financial losses to the communities impacted. The EES mentions that some landholders with wind turbines "may experience increased income," yet it fails to acknowledge or quantify the devastating financial burden on our members from property devaluation, the loss of productive agricultural land, and the significant costs of fighting this project for five years.

The "benefits" are abstract and distributed widely, while the costs are deeply personal, immediate, and permanent for us. The proposed Community Benefit Fund, a tiny fraction of the project's overall cost, is a poor and insufficient attempt to offset these tangible and lasting harms.

3.2 Our Comparative Assessment

Based on our analysis of the EES, our lived experience within the WRL’s Area of Interest, and our deep connection to the land and the community it supports, we have undertaken our own assessment of the project’s impact ratings.

The WVCA contends that AusNet’s ratings are biased and fail to account for the full range of impacts on our community and environment. Our assessment, detailed in the table below, challenges the proponent's self-assigned ratings and is grounded in the specific evidence and regulatory failures we have identified.

3.3 WVCA EES Impact Rating Assessment Table

EES Impact Rating System Criterion	Description	EES/Ausnet Rating	WVCA (Our) Assessment	Justification for Our Assessment (with Citations)
Cumulative Rating	Overall impact score across all criteria	<i>[Not explicitly stated, but implicitly low]</i>	Significantly higher than proponent's rating	We argue that the EES's rating is based on an incomplete and biased analysis. Our individual ratings across all criteria, which account for the permanent and pervasive nature of the impacts on our community and landscape, lead to a much higher overall impact score. The EES's failure to consider the

EES Impact Rating System Criterion	Description	EES/Ausnet Rating	WVCA (Our) Assessment	Justification for Our Assessment (with Citations)
				compounding effect of this project and others like VNI West is a significant omission.
Sensitivity of environmental or community values	How vulnerable or important the affected environment or community asset is	<i>[Implicitly low]</i>	Extremely High	The EES's rating is too low. We are the custodians of a landscape with high ecological and cultural value, including the Wombat-Lerderderg Forest region and the cultural and amenity value of the Bacchus Marsh landscape, which the EES acknowledges has "high landscape and visual impact". Our communities, livelihoods, and properties are uniquely vulnerable to a project of this scale, yet the EES fails to properly value these assets.
Magnitude, extent, and	The scale, reach, and time span of	<i>[Implicitly moderate]</i>	Massive, Permanent,	The EES's rating is insufficient. The impact of a 190

EES Impact Rating System Criterion	Description	EES/Ausnet Rating	WVCA (Our) Assessment	Justification for Our Assessment (with Citations)
duration of the impact	the impact (e.g., temporary vs. permanent)		and Extensive	km line of 80m-high steel towers is not a temporary or localized issue. It is a permanent visual, landscape, and amenity scar that alters the character of entire regions, affects thousands of landholders, and poses a permanent bushfire risk. The EES's focus on temporary construction impacts is a red herring and minimizes the true scale of the harm.
Existing activities and cumulative effects	Other ongoing or planned activities that may amplify the impact	<i>[Implicitly low]</i>	Significant and Unassessed	We highlight the EES's failure to adequately address the cumulative impact of this project alongside other planned developments, such as the VNI West project, which is mentioned in the EES itself. The EES fails to provide a holistic assessment of

EES Impact Rating System Criterion	Description	EES/Ausnet Rating	WVCA (Our) Assessment	Justification for Our Assessment (with Citations)
				how these two projects, in conjunction, will permanently change the landscape and the energy future of our region.
Benchmarks, policies, and standards	Evaluation against legal or regulatory thresholds and best-practice guidelines	<i>[Implicitly compliant]</i>	Non-Compliant	We argue that the proponent has failed to meet both the letter and the spirit of the EES Scoping Requirements, particularly Section 3.4 on alternatives. The EES's dismissal of alternatives based on cost and its self-defined project objectives is a clear failure to uphold the fundamental principle of impact avoidance. This constitutes a significant non-compliance issue.
Effectiveness of mitigation measures	How well the proposed measures are expected to reduce or	<i>[Implicitly effective]</i>	Ineffective and Insufficient	The EES's proposed mitigation measures are fundamentally inadequate. The permanent and

EES Impact Rating System Criterion	Description	EES/Ausnet Rating	WVCA (Our) Assessment	Justification for Our Assessment (with Citations)
	offset the impact			widespread visual, landscape, and social impacts of an overhead line cannot be truly offset by the proposed measures. The EES even admits that mitigation is not possible for some impacts, and the proponent's rejection of partial undergrounding at Darley demonstrates a clear unwillingness to use the most effective mitigation available.

PART 4: CONCLUSION

The WVCA's evaluation of AusNet's WRL EES leads us to one inescapable conclusion: the WRL EES is not fit for purpose. It fails to meet the letter and, more importantly, the spirit of the EES Scoping Requirements.

The project's rationale is built upon defending the overhead design and route outcome from the RIT-T process which deliberately excluded social and environmental concerns. As a consequence, AusNet's 'alternatives analysis' has not been a genuine search for the least-impact or even a lesser-impact solution, but a process of post-hoc justification for a decision that was made years ago without any regard to the environment.

AusNet's approach to the EES analysis demonstrates a duty of convenience, not a duty of avoidance.

A Better Alternative. AusNet has failed to genuinely assess alternatives, choosing instead to present a pre-determined outcome disguised as a rigorous evaluation. This failure is manifested

through a series of systemic flaws: the adherence to a route and design that ignored community values, dismissal of less impactful alternatives like undergrounding without a transparent or honest comparison of costs and benefits, and the use of an opaque methodology that engineered a route with severe, unresolved impacts.

This EES, in its current form, does not provide a credible or transparent foundation for an informed decision. Approving the project on this basis would ignore the many community voices calling for a genuine examination of alternatives.

By engineering the scope of alternatives to fit a predetermined outcome, AusNet has not fulfilled its obligation under the Environment Effects Act to avoid and minimize environmental damage wherever reasonably possible. AusNet's EES has not demonstrated that the chosen overhead route is the truly superior or only viable option.

We believe that with a proper, unbiased alternatives analysis, a different balance of cost and impact might have been found preferable.

We urge the IAC to find that AusNet's treatment of alternatives is inadequate and to recommend that the Minister for Planning reject the EES in its current form.

We request that AusNet be required to revisit its analysis - with independent oversight - to properly assess all feasible alternatives, including robust underground and route variation studies, in an open and transparent manner.

PART 5: RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the WVCA's concerns over the WRL Project rationale and development, inadequate assessment of impacts and inadequate failure to appropriately consider alternatives, as outlined in Section 1, we recommend that the IAC and the Minister for Planning:

1. **Reject AusNet's EES:** The IAC and the Minister for Planning should reject AusNet's EES for the WRL as inadequate and non-compliant, given the systemic failures identified in the project development and alternatives assessment processes.
2. **Mandate Unconstrained Re-evaluation:** Mandate a new, unconstrained assessment of alternatives for the WRL. This new process must begin with a new, transparent, multi-criteria analysis that gives equal weight to environmental, social, and economic factors.
3. **Independently Analyse Cost and Benefit:** Require a comprehensive and independently peer-reviewed cost-benefit analysis comparing overhead and underground alternatives. This analysis must move beyond narrow capital costs to explicitly monetise and weigh the long-term economic, environmental, and social externalities of both options, consistent with the holistic assessment principles of the EE Act.
4. **Demand Proportionality:** For highly constrained areas like Darley, demand that the new assessment must conduct a robust, detailed, and truly proportionate investigation into all viable alternatives, including partial undergrounding, with an explicit focus on the principle of impact avoidance over mere mitigation.

SECTION 2

WVCA ANALYSIS OF AUSNET'S EES CHAPTER 7 - COMMUNITY AND STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

This Section presents an evaluation of AusNet's engagement process, specifically focusing on the WRL EES Chapter 7, "Community and stakeholder engagement," and Attachment IV, "Stakeholder and community engagement consultation report".

The WVCA believes that AusNet's assessment and characterisation of the impacts of the proposed WRL fails to accurately represent our concerns, our lived experiences, and the true impacts this project will have on our properties, our livelihoods, and the health of our community.

Executive Summary: The Central Findings of Our Evaluation

Our detailed examination of AusNet's EES Chapter 7 and Attachment IV demonstrates that AusNet's community and stakeholder engagement process has been deeply and systematically deficient.

AusNet's engagement strategy appears designed to serve as a means of managing dissent and compiling a cursory record of consultation in order to fulfill a narrow, procedural interpretation of regulatory requirements, rather than to genuinely integrate public input into key decisions.

AusNet's approach represents a significant failure to meet both the procedural and substantive requirements of the EES process and has actively contributed to the profound community distrust that AusNet itself acknowledges.

Our analysis points to a pattern of considerable non-compliance, which includes:

- **Dismissal of Alternatives:** AusNet failed to adequately respond to the community's primary and most widespread request for undergrounding the transmission line. This primary alternative was unilaterally dismissed via an internal inquiry rather than being subjected to a genuine, collaborative evaluation.
- **Dysfunctional Engagement Mechanisms:** The formal consultation bodies, particularly the Community Consultation Group (CCG), proved to be a failed mechanism. The proponent's own documentation confirms the disintegration of this group due to "recruitment failures and mass resignations," a potent symptom of the profound community distrust the project has engendered.
- **The Illusion of Influence:** Our detailed examination of the proponent's claims of responsiveness reveals a systematic practice of re-labelling routine project development procedures, minor operational accommodations, or externally mandated changes as genuine concessions to community feedback. This practice has created a misleading impression of community empowerment.
- **An Unaccountable Future Framework:** The future engagement plan is procedurally flawed. It improperly transfers core responsibility for the high-impact construction phase to an undefined "Principal Contractor" and depends on an Independent Environmental Auditor (IEA) who is not equipped to verify the qualitative aspects of social performance, thereby leaving a significant gap in accountability.

In light of these findings, we formally request that the IAC and the Minister for Planning reject the community and stakeholder engagement assessment contained in the WRL EES as an inadequate and unreliable basis for an informed decision. We recommend that AusNet be required to undertake a new, genuine, and independently peer-reviewed engagement process consistent with the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) principles of collaboration.

Section 2 is structured in seven parts:

1. AusNet's Engagement Process - A Critique of Design and Intent
2. The Illusion of Our Influence - A Deconstruction of Project "Responses"
3. Our Heritage, Our Land - An Inadequate Engagement with Traditional Owners
4. Systemic Deficiencies and the Absence of Accountability
5. Comparative Impact Rating Assessment Table
6. Conclusion
7. Recommendations

PART 1: AUSNET'S ENGAGEMENT PROCESS - A CRITIQUE OF DESIGN AND INTENT

1.1 Contradiction of Foundational Principles: A Failure to Uphold Trust

AusNet's engagement framework, as outlined in their EES, is built upon four stated principles: "understanding, openness, respect and responsiveness". While these terms appear laudable on the surface, a detailed examination of the proponent's actions over the past five years reveals that these principles were not upheld in practice.

The promise of "openness" and "responsiveness," which includes setting "clear expectations with stakeholders about what they can influence," was fundamentally violated by the proponent's pre-determined decision to proceed with an overhead transmission line. This pre-determination created an environment where dialogue was superficial, and our input was never seriously considered in shaping the project's core design.

A critical point of non-compliance is the direct misalignment of the proponent's approach with the IAP2 Core Values, which the project's own Environmental Performance Requirement (EPR) EM5 explicitly mandates for future engagement plans. The IAP2 standard is founded on the promise that "the public's contribution will influence the decision".

However, AusNet's engagement activities have consistently operated at the most rudimentary levels of the IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation - "Inform" and "Consult" - which directly contradicts the commitment in its own Environmental Performance Requirements for a collaborative approach. AusNet provided information through fact sheets and webinars, and documented concerns through drop-in sessions and online surveys, but there is no credible evidence that this input genuinely influenced key decisions. This contradiction between their stated commitment to IAP2 values and their historical actions renders any future promises non-credible and casts serious doubt on their willingness to engage in a meaningful way.

This persistent failure to adhere to the IAP2 standard from the outset is the direct cause of the loss of social license and the deep-seated community distrust that AusNet now acknowledges as a major challenge. AusNet's EES documents admit to a social environment plagued by distrust and a breakdown in their social license to operate. This is not an unforeseen consequence but a direct result of their decision to use a low-level, one-way communication

model. A genuine collaborative approach would have allowed for shared analysis and the joint development of solutions, potentially mitigating conflict. Instead, AusNet chose a defensive model focused on defending a pre-existing decision, which actively fuelled the intense community anger and frustration that is now the root cause of the social performance crisis.

1.2 The Collapse of Formal Consultation Mechanisms: The Community Consultation Group (CCG)

AusNet presents the Community Consultation Group (CCG) as a cornerstone of its structured consultation framework, intended to "maximise community understanding of the Project and participation". However, a closer look at the proponent's own documentation reveals a mechanism that was dysfunctional from its inception and ultimately failed. This failure is a critical diagnostic indicator of the profound community distrust that the project generated and failed to manage.

The evidence of the CCG's failure is explicit and is documented within the EES itself. The project's ambition to form three geographically based CCGs collapsed at the first hurdle because of the "small number of nominations received". The proponent's ability to form only one group is not a success; it is a clear and powerful early warning sign that the community lacked the trust and buy-in to participate in their proposed engagement structures. This initial lack of interest was a direct reflection of the community's belief that the process was tokenistic and would not be influential.

The most damning piece of evidence is the admission that "In the second half of 2021, after a significant number of resignations, the group's composition and approach was reviewed". A functioning, effective consultation group does not experience a mass exodus of its members. This event points to a fundamental breakdown where participants, having experienced the process firsthand, concluded that it was not a worthwhile or genuine use of their time. The proponent's concession that it has been "difficult to recruit and retain CCG members representing all sections of the Project" further highlights this failure. As of August 2024, only six community members and council representatives were regularly attending. For a 190 km project traversing six Local Government Areas and impacting thousands of people, a group of six individuals cannot be considered a representative body and its ability to provide credible, broad-based community advice is non-existent.

The collapse of the CCG is a direct and predictable consequence of the proponent's low-level engagement model. When the community's primary concerns, such as the call for undergrounding, were consistently dismissed, and when it became clear that their feedback had no substantive influence on major decisions, community members logically chose to withdraw their participation. The mass resignations are not a random administrative issue; they are a direct consequence of a process that the community perceived as pre-determined and inauthentic. AusNet acknowledges the existence of "community distrust" but their engagement strategy actively fuelled this distrust, ultimately leading to the CCG's failure.

PART 2: THE ILLUSION OF OUR INFLUENCE - A DECONSTRUCTION OF PROJECT "RESPONSES"

2.1 Dismissal of Our Core Proposal: The Case for Undergrounding

Our community's most consistent, widespread, and important request has been for the transmission line to be fully or partially undergrounded. The proponent's purported response to

this core demand was not a collaborative discussion, but rather a solitary rejection of the proposal. The EES documentation confirms that AusNet "commissioned an independent investigation into underground construction" and subsequently released an "Underground Construction Summary" report concluding that overhead construction was the "most appropriate solution". This is not a genuine response in the spirit of the EES process; it is a defensive action designed to justify a pre-existing commitment.

There is no evidence within AusNet's EES of a shared assessment, joint fact-finding, or a sincere investigation of partial undergrounding in high-sensitivity areas. The proponent's own documentation concedes that Moorabool Shire Council "disputes the characterisation of underground as an unsuitable design solution" and that "AusNet's underground report is based on technical design options that are not agreed between council and AusNet". This fact alone invalidates AusNet's claim of a robust and universally accepted conclusion. The ongoing nature of this disagreement proves that, from our perspective, the matter is not closed, and the engagement process has failed to resolve the central point of contention.

The dismissal of undergrounding is the root cause of the breakdown in social license. Our five-year campaign against this project is predicated on the belief that a less impactful, more modern alternative exists. AusNet's EES documents acknowledge our strong preference for undergrounding and our continuous advocacy for it. Their response was to produce a report that merely justifies their original overhead approach, thereby validating our perception that the process was pre-determined. This dismissive action is the reason trust collapsed and is the source of the "social licence" issue that AusNet themselves identifies. Therefore, the EES's failure to resolve this core issue means it cannot be considered a credible foundation for project approval.

Anecdotal and procedural evidence indicates that AusNet made no genuine effort to engage collaboratively with the community, particularly in relation to the issue of social license.

At no point did AusNet seek to transparently address community concerns by commissioning and releasing for public scrutiny, a credible, independent assessment of full or partial undergrounding options.

Such an analysis - grounded in the criteria explicitly identified by the community - could have provided a robust comparative framework and potentially validated the overhead transmission design as the most appropriate environmental and technical solution. Instead, AusNet elected to bypass meaningful engagement, opting instead to quietly reinforce its predetermined preference. This approach not only sidelined community input but also undermined the legitimacy of the consultation process.

Even as community opposition intensified and the underlying tactic became increasingly apparent, AusNet failed to take any substantive steps to rebuild trust or respond to the concerns raised - further reinforcing the perception that public engagement was never a genuine priority.

2.2 Misrepresenting Our Impact: Examination of the "Project Responses" Table

AusNet presents Table 7.6 ("Project responses") as the primary evidence of a responsive engagement process where community feedback has led to direct change. However, deconstruction of this table reveals that the claims of responsiveness are largely an illusion. The majority of the listed "responses" are not genuine concessions to our influence but fall into

one of three categories: standard project development procedures, minor operational accommodations, or externally forced changes. AusNet has created a misleading narrative by appropriating routine, technical, or externally driven project changes and reframing them as "responses" to our feedback.

The following table systematically deconstructs these claims:

AusNet's Claimed Response	Our Analysis (Substantive Change vs. Minor Accommodation vs. Dismissal)	Our Justification (Evidence & Citation)	Significance of Failure
"Based on community input... the AOI was narrowed to an identified corridor"	Standard Project Procedure	This is a standard, technically driven procedure in all EES processes, not a concession to community input. AusNet misrepresents a necessary step as a community win.	High
"...the proposed terminal station was relocated from north of Ballarat to Bulgana."	Externally Forced Change	The EES links this change directly to the requirements of the VNI West project. It was not a decision made in response to WRL community feedback. To present this as a response to local community feedback is disingenuous.	High
"Acknowledging the community's advocacy for undergrounding, AusNet... commissioned an independent investigation..."	Dismissal of Key Concern	The "response" was a unilateral investigation that confirmed the proponent's existing position. This is a rejection of community input, not an incorporation of it. The process lacked	High

AusNet's Claimed Response	Our Analysis (Substantive Change vs. Minor Accommodation vs. Dismissal)	Our Justification (Evidence & Citation)	Significance of Failure
		collaboration and transparency.	
"...moved towers in several locations to align the Proposed Route with internal fences..."	Minor Accommodation	This is routine "micro-siting" and is a minor operational adjustment. It does not constitute a substantive change to the project's overall design or impact profile, yet it is presented as a key example of community influence.	Medium
"Implemented lower single circuit towers... around MacPherson Park to reduce impacts to the Melton Aerodrome."	Technical Requirement	This is a technical design constraint related to aviation safety, not a response to general community feedback. It is a regulatory requirement, not a concession.	Medium

This pattern of misattribution and misrepresentation demonstrates a systematic effort to create a paper trail of consultation without making any meaningful concessions to our concerns. This strategy is a clear sign of a process focused on achieving regulatory compliance over genuine collaboration, and it has served to further undermine our trust in AusNet and the EES process as a whole.

2.3 Our Unaddressed Concerns: The True Impacts on Our Lived Experience

The proponent's EES fails to address the true and profound impacts on our lived experience. While AusNet acknowledges "mental health" as an engagement challenge, their response - offering a confidential counselling service - is a superficial and reactive measure. We, the community, know that the root cause of this mental anguish is the profound uncertainty, the threat to our properties and our children's futures, and the feeling of helplessness. This

response addresses the symptom, not the cause, and fails to acknowledge that the mental distress is a direct result of the project's design and the proponent's dismissive approach.

Similarly, we have repeatedly raised concerns that the towers will "drastically affect... local land and property values". The proponent's response is to outline the compensation process and discuss professional fees. This is, in effect, an admission of the impact, but it fails to address our primary concern: that this financial loss is permanent and cannot be fully mitigated. The proponent's plan to industrialize our pristine landscapes with 80-metre-high steel lattice towers directly contradicts the "peaceful, country lifestyle" that attracted many of us to this region. The visual and emotional toll of these massive, intrusive structures is dismissed as an unavoidable consequence, a stance we find unacceptable.

While it is self-evident that property values across the broader region will be diminished, due to both visual intrusion and associated impacts, the compensation framework restricts eligibility to properties situated directly within the designated route corridor.

Were compensation instead calculated as the aggregate of incremental value loss across all properties within visual proximity of the transmission line's full extent, the resulting figure would represent a substantial additional cost attributable exclusively to the overhead design, and one not incurred by undergrounding.

Yet this significant broader devaluation is excluded from both the compensation model and the EES's accounting of overhead transmission costs, effectively obscuring the true financial burden imposed by the overhead option and misrepresenting its comparative impact

PART 3: OUR HERITAGE, OUR LAND - AN INADEQUATE ENGAGEMENT WITH TRADITIONAL OWNERS

3.1. A Procedural Checkbox, not a Genuine Partnership

AusNet's engagement with Traditional Owners (TOs) and Registered Aboriginal Parties (RAPs), as documented in the EES, is a procedural checklist rather than a genuine partnership. The EES lists a series of activities such as "CHMP inception meetings," "EES workshops," and "Fieldwork". While these activities are necessary for compliance with the Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006, simply logging their occurrence is not sufficient for a meaningful EES. AusNet provides "scant evidence of its substance, effectiveness, or outcomes" and fails to provide any details on the key issues raised by the RAPs or how these concerns influenced the project's design.

This omission of substantive content is a critical flaw. RAPs and Traditional Owners are custodians of both tangible and intangible cultural values, landscapes, and waterways. Without documenting the specific concerns raised in these meetings, AusNet makes it impossible for the Minister or the IAC to assess whether these values have been adequately respected and protected. This absence of critical information renders the cultural heritage assessment incomplete and non-transparent, undermining the entire EES process.

3.2. A Critical Omission: The Unexplained Refusal to Engage

The most alarming aspect of the Traditional Owner engagement is a critical red flag that AusNet mentions but fails to explain. The EES casually notes that "All RAPs attended and participated in these workshops apart from Wadawurrung Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation (WTOAC), who declined the offer to attend". The refusal of a statutory body representing Traditional Owners to participate in a key EES workshop is not a trivial matter. It signifies a fundamental

breakdown in the relationship, a serious objection to the project or its process, or a deep-seated disagreement that has not been resolved. A transparent and compliant EES would address this issue head-on. It would be expected to provide an explanation for the WTOAC's refusal, outline their specific concerns, and detail the alternative measures taken to ensure their cultural values were still adequately captured and assessed.

AusNet's EES does none of this. It simply states the fact and moves on, leaving a significant gap in the assessment record. This silence is a deliberate act of withholding critical information from the decision-making process. The proponent's failure to provide an explanation for the WTOAC's refusal, or to detail how they compensated for this absence, is not a simple oversight. It is an act of non-transparency that suggests a fundamental breakdown in the relationship with a key stakeholder. This renders the Aboriginal cultural heritage assessment "unreliable" and "incomplete" as a foundation for an informed decision.

PART 4: SYSTEMIC DEFICIENCIES AND THE ABSENCE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

4.1. The Accountability Vacuum: Delegating Responsibility to a Contractor

The framework for future community and stakeholder engagement is procedurally flawed and lacks clear accountability. AusNet's EES states that during the high-impact construction phase, the "Principal Contractor" must "develop community and stakeholder engagement plans" and a complaints management system. The proponent, AusNet, whose reputation and social license are at stake, is relegated to merely reviewing and approving this plan. This constitutes an improper delegation of a core proponent responsibility to a contractor whose primary drivers are budget and schedule, not nuanced, long-term community relationship management.

The oversight mechanism for this process is the Independent Environmental Auditor (IEA). However, an IEA is "ill-equipped to audit the qualitative aspects of social performance". An IEA can verify the existence of a document or a complaints log, but they cannot make a professional judgment on whether engagement was truly "genuine," whether community input was meaningfully considered, or whether a complaint resolution was satisfactory to the community. This means the primary mechanism for ensuring compliance with social performance commitments is unable to audit the most important aspects of that performance.

AusNet's future engagement framework is designed to delegate responsibility, frames commitments in vague terms that are difficult to enforce and proposes to assign oversight to an auditor who cannot effectively audit the qualitative outcomes, thereby creating a perfect accountability vacuum.

4.2. A Failure of Quality Assurance: The Omission of Peer Review

A significant and critical deficiency in AusNet's EES documentation is the absence of any independent peer review of the community and stakeholder engagement methodology, process, or the resulting reports. A search of Chapter 7 and Attachment IV finds no mention of any such review having been commissioned or conducted.

Technical reports in an exemplar EES should be expected to be subject to peer review to ensure their methodological soundness. However, the social and engagement components of this highly contentious project appear to have been entirely self-assessed by AusNet and its consultants.

The omission of a peer review is not considered an oversight; it is a strategic decision to maintain control over the project's narrative.

A truly independent expert in public participation or social performance would have almost certainly identified the systemic failures outlined in this report: the misalignment with IAP2 standards, the "Decide, Announce, Defend" model of consultation, and the misrepresentation of community influence.

By avoiding this scrutiny, AusNet has ensured that its self-serving narrative of a successful, responsive engagement process has gone unchallenged within the EES. This prioritisation of narrative control over transparency and quality assurance further erodes the credibility of AusNet's EES and its commitment to quality assurance.

PART 5: COMPARATIVE IMPACT RATING ASSESSMENT TABLE

The table below provides a clear, evidence-based comparison between AusNet's self-assessed impacts and our community's assessment, grounded in our lived experience and our analysis of the evidence presented. This table serves as a direct contradiction to AusNet's methodology and conclusions.

AusNet's EES Impact Rating System Criterion	Description	EES/AusNet Rating	WVCA (Our) Assessment	Our Justification (Evidence & Citation)
Overall impact score across all criteria	Overall impact score across all criteria	Not explicitly stated as a single score; implied to be manageable with mitigation.	High to Extreme	The project will have permanent, irreversible impacts on our property values, mental health, and rural lifestyle, impacts that cannot be mitigated by minor adjustments or complaints hotlines. The identified "responses" are superficial and do not address the core issues.

AusNet's EES Impact Rating System Criterion	Description	EES/AusNet Rating	WVCA (Our) Assessment	Our Justification (Evidence & Citation)
Sensitivity of environmental or community values	How vulnerable or important the affected environment or community asset is	Varies (e.g., acknowledged sensitivity in some areas, but overall rating is implied as manageable)	Extreme	Our region contains national parks, state forests, and high-value agricultural land. The proponent's documents acknowledge the existence of "high constraint areas" and the sensitivity of Aboriginal cultural heritage, yet their proposed route and procedural engagement fail to adequately avoid these values.
Magnitude, extent, and duration of the impact	The scale, reach, and time span of the impact (e.g., temporary vs. permanent)	Implied as temporary during construction and manageable during operation with mitigation.	Permanent and Irreversible	The 80-meter-high towers create permanent visual pollution that cannot be landscaped away. The loss of prime agricultural land, disruption to

AusNet's EES Impact Rating System Criterion	Description	EES/AusNet Rating	WVCA (Our) Assessment	Our Justification (Evidence & Citation)
				<p>bio-links, and the irreversible alteration of the landscape are not temporary impacts but are permanent scars on our environment and community.</p>
<p>Existing activities and cumulative effects</p>	<p>Other ongoing or planned activities that may amplify the impact</p>	<p>Mentioned as a "key feedback theme" and considered in some technical reports but not adequately rated.</p>	<p>Significant and Unacceptable</p>	<p>Our region already faces significant impacts from existing wind farms and transmission lines. The proponent's response focuses on individual technical assessments, not the collective burden on our community, and fails to rate the cumulative effect on our health and environment.</p>

AusNet's EES Impact Rating System Criterion	Description	EES/AusNet Rating	WVCA (Our) Assessment	Our Justification (Evidence & Citation)
Effectiveness of mitigation measures	How well the proposed measures are expected to reduce or offset the impact	Implied as effective and sufficient.	Low to Non-existent	AusNet's mitigation measures - e.g., micro-siting towers to avoid fences or offering counselling - are superficial and do not address the fundamental, long-lasting impacts of the project's design and location. They fail to mitigate property devaluation, fire risk, and the irreversible change to our landscape.

PART 6: CONCLUSION

Section 2 of the WVCA submission demonstrates that that community concerns have been systematically downplayed, dismissed, or reframed as minor issues by AusNet in compiling their EES.

The evidence within Chapter 7 and Attachment IV, when rigorously scrutinised, proves that AusNet's engagement process was a hollow exercise in box-ticking, not a genuine effort to collaborate with our community. The acknowledged "community distrust" and the collapse of their formal consultation mechanisms are not anomalies but the predictable result of a pre-determined and inauthentic process.

AusNet's Community and Stakeholder Engagement is not a sound or reliable basis for an informed decision by the IAC or the Minister for Planning. It fails to meet the core requirements and intent of the EES Scoping Requirements.

PART 7: RECOMMENDATIONS

The WVCA, therefore, demand a path forward that upholds the principles of transparency, accountability, and genuine collaboration.

Based on the WVCA's concerns over AusNet's Community and Stakeholder engagement analysis, as outlined in Section 2, we recommend that the IAC and the Minister for Planning:

1. **Mandate a New Process:** Mandate a new, genuine community and stakeholder engagement process that is transparent, independently overseen, and explicitly structured around the "Collaborate" level of the IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation. This new process must begin with a genuine re-evaluation of alternatives, including the full and partial undergrounding of the line, in collaboration with our community and independent experts.
2. **Require Independent Oversight:** Require the new community and stakeholder engagement process, and all resulting documentation, to be subject to ongoing oversight and final peer review by suitably qualified, independent experts in public participation and social performance, with all reports made publicly available.

SECTION 3

WVCA ASSESSMENT OF AUSNET'S EES CHAPTER 8 - BIODIVERSITY AND HABITAT

This Section provides an evaluation of AusNet's WRL EES assessment, specifically focusing on Chapter 8, "Biodiversity and Habitat".

The WVCA believes that AusNet's assessment is not a credible foundation for an informed decision, as it fundamentally fails to accurately measure the impacts this project will have on our land and the fragile ecosystems it supports.

Executive Summary: The Central Findings of Our Evaluation

Based on a thorough evaluation of AusNet's WRL EES documentation, specifically Chapter 8 and its supporting materials, our analysis concludes that AusNet's biodiversity assessment is built on an unreliable and incomplete foundation. This renders its conclusions speculative and incapable of meeting the legal and regulatory requirements of a credible EES.

Our key findings are as follows:

- **Incomplete Baseline Data:** AusNet's Technical Report A: Biodiversity Impact Assessment concedes a significant procedural shortcoming, admitting that approximately 24% of the Project Area requiring ecological survey was not fully assessed. This is not a minor oversight; it is a fundamental flaw that makes it impossible to know the true extent of the project's impact before a decision is made and could well have excluded the most significant and predictably damaging locations.
- **Subversion of the EES Process:** AusNet's EES documentation attempts to defer these critical baseline surveys to a post-approval phase using Environmental Performance Requirements (EPRs), such as EPR BD1. This approach is contrary to the statutory purpose of the EES, which is to assess impacts before a decision is made. This framework would effectively remove public and regulatory scrutiny from the most critical stage of the assessment process.
- **Unproven and Ineffective Mitigation:** Even with its incomplete data, AusNet acknowledges that the project will have a "Likely" significant impact on critically endangered ecological communities and proposes the clearing of over 238 hectares of native vegetation. Our analysis shows that AusNet's proposed mitigation measures for threatened species are generic, unproven, and conditional, revealing a manifest failure to genuinely "avoid and minimise" adverse effects.
- **Absence of Independent Scrutiny:** A significant deficiency in the assessment is the complete absence of any formal, independent peer review of the biodiversity and habitat methodology, process, or resulting reports. This omission severely undermines the credibility of AusNet's self-assessment and raises fundamental questions about the quality and rigor of the work.

Considering these critical failures, the WVCA recommend that the IAC and the Minister for Planning find AusNet's assessment of biodiversity and habitat impacts of the WRL as detailed in Chapter 8 of AusNet's EES to be inadequate. We recommend that AusNet be required to complete all necessary baseline surveys and revise its impact assessment with complete and independently accredited data before any project approval is considered.

Section 3 is structured in six parts:

1. A Flawed Foundation: The Failure to Characterise Our Land
2. Misuse of Environmental Performance Requirements (EPRs)
3. Ineffective and Unproven Mitigation of Irreversible Harm
4. The Lack of Integrity: The Omission of Independent Peer Review
5. Conclusion
6. Recommendations

PART 1: A FLAWED FOUNDATION: THE FAILURE TO CHARACTERISE OUR LAND

The EES Scoping Requirements legally mandate that the proponent must "characterise broadly the type, distribution, and condition of biodiversity values within a suitable study area" using "targeted field surveys". This is a fundamental procedural requirement of the *Environment Effects Act 1978*. Our analysis of AusNet's documentation reveals a significant procedural shortcoming in meeting this requirement.

1.1 The Unassessed Quarter: The 24% Data Gap

AusNet's own Technical Report A: Biodiversity Impact Assessment explicitly states that approximately 24% of the Project Area identified for ecological survey was not fully assessed. This comprises over 469 hectares that were "not surveyed" and an additional 109 hectares that were "partially surveyed". AusNet provides "land access constraints" as the sole justification for this extensive data gap.

We, as a community, recognise that this is a direct result of our unified opposition to this project and our principled refusal to grant access for a project we do not support. However, this is not a failure on our part. It is AusNet's responsibility to gather the necessary data to support a credible EES. To proceed with the statutory process when a quarter of the required survey area remains unassessed is premature and serves to transfer the risk of unknown environmental impacts from AusNet to our community and our environment.

1.2 Unjustified Reliance on Unreliable Modelling

In the absence of empirical field data for these vast areas, AusNet has relied on desktop modelling and what it terms a "conservative approach" to predict vegetation type and condition. Yet, the EES's own technical report acknowledges the severe limitations of this method, stating that such modelling should only be "considered a guide" and that certain critical vegetation types, such as native grasslands, are "generally poorly represented" in these datasets.

AusNet's claim that a "conservative approach" - which assumes the presence of a value in the absence of data - is a valid substitute for a proper assessment is a fundamental misrepresentation. A conservative assumption does not negate the need for empirical evidence to determine the actual presence, extent, quality, and significance of a biodiversity value.

Without this essential data, it becomes impossible to perform the core functions of a robust environmental assessment. AusNet cannot:

- Accurately assess the magnitude of potential impacts
- Genuinely apply the 'avoid and minimise' mitigation hierarchy
- Develop specific and effective mitigation measures

- Calculate a credible and legally defensible offset liability.

This is a high-risk compliance failure that subverts the EES process. We are deeply concerned that high-value biodiversity, such as undiscovered populations of threatened species or high-quality ecological communities that we, the landowners, know exist on our properties, could be destroyed without a proper assessment. AusNet's decision to proceed with the EES despite this data gap is a strategic choice that prevents the public and decision-makers from scrutinizing the true scale of the biodiversity impacts.

1.3 Non-compliance with EES Scoping Requirements

The following table demonstrates the direct failure of AusNet's EES to comply with the Scoping Requirements for characterising the existing environment.

Requirement (EES Scoping Requirements, Section 4.1, p. 15-16)	AusNet's Delivery (Evidence from EES & Technical Report A)	Identified Gap / Failure
"Characterise broadly the type, distribution, and condition of biodiversity values within a suitable study area..."	The EES admits that approximately 24% of the Project Area requiring survey was not fully assessed due to "land access constraints".	The characterisation is incomplete. The type, distribution, and condition of biodiversity values across a significant portion of the impact footprint are unknown.
"Characterisation of the existing environment is to be informed by relevant databases, literature... and targeted field surveys..."	For 24% of the required survey area, characterisation relies on desktop modelling, which AusNet's own report acknowledges has significant limitations.	The EES fails to use the required method (targeted field surveys) for a substantial part of the Project Area, substituting it with a less reliable method.
"Identify and characterise any ephemeral wetlands/habitat for threatened species and communities listed under the EPBC Act or FFG Act."	The presence, extent, and condition of such habitats cannot be confirmed or denied in the unsurveyed 24% of the Project Area. The assessment remains speculative.	The EES fails to definitively identify and characterise these critical values across the entire impact area.

PART 2: MISUSE OF ENVIRONMENTAL PERFORMANCE REQUIREMENTS

2.1 The Deferral of Our Fate

AusNet has systematically used the Environmental Performance Requirements (EPRs) to defer fundamental assessment tasks to a post-approval stage, effectively subverting the statutory purpose of the EES process.

The most blatant example is EPR BD1, which states that ecological surveys of unsurveyed areas will be completed *prior to the finalisation of the detailed design*. This is not an enforceable requirement for managing an impact; it is an instruction to undertake the baseline assessment that the EES itself was legislatively required to contain.

This approach transforms the EES from an "impact assessment" into a "process approval," where the Minister is being asked to make a decision based on a promise that the full environmental picture will be revealed later. This removes the public and the IAC from the most critical stage of the assessment - the understanding of baseline conditions - and defeats the very purpose of public participation.

This framework also relies on vague and unenforceable language. EPR BD1 promises that infrastructure will be moved "to the extent practicable" to avoid native vegetation and threatened species. The term "to the extent practicable" is a significant loophole that allows AusNet to balance environmental protection against cost and convenience after approvals are granted, and our voices can no longer be heard.

This creates a perfect accountability vacuum, placing the fate of our local ecosystems in the hands of a contractor whose primary concern is the bottom line. The approval of an EES that defers the collection of essential data would set a dangerous precedent, weaken the legal framework of the *Environment Effects Act 1978*, and make it a less effective tool for transparent and accountable environmental decision-making.

2.2 Non-compliance with the *Environment Effects Act 1978*

The following table demonstrates how AusNet's proposed EPR framework fails to meet the fundamental obligations of the *Environment Effects Act 1978*.

Statutory Obligation under the <i>Environment Effects Act 1978</i>	Proponent's Proposed Action (via EPRs)	Analysis of Non-Compliance
The proponent must prepare and submit an EES for the Minister's assessment of environmental effects (Section 4(1)).	EPR BD1 requires baseline ecological surveys to be completed <i>after</i> the EES is submitted, <i>prior to</i> final design.	The EES submitted for assessment is incomplete. It defers the collection of essential data required for the Minister to conduct a proper assessment of environmental effects.

Statutory Obligation under the <i>Environment Effects Act 1978</i>	Proponent's Proposed Action (via EPRs)	Analysis of Non-Compliance
The Minister's assessment is to inform decisions on whether the works should proceed (Section 1(c)).	The EES provides incomplete information, preventing a fully informed assessment. The true impacts in 24% of the Project Area are unknown.	The Minister cannot be fully informed by an assessment that is based on incomplete data. The decision-making process is compromised.
The EES must be placed on public exhibition for comment (Section 9(1)).	Key assessment data (from surveys in 24% of the Project Area) will be generated <i>after</i> the public exhibition and IAC hearing have concluded.	The public and the IAC are denied the opportunity to review and comment on the full environmental impacts of the project, defeating the purpose of public participation in the EES process.

PART 3: INEFFECTIVE AND UNPROVEN MITIGATION OF IRREVERSIBLE HARM

3.1 A Failure to Avoid

AusNet's primary objective, as outlined in the EES, was to "avoid, and where avoidance is not possible, minimise" adverse effects. Even with its incomplete data, the EES documentation provides unmistakable evidence that this objective has been disregarded. The sheer scale of the documented destruction demonstrates that the project design was not adequately guided by ecological constraints.

WVCA analysis shows that the project will require the clearing of over 238 hectares of native vegetation and the removal of 991 large trees. This includes 5.37 hectares of the critically endangered Natural Temperate Grassland of the Victorian Volcanic Plain and 16.61 hectares of the endangered Grey Box Grassy Woodlands.

These are not minor incursions; they are substantial and irreversible impacts on communities that have already suffered historical decline. This outcome demonstrates a clear failure by AusNet to apply the 'avoid and minimise' hierarchy in the project design. AusNet's claim that avoidance was a central consideration appears to be a justification exercise after the design was finalised, rather than a genuine reflection of a design process driven, or adjusted, by ecological constraints.

3.2 Conditional and Uncertain Mitigation

The proposed mitigation measures detailed by AusNet are often uncertain and unproven. For example, the EES suggests installing "glider poles" for the endangered Southern Greater Glider, but it provides no evidence of their efficacy and makes their implementation conditional on

"landholder discussion and agreement". This is not a firm commitment but a promise contingent on an uncertain outcome.

Similarly, AusNet admits that the effectiveness of proposed bird diverters for the endangered Brolga is based on overseas studies and that "there is a lack of systematic, peer-review studies specifically assessing the effectiveness... within Australia". This is an explicit acknowledgement that the effectiveness of the proposed mitigation for a state-listed endangered species is unknown.

3.3 Conceding Significant Residual Impacts

Furthermore, AusNet concedes a "High" residual impact on the critically rare Brittle Greenhood and a "Moderate" residual impact on the Creekline Grassy Woodland Community even *after* applying mitigation measures.

This is irrefutable evidence that the proposed mitigation framework is not effective at reducing impacts to an acceptable level for some of the most significant biodiversity values affected by the project.

This leads the WVCA to conclude that AusNet's mitigation framework is not a genuine commitment to reduce harm; it is a procedural exercise designed to create the illusion of environmental responsibility while accepting massive residual impacts as an unavoidable outcome.

PART 4: THE LACK OF INTEGRITY: THE OMISSION OF INDEPENDENT PEER REVIEW

A significant deficiency in AusNet's EES documentation is the absence of any formal, independent peer review of the biodiversity and habitat methodology, process, or resulting reports. While other technical reports in an EES are routinely peer-reviewed to ensure their methodological soundness, the biodiversity and habitat components of this highly contentious project appear to have been entirely self-assessed by AusNet and its consultants.

This omission is not a minor oversight. In science, peer review is the fundamental process for validating a claim, and its absence leaves the findings open to question.

By failing to have the assessment peer-reviewed, AusNet is asking the public, the IAC, and the Minister to take its findings on faith. This introduces an unacceptable risk of undetected methodological errors, flawed assumptions, and confirmation bias. For a project of this scale and complexity, particularly one with acknowledged data gaps and contested mitigation strategies, independent peer review is not merely best practice; it is an essential component of due diligence.

The absence of this scrutiny ensures that AusNet's self-serving narrative of a successful assessment process remains unchallenged, further eroding the credibility of its EES. This failure to seek external validation is a matter of public trust and demonstrates AusNet's unwillingness to be held accountable.

The table below provides a clear, evidence-based comparison between AusNet's self-assessed impacts and our community's assessment, grounded in our lived experience and our detailed analysis of the EES documentation.

AusNet's EES Impact Rating System Criterion	Description	EES/Proponent Rating	WVCA (Our) Assessment	Our Justification (Evidence & Citation)
Cumulative Rating	Overall impact score across all criteria	Not explicitly stated; implied as manageable with mitigation.	High to Extreme	The project will have permanent, irreversible impacts on our property values, livelihoods, and the natural environment. AusNet's own documents concede "Likely" significant impacts on critically endangered ecological communities and "High" residual impacts on rare species even after mitigation.
Sensitivity of environmental or community values	How vulnerable or important the affected environment or community asset is	Varies; acknowledged sensitivity in some areas.	Extreme	Our region contains national parks, state forests, high-value agricultural land, and critically endangered ecological communities, all of which are

AusNet's EES Impact Rating System Criterion	Description	EES/Proponent Rating	WVCA (Our) Assessment	Our Justification (Evidence & Citation)
				of extreme importance. AusNet's documentation acknowledges this sensitivity yet proposes a route that causes significant damage.
Magnitude, extent, and duration of the impact	The scale, reach, and time span of the impact (e.g., temporary vs. permanent)	Implied as temporary during construction and manageable during operation.	Permanent and Irreversible	The project will destroy 238.607 hectares of native vegetation and fragment critical habitats, creating permanent damage that can never recover to its original state. This is not a temporary or manageable impact but a permanent scar on our environment and community.

AusNet's EES Impact Rating System Criterion	Description	EES/Proponent Rating	WVCA (Our) Assessment	Our Justification (Evidence & Citation)
Existing activities and cumulative effects	Other ongoing or planned activities that may amplify the impact	Mentioned in some technical reports but not adequately rated.	Significant and Unacceptable	Our community already experiences impact from existing wind farms and transmission lines. The EES fails to accurately assess the collective burden of these combined projects on our local biodiversity, flora, and fauna, making the proposed impacts significant and unacceptable.
Effectiveness of mitigation measures	How well the proposed measures are expected to reduce or offset the impact	Implied as effective and sufficient.	Low to Non-existent	Mitigation measures such as "glider poles" for the Southern Greater Glider and "bird diverters" for the Brolga are unproven in the Australian context and conditional on

AusNet's EES Impact Rating System Criterion	Description	EES/Proponent Rating	WVCA (Our) Assessment	Our Justification (Evidence & Citation)
				landholder agreement. The EES's own data shows that residual impacts remain "High" for a critically rare species, proving the ineffectiveness of the proposed measures.

PART 5: CONCLUSION

Our evaluation of the EES Chapter 8 demonstrates that AusNet's biodiversity assessment is fundamentally flawed. It is built on incomplete data, attempts to defer critical assessment tasks, and fails to propose effective mitigation for the significant impacts it concedes.

AusNet's biodiversity assessment, in its current form, is not a sound or reliable basis for an informed decision by the IAC or the Minister for Planning. It fails to meet the core requirements and intent of the Environment Effects Act 1978.

PART 6: RECOMMENDATIONS

The WVCA demand a path forward that upholds the principles of transparency and genuine environmental protection.

Based on the WVCA's concerns over AusNet's assessment of the biodiversity and habitat impacts, as outlined in Section 3, we recommend that the IAC and the Minister for Planning:

1. **Reject the EES:** Reject AusNet's Biodiversity Impact Assessment for the proposed WRL as it fails to provide a credible foundation for assessing the project's environmental effects.
2. **Mandate a New Assessment:** Mandate a new, comprehensive assessment process that is based on complete baseline data from the entire Project Area. Require AusNet to complete all necessary field surveys before the EES is considered for approval.

3. **Require Independent Peer Review:** Require the revised assessment, including the biodiversity methodology and findings, to be subject to rigorous, independent peer review by suitably qualified experts.
4. **Redraft Enforceable Commitments:** Require AusNet to redraft all biodiversity and habitat EPRs to be specific, measurable, and legally enforceable, without relying on vague loopholes like "to the extent practicable".

SECTION 4

WVCA ASSESSMENT OF AUSNET'S EES CHAPTER 9 - ABORIGINAL CULTURAL HERITAGE

This Section presents an evaluation of AusNet's WRL EES assessment, specifically focusing on Chapter 9: Aboriginal Cultural Heritage and its supporting documentation.

The WVCA concludes that AusNet's submission fails to meet the statutory requirements of the *Environment Effects Act 1978* and the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006*, rendering it non-compliant and not fit for purpose.

Executive Summary: The Central Findings of Our Evaluation

The key findings of this evaluation are that the EES was submitted prematurely on the basis of critically incomplete investigations, unlawfully deferring the core task of impact assessment to a non-public, post-approval process.

The proposed mitigation measures, particularly Environmental Performance Requirement (EPR) ACH2, are demonstrably inadequate and legally unenforceable. Furthermore, the proponent's claims of successful and respectful stakeholder engagement are directly and emphatically contradicted by the documented testimony of the Registered Aboriginal Parties (RAPs) themselves.

Finally, the omission of independent peer review for this highly sensitive and complex report - fatally undermines the credibility of the entire heritage assessment.

Based on these findings, AusNet's EES, in its current state, fails to provide the IAC and the Minister for Planning with the necessary information to make a lawful and informed assessment. We recommend that AusNet be required to complete all genuine consultations before any project approval is considered.

Section 4 is structured in five parts:

1. Purpose and Legal Imperatives
2. Systemic Failures
3. The Evasion of Independent Scrutiny
4. Conclusion
5. Recommendations

PART 1: PURPOSE AND LEGAL IMPERATIVES

1.1. Purpose of the Report

The purpose of this report is to provide a systematic critique of WRL EES, focusing on AusNet's assessment of Aboriginal cultural heritage, including the technical reports and the Cultural Value Assessments (CVAs) authored by the Registered Aboriginal Parties (RAPs).

1.2. The Foundational Legislative Framework

The WVCA's assessment is grounded in the legislative framework governing environmental and heritage protection in Victoria. The *Environment Effects Act 1978* serves as the cornerstone of this framework, requiring a proponent to prepare an EES for the Minister for Planning's "assessment of the environmental effects of the works". This legal language presupposes that

the environmental baseline is known and that the project's effects can be comprehensively assessed before key approvals are granted. This "front-end" assessment is designed to be transparent and subject to public scrutiny.

Conversely, the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006* establishes the Cultural Heritage Management Plan (CHMP) process, which empowers Traditional Owners as protectors of their cultural heritage and serves as the primary mechanism for detailed fieldwork and the management of tangible heritage.

A compliant EES must navigate these two legislative instruments in a manner that ensures mutual reinforcement, with the detailed CHMP work informing a comprehensive EES, not bypassing it. The WVCA's analysis demonstrates that AusNet has failed to adhere to this fundamental principle, opting instead to use one legislative framework to circumvent its responsibilities under the other.

PART 2: SYSTEMIC FAILURES

2.1. Systemic Failure 1: The Premature Assessment of an Undefined Baseline

A foundational principle of environmental impact assessment is that a project's potential effects cannot be comprehensively assessed until the existing environment is properly understood. AusNet, has submitted the WRL EES for formal assessment without this foundational understanding, rendering the entire Aboriginal cultural heritage impact assessment a speculative exercise rather than a compliant analysis.

AusNet's EES documentation is predicated on critically incomplete fieldwork. AusNet repeatedly states that the seven Cultural Heritage Management Plans (CHMPs) for the project are currently "in preparation," a fact that fundamentally undermines the validity of the impact assessment being presented.

This is not a minor point but a direct admission that the detailed fieldwork necessary to identify tangible heritage is far from complete. AusNet's Technical Report B provides unequivocal evidence of this premature nature by presenting a table titled "Percentage of fieldwork completed for each Cultural Heritage Management Plan." This serves as a stark admission of profound investigative gaps that exist across the 190 km project corridor.

The deficiencies are most acute in the central and eastern sections of the proposed route, which traverse the Country of the DJAARA, Wadawurrung, and Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung peoples. For instance, for the Wadawurrung Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation (WTOAC) RAP area, 0% of the required complex assessment has been completed.

Complex assessments are essential for identifying buried archaeological deposits, which often constitute the most significant tangible heritage sites. The failure to complete critical investigations means the proponent has an incomplete picture of the very environment it claims to have assessed.

AusNet makes no attempt to conceal this deficiency, explicitly stating in its technical report that "the dataset presented in this report is not final" and that "further Aboriginal cultural heritage values... may be identified subsequent to the EES". This is a direct admission that the assessment presented is based on an incomplete and evolving dataset. This is further substantiated by the acknowledgement in a February 2025 addendum that disclosed an

additional 125 newly identified Aboriginal cultural heritage values, with 77 of these now slated for project impact.

This discovery, made subsequent to the EES's submission, confirms the assessment's premature nature and validates the WVCA's concerns about its critical incompleteness. This places the IAC and the Minister for Planning, and the public in an untenable position, as they are being asked to assess the environmental effects of a project without a complete and stable inventory of the heritage that will be affected.

The WVCA contends that the submission of an EES with such significant and acknowledged data gaps constitutes a clear failure to comply with the Minister's Scoping Requirements, which directed the proponent to conduct "adequate field assessments" to verify desktop studies.

AusNet is essentially asking decision-makers to approve the WRL project based on an assurance that the full extent of the environmental harm will be identified and quantified at a later date, a process that fundamentally misinterprets the purpose of the *Environment Effects Act 1978*.

The table below, adapted from Technical Report B, Table 9-1, identifies the status of Aboriginal cultural heritage fieldwork completion (as of 5 June 2024).

Study Area	Registered Aboriginal Party (RAP)	CHMP Number	AusNet's EES Standard Assessment Coverage (%)	AusNet's EES Complex Assessment Coverage (%)
Area 1	Barengi Gadjin Land Council Aboriginal Corporation (BGLCAC)	17313	100	61.5
Area 2	Eastern Maar Aboriginal Corporation (EMAC)	17321	100	100
Area 3	Non-RAP Area	17312	100	100
Area 4	Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation (DJAARA)	17311	93.8	100
Area 4	Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal	18101	49.1	34.2

Study Area	Registered Aboriginal Party (RAP)	CHMP Number	AusNet's EES Standard Assessment Coverage (%)	AusNet's EES Complex Assessment Coverage (%)
	Corporation (DJAARA)			
Area 5	Wadawurrung Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation (WTOAC)	18108	39.0	0
Area 6	Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation (WWCHAC)	18111	53.7	63.2

2.2. Systemic Failure 2: The Unlawful Deferral of Statutory Responsibility

AusNet's failure to complete the fieldwork is compounded by a procedural framework designed to defer the substantive assessment of Aboriginal cultural heritage to a separate, less transparent, post-EES process. The WVCA contends that this approach represents a strategic attempt to circumvent the public scrutiny required by the *Environment Effects Act 1978*.

The central pillar of this strategy is Environmental Performance Requirement (EPR) ACH1, which states: "Implement and comply with Cultural Heritage Management Plans (CHMPs) sponsored by AusNet and approved for the Project under the Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006". This EPR effectively outsources the core assessment and mitigation design from the public EES forum to the private CHMP process.

The EES process, managed by the Department of Transport and Planning, is a public and transparent mechanism that involves public exhibition, the opportunity for public submissions, and typically a public hearing before an independent IAC. In stark contrast, the CHMP approval process under the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006* is not a public process; it is a statutory negotiation between the proponent and the relevant Registered Aboriginal Party (RAP), with no requirement for public exhibition, submissions, or hearings. The Minister for Planning has no statutory role in the approval of a CHMP.

By shifting these critical decisions out of the public and transparent EES forum and into a private one, the proponent denies the IAC, the public, and the Minister for Planning the ability to scrutinise, question, and assess the project's most significant and sensitive heritage impacts.

This manoeuvre makes a mockery of the public exhibition and hearing process, as the public is asked to comment on a framework of promises rather than a concrete assessment of effects. The proponent is asking the Minister to issue an assessment based on an incomplete EES, with the assurance that detailed impact analysis and mitigation design will be handled later in a separate process over which the Minister has no control. This would set a dangerous precedent, creating a significant loophole in Victorian environmental law, and subvert the purpose of the *Environment Effects Act 1978*.

2.3. Systemic Failure 3: The Erosion of Enforceability through Permissive Language

A cornerstone of any credible EES is the development of robust, specific, and enforceable Environmental Performance Requirements (EPRs). The proponent's EPRs for Aboriginal cultural heritage, particularly EPR ACH2, fail to meet this standard, using language that is deliberately non-committal and legally unenforceable.

The EES Scoping Requirements establish a clear mitigation hierarchy: "Avoid, or minimise where avoidance is not possible, adverse effects on Aboriginal cultural heritage and historic heritage values". This places clear onus on the proponent to justify any impact, with avoidance as the primary and mandatory goal. In response to this stringent requirement, particularly for intangible heritage values which are not covered by the CHMP process, AusNet has developed EPR ACH2, which states: "AusNet must engage with each of the relevant Registered Aboriginal Parties (RAPs) and Traditional Owner (TO) groups... to address recommendations, **where practicable**, arising from each RAP or TO group's Cultural Values Assessment to avoid or minimise impacts on intangible cultural heritage values from the Project".

The inclusion of the qualifying phrase "where practicable" fundamentally undermines the entire EPR. This term is not defined within the EES and introduces a high degree of subjectivity and discretion, which is likely to be always weighted in favour of the proponent. It allows for AusNet's considerations of cost, logistics, and project scheduling to override heritage protection objectives. This language shifts the onus of proof from AusNet to the RAPs and provides AusNet with unilateral discretion to simply assert that a recommendation is not "practicable," even if it is technically feasible.

This renders EPR ACH2 an unenforceable commitment to a process (discussion) rather than a binding guarantee of an outcome (protection).

This inadequacy is thrown into sharp relief when contrasted with the direct, specific, and often non-negotiable recommendations made by the RAPs in their CVAs. For example, the Wadawurrung Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation (WTOAC) has "strongly advocate[d] that AusNet construct the transmission line underground... and that the current study area be unimpacted by the project". The proponent can use the "where practicable" clause to formally dismiss this primary recommendation, while still technically complying with the EPR.

Inclusion of "...where practicable" serves as a pre-emptive mechanism for AusNet to dismiss inconvenient recommendations, creating an illusion of mitigation while providing no actual guarantee of protection.

2.4. Systemic Failure 4: The Contradiction of Consultation Claims

A successful EES process is predicated on genuine and respectful stakeholder engagement. In Chapter 7 of the EES, AusNet presents a narrative of a comprehensive and successful consultation program, founded on principles of "understanding, openness, respect and

responsiveness". However, this self-congratulatory narrative is dismantled by the testimony of the Registered Aboriginal Parties (RAPs) themselves, which is appended to AusNet's technical report.

The Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation (DJAARA) provides a scathing critique of the process, stating: "I don't feel Djaara have been properly consulted or engaged on this project. I feel as though we are an afterthought and are only being engaged as a 'check the box' requirement... feels like we have been set up to fail".

This statement reveals a multi-faceted failure, including a lack of timeliness ("little notice"), inequity ("compared to farmers"), and procedural flaws ("little to no access"). The Wadawurrung Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation (WTOAC) corroborates this experience, noting that "land access for this project was consistently problematic" and that it "declined the offer to attend" a key EES workshop, a fact that signifies a breakdown in the relationship.

The gap between the proponent's narrative in Chapter 7 and the reality described by the RAPs is irreconcilable. This is a direct contradiction on matters of fact regarding the timeliness, equity, and procedural adequacy of the consultation process. The proponent's claim to have operated under a principle of "respect" is directly refuted by the RAPs' experience of being treated as an "afterthought" and a "check the box" requirement.

The fact that AusNet published both competing narratives side-by-side demonstrates a cynical disregard for the documented testimony of the RAPs. This profound failure to engage meaningfully and respectfully contravenes the primary objectives of the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006*, which is designed to "empower Traditional Owners as protectors of their cultural heritage" and to "promote respect for Aboriginal cultural heritage".

This is a catastrophic failure to achieve the social license required for a project of this scale, which creates significant and lasting project risk.

PART 3: THE EVASION OF INDEPENDENT SCRUTINY

Independent peer review serves as a vital quality assurance mechanism in the EES process, providing an objective, expert-led verification of a technical study's integrity. AusNet's decision to omit an independent peer review for the Aboriginal Cultural Heritage technical report - while commissioning reviews for numerous other, less contentious reports - is a critical failure that fatally undermines the credibility of the entire heritage assessment.

The Victorian Government's guidelines for the EES process explicitly recognise the importance of peer review, stating that it is required for "critical components". The assessment of Aboriginal cultural heritage is unequivocally a critical component of the WRL EES, given the potential for significant, irreversible impacts.

AusNet's failure to conduct a peer review for this specific report is not a matter of speculation; the proponent's own project website lists the independent peer review reports commissioned, and Aboriginal cultural heritage is conspicuously and inexplicably absent from this list.

A competent peer reviewer would have inevitably identified the systemic failures documented in this report, including the incomplete fieldwork, the unenforceable EPRs, and the contradicted consultation claims. The resulting peer review report would have provided independent, expert-level validation of the EES's flaws, which would have been made public as part of the EES documentation and provided powerful ammunition for the IAC and project opponents.

By choosing not to commission this review, AusNet appears to have successfully shielded its flawed work from expert scrutiny. This demonstrates a conscious act of non-compliance and a lack of confidence by AusNet in their own submission and fatally undermines the credibility of the entire Aboriginal cultural heritage assessment.

PART 4: CONCLUSION

AusNet's claims of successful consultation are directly contradicted by the documented testimony of the RAPs, revealing a process that was disrespectful and tokenistic. AusNet's entire assessment lacks the credibility of independent peer review, a fatal omission that suggests a deliberate evasion of expert scrutiny.

In its current form, Chapter 9 of the WRL EES is not a credible assessment of Aboriginal cultural heritage impacts of the proposed WRL and does not form a sound or reliable basis for an informed decision by the IAC or the Minister for Planning. It fails to meet the core requirements and intent of the *Environment Effects Act 1978* and *Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006*.

PART 5: RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the profound and systemic deficiencies in AusNet's assessment of Aboriginal cultural heritage impacts, as identified in Section 4, we recommend that the IAC and the Minister for Planning:

1. **Reject the EES:** AusNet's assessment of Aboriginal Cultural Heritage must be found inadequate and non-compliant with the *Environment Effects Act 1978* and the EES Scoping Requirements. Reject AusNet's EES in its current form.
2. **Direct the Proponent to Withdraw and Complete All Investigations:** Direct AusNet to withdraw the EES and complete all nine Cultural Heritage Management Plans in their entirety, without exception.
3. **Mandate Genuine Consultation and Co-designed EPRS:** Require AusNet to re-engage in a genuine and respectful consultation process with all RAPs to meaningfully address the recommendations in the Cultural Value Assessments, and co-design new Aboriginal Cultural Heritage EPRS that are specific, measurable, and legally enforceable, and which do not contain permissive or discretionary language.
4. **Mandate Independent Peer Review:** Mandate that any future submission of a WRL EES Aboriginal Cultural Heritage report must be accompanied by a full, independent peer review conducted by suitably qualified and mutually agreed-upon experts.

SECTION 5

WVCA ASSESSMENT OF AUSNET'S EES CHAPTER 11 - LANDSCAPE AND VISUAL AMENITY

This Section presents an evaluation of AusNet's assessment of landscape and visual amenity impacts of the proposed WRL project, focusing on the WRL EES Chapter 11, "Landscape and Visual," and its supporting technical report.

This Section is a direct refutation of AusNet's claims, arguing that their assessment is demonstrably unsound, structurally biased, and an unreliable foundation for a reasoned decision.

Executive Summary: The Central Findings of Our Evaluation

Our detailed examination of AusNet's EES Chapter 11 and its supporting technical report, demonstrates that AusNet's landscape and visual assessment is deeply flawed and consistently undervalues the lasting and adverse impacts of this project.

The WVCA contend that the assessment, as submitted, fails to meet the legal and technical requirements of the EES process and is an inadequate basis for an informed decision by the IAC and the Minister for Planning.

Our core findings reveal a pattern of significant non-compliance and methodological failures:

- **A Methodologically Unsound Assessment:** The assessment's approach, while citing established guidelines, is implemented with a clear bias that minimises the true severity of the project's impacts. The selection of viewpoints from private dwellings is based on an unrepresentative data set of just 23 homes, which cannot possibly account for the thousands of households impacted.
- **Failure to Meet Statutory Requirements:** AusNet's EES consistently fails to meet the primary evaluation objective of the Scoping Requirements: to "avoid" adverse effects on landscape and visual amenity. Instead, it documents widespread, unmitigated 'High' residual impacts and provides only a cursory analysis of areas protected by statutory overlays.
- **Inadequate Mitigation Framework:** The proposed mitigation measures, such as landscape screening, are deficient and non-binding. They are designed to outline a process of action rather than guarantee a tangible and effective outcome, thereby shifting the risk and long-term responsibility onto us, the affected landowners and managers.
- **Lack of Independent Peer Review:** No evidence has been presented to show that this vital technical report underwent an independent peer review, which constitutes a failure to adhere to the transparency and quality assurance principles central to the EES process. This omission fatally undermines the credibility of AusNet's self-assessment.

In light of these fundamental deficiencies, we formally request that the IAC and the Minister for Planning find the Landscape and Visual component of the WRL EES to be inadequate and non-compliant. We insist that this section of AusNet's EES be rejected and that AusNet be required to conduct a new, robust, and compliant assessment before any approvals are considered.

Section 5 is structured in eight parts:

1. A Flawed Methodology that Undermines the Assessment
2. Systemic Non-Compliance with EES Scoping Requirements
3. The Understatement of Impacts on Our Public Places
4. Our Private Lives are Not a Commodity
5. The Failure of Quality Assurance - The Missing Peer Review
6. Comparative Impact Rating Assessment
7. Conclusion
8. Recommendation

PART 1: A FLAWED METHODOLOGY THAT UNDERMINES THE ASSESSMENT

The credibility of any environmental impact assessment depends on the objectivity and rigorous application of its methodology. AusNet's Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA) is undermined by subjective application, inconsistent logic, and an unsound approach to sampling, which systematically skews the assessment to undervalue the project's true impacts.

1.1. Inconsistent Application of Our Impact

The LVIA defines a "High" impact as occurring "where significant adverse effects cannot be avoided, remedied, or mitigated," while a "Low" impact is where the project is "noticeable but will not cause significant impacts". A meticulous examination of AusNet's EES reveals that these criteria are applied inconsistently to arrive at predetermined, lower impact ratings.

For example, at Viewpoint VHF 10 on the Lexton-Ararat Road, the project's 80m towers are just 550 meters from the viewpoint. Despite this immense change in scale and proximity, the impact is rated as 'Low' with the justification that views are from a "local road with few viewers, short in duration and oblique to the direction of travel". This explanation selectively focuses on viewer type and duration, disregarding the immense shift in scale and proximity, which fundamentally contradicts the principles of objective assessment. We, the people who live here, know that this industrial infrastructure at such close range fundamentally and permanently alters the landscape character of our homes.

1.2. Flawed and Unrepresentative Viewpoint Selection

The EES Scoping Requirements mandate the identification of viewsheds from "representative residences" to assess the visual effects on us, the landowners. AusNet's methodology, however, is not statistically valid and cannot be considered representative. The LVIA admits that it is based on a self-selecting, reactive process where they created a "shortlist" of approximately 100 dwellings and approached landholders for access. This approach failed to capture the full spectrum of impacts on our community.

The scale of this failure is starkly apparent in the Peri-urban and Townships area, where the LVIA acknowledges that approximately 6,140 dwellings are located within 2km of the proposed route. Yet, the assessment relies on access to only 23 dwellings in this area.

Drawing conclusions for over 6,000 households from a sample of 23 is both statistically insignificant and scientifically unsound. It prevents the IAC and the Minister from understanding the true prevalence and distribution of visual harm across our community.

1.3. Arbitrary Study Area and Zones of Visual Influence (ZVI)

The LVIA establishes the outer boundary of its study area at an arbitrary distance of 9.2km from the proposed route. This distance is justified as the point where an 80m tower would be a "small object in the background of views and difficult to discern". This definition is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, it establishes an arbitrary cutoff that fails to account for the cumulative impact of linear infrastructure. While a single tower at 9.2km may be "difficult to discern," a continuous 190km line of towers, even at that distance, creates a persistent industrial feature on the horizon that fundamentally alters the character of broad, sweeping landscapes. The methodology assesses towers as individual points rather than as a connected, continuous industrial scar.

Secondly, the assessment of the private domain is limited to a 2km zone. This fails to adequately consider the degradation of borrowed landscapes and distant views for residents located further away, whose properties may have been valued precisely for their outlook over undeveloped rural landscapes. The methodology's rigid, distance-based zones fail to capture the nuances of landscape perception and value.

PART 2: SYSTEMIC NON-COMPLIANCE WITH EES SCOPING REQUIREMENTS

The EES Scoping Requirements set the legal and technical benchmarks against which this assessment must be judged. Our analysis has found that the proponent's LVIA fails to meet multiple, explicit, and mandatory requirements, undermining the integrity of the entire EES process.

The following table presents a systematic breakdown of these compliance failures:

EES Scoping Requirement	AusNet's EES Submission	WVCA Assessment of Deficiency
<p>Evaluation Objective: Avoidance of Adverse Effects. The objective is to "avoid, or minimise where avoidance is not possible, and manage potential adverse effects on landscape and visual amenity."</p>	<p>AusNet's documentation repeatedly identifies 'High' residual impacts across both public and private spaces.</p>	<p>This demonstrates a failure to meet the core mandate of the EES Scoping Requirements. The assessment serves to catalogue severe impacts rather than proving that avoidance and minimization were prioritised in the project's design phase.</p>
<p>Analysis of Protected Landscapes and Overlays. The requirement is to assess "potential effects on significant landscape values...especially... areas covered by Significant Landscape Overlay (SLO)."</p>	<p>AusNet's EES identifies relevant SLOs but offers only a cursory analysis of the project's effect on these protected areas.</p>	<p>The report fails to evaluate the project's impact on the specific values the overlays were established to protect. For instance, the assessment does not adequately explain how the visual prominence of volcanic peaks, protected by Hepburn SLO1, is fundamentally altered by a line of 80m towers.</p>

EES Scoping Requirement	AusNet's EES Submission	WVCA Assessment of Deficiency
Evaluation of Alternatives and Mitigation Options. The EES must "identify and evaluate any potential design, siting and alignment options that could avoid and minimise potential effects..."	The report is largely a justification for a pre-selected overhead design, dismissing alternatives like painting towers based on cost and maintenance issues.	AusNet's EES fails to genuinely "evaluate" a reasonable spectrum of alternatives as required. Its justifications, such as dismissing painting on economic grounds, do not constitute a sufficient technical response to the obligation to consider all potential mitigation.
Contingency Planning and Monitoring. The EES must "describe the approach to monitor effects and develop contingency measures... in the event of adverse residual effects..."	The mitigation measures detailed in the Environmental Performance Requirements (EPRs) rely on voluntary offers of landscape screening, with no specified contingency plans.	This framework is entirely devoid of contingency planning. Should a landowner decline the screening offer, the 'High' residual impact remains unaddressed, with no alternative mechanism proposed to manage this predictable outcome, thereby failing to meet a fundamental requirement for the EES.

PART 3: THE UNDERSTATEMENT OF IMPACTS ON OUR PUBLIC PLACES

The LVIA fails in its duty to provide an objective evaluation of the project's effect on our publicly valued landscapes, consistently downplaying the severity of impacts on significant public viewpoints through a combination of subjective rating and inadequate mitigation.

3.1. The Devastation of Bolwarrah Weir and Buried Rivers of Gold

AusNet's report acknowledges a 'High' visual impact at Bolwarrah Weir, where 80m towers will be just 730m away. Yet, their proposed solution is "selective landscape screening," a completely inadequate measure to address the fundamental and irreversible transformation of this tranquil rural site into an industrialised landscape.

Similarly, the assessment finds a 'High' visual impact from the historic Buried Rivers of Gold Tourist Drive, with towers as close as 65m. The proponent rejects mitigation, arguing that screening would block the very long-distance views that the project has already degraded. The community is, in effect, being asked to choose between a view that has been permanently degraded or no view at all, a choice that demonstrates a failure of the assessment to provide genuine mitigation.

3.2. Desecrating Our Heritage: Merrimu Reservoir War Memorial

Perhaps the most egregious example of the project's unacceptable effects is the proposal for Merrimu Reservoir and War Memorial. The LVIA rates the impact as 'High' and includes an

alarming mitigation measure: an "offer" for the "reconfiguration and/or redesign of the Merrimu Reservoir War Memorial so that views are oriented away from the Project".

This is not mitigation. It is an extraordinary admission that the visual impact is so severe that a significant public site of remembrance may need to be physically altered to avoid it. The proponent proposes the physical alteration of a significant public site of remembrance to avoid the visual impact of their project. This is not a form of mitigation; it is an act of desecration that reflects a profound disrespect for the community's heritage and values.

PART 4: OUR PRIVATE LIVES ARE NOT A COMMODITY

The EES Scoping Requirements place a clear emphasis on assessing the potential for us, the residents and landowners, to be "exposed to significant visual effects". The LVIA documents a widespread degradation of our residential visual amenity but fails to propose a mitigation framework that is certain, fair, or effective.

AusNet's assessment identifies an unacceptably high number of private dwellings that will be left with a permanent 'High' residual impact, representing a profound failure to meet the core evaluation objectives of the EES. The LVIA's proposed mitigation, outlined in EPR LV2, is the offer of "landscape screening" to us, the landowners, to filter or screen views of the towers.

This measure is non-committal and non-binding. It improperly transfers the risk, cost, and long-term maintenance burden from the project proponent to us.

AusNet's assessment documents the irreversible degradation of residential amenity, yet their proposed solution is to shift the responsibility for concealing this industrial intrusion onto the residents themselves. This places the onus on landowners to plant screening, effectively asking them to obscure the views for which their properties were valued, to hide the damage caused by the proposed WRL. This is neither a just nor acceptable resolution.

PART 5: THE FAILURE OF QUALITY ASSURANCE - THE MISSING PEER REVIEW

A major and critical failing of AusNet's EES documentation is the lack of an independent peer review report for the Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment. While other technical reports are routinely peer-reviewed to ensure methodological soundness, the landscape and visual components of this highly contentious project have been entirely self-assessed by AusNet.

This omission is a serious violation of the principles of transparency and quality assurance that underpin the EES process.

PART 6: COMPARATIVE IMPACT RATING ASSESSMENT

The table below provides a clear, evidence-based comparison between the proponent's self-assessed impacts and our community's assessment, which is rooted in our lived experience and our analysis of the evidence.

EES Impact Rating System Criterion	Description	EES/AusNet Rating	WVCA (Our) Assessment	Our Justification
Overall impact score across all criteria	Overall impact score across all criteria	Not explicitly stated; implied to be manageable with mitigation.	High to Extreme	The project will result in permanent and profound detriments to property values, mental well-being, and the rural lifestyle. The proponent's own documentation of 'High' residual impacts on homes and public areas proves that this is not a manageable outcome but an unacceptable one.
Sensitivity of environmental or community values	How vulnerable or important the affected environment or community asset is	Varies, with some areas acknowledged as sensitive.	Extreme	The affected region encompasses national parks, agricultural land of high value, and private residences chosen for their quality of life and scenic views. The chosen route through these areas reflects a disregard for the extreme sensitivity and significance of these community and environmental values.
Magnitude, extent, and duration of the impact	The scale, reach, and time span of the impact (e.g., temporary vs. permanent)	Implied as temporary during construction and manageable during operation.	Permanent and Irreversible	The introduction of 80-meter-high towers, stretching for hundreds of kilometres, will permanently industrialize the landscape. This profound loss of rural character and pristine views is a dramatic and irreversible consequence that AusNet's EES fails to properly acknowledge.
Existing activities and	Other ongoing or planned activities that	Mentioned in the EES but not	Significant and Unacceptable	Western Victoria is already burdened by existing wind farms and transmission lines. AusNet's EES does

EES Impact Rating System Criterion	Description	EES/AusNet Rating	WVCA (Our) Assessment	Our Justification
cumulative effects	may amplify the impact	adequately rated.		not properly assess the collective and cumulative visual burden on our community, which renders the proposed impacts of this new project cumulatively significant and unacceptable.
Effectiveness of mitigation measures	How well the proposed measures are expected to reduce or offset the impact	Implied as effective and sufficient.	Low to Non-existent	The proposed mitigation strategies, such as landscape screening, are demonstrably inadequate for the overwhelming scale of the towers and often rely on the voluntary consent of landowners. AusNet's own assessment concedes that mitigation is either not recommended or insufficient, leaving a high number of significant residual impacts.

PART 7: CONCLUSION

For five years, we, the members of the WVCA, have fought this project because we believe in a better way forward. Section 5 of this WVCA submission demonstrates that our concerns have been systematically dismissed and our landscape values have been profoundly undervalued.

The evidence within Chapter 11, when rigorously scrutinised, proves that the LVIA is a biased and unreliable document that is not a sound or credible basis for an informed decision by the IAC or the Minister for Planning. The EES, in its current form, fails to meet the core requirements and intent of the *Environment Effects Act 1978*.

PART 8: RECOMMENDATIONS

The WVCA, therefore, demand a path forward that upholds the principles of transparency and genuine environmental protection.

Based on the WVCA's concerns over AusNet's landscape and visual amenity analysis, as outlined in Section 5, we recommend that the IAC and the Minister for Planning:

1. **Reject the EES:** Reject AusNet's landscape and visual impact assessment as it fails to provide a credible foundation for assessing the project's profound landscape and visual effects.
2. **Mandate a New Assessment:** Mandate a new, comprehensive landscape and visual impact assessment process that is transparent, independently overseen, and fully evaluates the comparable advantages of genuine alternatives, including undergrounding in high-value visual landscapes.
3. **Require Independent Oversight:** require the new landscape and visual impact assessment, and all resulting documentation, to be subject to rigorous, independent peer review by suitably qualified experts, with all reports made publicly available.

SECTION 6

WVCA ASSESSMENT OF AUSNET'S EES CHAPTER 12 - LAND USE AND PLANNING

This Section presents an evaluation of AusNet's assessment of land use and planning impacts of the proposed WRL project, specifically focusing on the WRL EES Chapter 12, "Land Use and Planning" and its supporting Technical Report E.

Executive Summary: The Central Findings of Our Evaluation

Our assessment of AusNet's Chapter 12 analysis is that it is a document of profound detachment. It views our land not as a living, breathing landscape interwoven with our stories and history, but as a series of datasets to be managed and minimized.

This submission demonstrates how AusNet's assessment of land use impacts is fundamentally deficient and fails to meet the legal and ethical standards required. AusNet's compliance with legal requirements is selective, its promises of mitigation are hollow, and its assessment of the human cost is dismissive.

Our analysis reveals that AusNet's assessment framework is not fit for purpose for a linear infrastructure project of this nature and scale. This framework is demonstrably designed to systematically diminish the severity of the project's true impacts, thereby enabling AusNet to arrive at predetermined and misleading conclusions.

Section 6 is structured in eight parts:

1. A Flawed Methodology
2. Systemic Non-Compliance with EES Scoping Requirements
3. The Human Cost: Impacts on Our Homes, Our Assets, and Our Community
4. Unenforceable Promises: A Deficient Mitigation Framework
5. Comparative Impact Rating Assessment
6. The Failure of Integrity: A Missing Peer Review
7. Conclusion
8. Recommendation

PART 1: A FLAWED METHODOLOGY

The core flaw lies in application of a broad, regional-scale assessment to a project that creates acute, localised, and permanent damage. The methodology detailed by AusNet uses a five-point rating scale - Negligible, Minor, Moderate, Major, and Severe - with definitions that are vague and geographically expansive.

AusNet's EES Chapter 12 defines a "Minor" impact as an effect "limited to receptors within or adjacent to the study area," while a "Moderate" impact "may affect a local government area". This framework is fundamentally ill-suited to capture the devastating, property-specific consequences of a 190km transmission line.

This methodological misrepresentation is most evident in the EES's assessment of agricultural impacts. AusNet concludes that the residual impact on agriculture is "minor," a finding predicated on framing the project's temporary occupation of approximately 2,247 hectares as a negligible 0.4% of the region's total agricultural land.

For us, the individual landholders whose entire properties, or their most productive portions, fall within that 2,247-hectare footprint, the impact is not 0.4%. The impact is a catastrophic loss of a viable business, the decimation of a family's legacy, and the end of our life on the land we have cared for as custodians for generations.

AusNet's methodology provides no mechanism to capture or report this severe, concentrated harm. This approach constitutes a direct failure to meet the EES Scoping Requirements, which explicitly mandate an assessment of effects on "affected and neighbouring landholders" and "businesses including farming".

By adopting this regional based assessment methodology AusNet has substituted this legally required assessment of individual impact with a regional overview that is of no relevance to those directly affected.

The choice of this assessment framework predetermines a finding of low impact by rendering the most severe consequences invisible to decision-makers.

PART 2: SYSTEMIC NON-COMPLIANCE WITH EES SCOPING REQUIREMENTS

An EES is a direct and binding response to the Scoping Requirements issued by the Minister for Planning under the *Environment Effects Act 1978*. A comparison of AusNet's submission against these specific requirements reveals a pattern of systemic non-compliance.

These are not minor oversights; they are fundamental failures that leave the IAC and the Minister for Planning without the necessary information to make a sound assessment.

2.1 The Failure to Assess Agricultural Consequences for Individual Businesses

AusNet's EES presents a superficial and misleading assessment of the impacts on our agricultural operations. It fails to move beyond a high-level inventory of the affected area to a meaningful analysis of the project's impact on the viability of our family businesses, which is a direct requirement of the Scoping Requirements.

EES Chapter 12 acknowledges that the easement will impose permanent restrictions, including prohibitions on aerial crop dusting and the use of certain large irrigation equipment like gun-type irrigators. However, AusNet provides no analysis whatsoever of the financial or operational impact of these restrictions on affected farms.

AusNet acknowledges that potato growing occurs in the study area, particularly between Waubra and Mount Prospect, yet it fails to connect this finding with its proposed irrigation restrictions. This omission transforms the land use assessment into a box-ticking exercise that ignores the project's potential to systematically dismantle the economic fabric of our agricultural communities. AusNet's own community engagement records show that landholders explicitly raised concerns about "farming practice impacts" and "irrigation equipment", yet the EES fails to substantively address the operational and economic consequences of these restrictions on a farm-by-farm basis.

2.2 The Improper Siloing of Data to Obscure Consequences

The WRL EES Scoping Requirements for Land Use demand an assessment of "associated economic and social effects". However, EES Chapter 12 improperly defers a comprehensive economic analysis to Chapter 14, even while concluding that land use impacts are "minor". This is a clear instance of non-compliance.

By detaching land use impacts from their economic consequences, AusNet arrives at a conclusion of "minor" impact in an economic vacuum, a finding that is completely unsubstantiated and dishonest. It is not possible to determine if an impact on a farm is minor without knowing the financial cost of that impact.

AusNet's EES refuses to provide this critical information, leaving decision-makers without a full picture of the potential economic devastation this project will cause.

2.3 The Absence of Specific Contingency Measures

The WRL EES Scoping Requirements also mandate that the EES "describe... contingency measures for responding to unexpected impacts". Yet, AusNet's EES Chapter 12 and its technical report offer no specific land use contingencies.

The Environmental Management Framework only mentions generic measures for events like spills or heritage finds but provides no plans for greater-than-expected disruption to our farm access, a failure of rehabilitation efforts, or conflicts with new land uses. This is a critical gap that leaves us with no security. If AusNet's promises of "reinstatement" of our land prove hollow after construction, we have no mechanism to hold them accountable. This omission exposes the illusory nature of the proposed Environmental Management Framework.

PART 3: THE HUMAN COST: IMPACTS ON OUR HOMES, OUR ASSETS, AND OUR COMMUNITY

3.1 Human Impacts

AusNet's assessment of impacts on our homes and our rural lifestyle is characterised by a shocking level of indifference and non-committal language. It provides no certainty to us, the affected residents, and dismisses our profound emotional and financial concerns as irrelevant.

AusNet's EES identifies 32 existing dwellings within 150m of the proposed route. Of these, one dwelling at SPI: 209\PP2676 is located within the proposed easement and will "require the existing dwelling to be relocated in consultation with the land title holder".

This statement is a declaration of intent to forcibly displace one of our neighbours without providing any certainty or a binding framework for a fair outcome. AusNet is silent on the critical aspects of this impact:

- Will the landholder be compensated at full market value?
- Who will bear the significant emotional and social costs of forced relocation?

The EES provides no answers, leaving our neighbour in a state of complete uncertainty. This is a dereliction of AusNet's duty to assess and manage severe effects and shows a fundamental lack of respect for our homes and our families.

3.2 Land Use Impact

AusNet's EES dismisses the permanent loss of our rural amenity and the devaluation of our property as having a "negligible" land use impact. It argues that a permanent change to our visual amenity would not "change the underlying use of the land". This is a callous and dehumanising statement.

We chose to live here for the peace, the open spaces, and the semi-rural lifestyle. The presence of 80m high steel lattice towers, equivalent to a 25-story building, will permanently industrialise our scenic landscapes and destroy the very appeal that defines this region. AusNet's conclusion shows a profound disconnect between their corporate values and our community's values, reducing our homes to mere physical structures and ignoring the immense personal and financial value we place on our unique rural environment.

PART 4: UNENFORCEABLE PROMISES: A DEFICIENT MITIGATION FRAMEWORK

The proposed Environmental Performance Requirements (EPRs) are AusNet's primary mechanism for managing the project's impacts. Our analysis shows that these EPRs are critically flawed, relying on vague and non-committal language that provides no enforceable protection for our community.

The key land use EPRs, LU1 and LU2, require AusNet to "develop and implement a plan to minimise the construction footprint so far as reasonably practicable" and to "avoid and minimise impacts, so far as reasonably practicable," respectively.

The reliance on subjective phrases like "so far as reasonably practicable" fails to establish a clear, measurable, and auditable performance standard. It gives the proponent and its contractors sole discretion to decide what is "reasonable," a decision that will inevitably be biased by cost and convenience to AusNet's benefit rather than the protection of our landholder interests. This language renders the Land Use EPRs effectively un-auditable and unenforceable, providing only the illusion of mitigation without any enforceable legal obligation to deliver.

Furthermore, EPR LU2 misapplies the mitigation hierarchy. It presents "compensate the landholder to relocate the permitted dwelling" as an equally valid alternative to "avoid and minimise impacts". This subverts the entire EES process, which is designed to first and foremost prevent environmental harm. The EPRs give the illusion of management while leaving the proponent with full discretion over the extent of the project's future impact, leaving our community to bear all the risks.

PART 5: COMPARATIVE IMPACT RATING ASSESSMENT

The table below demonstrates the gulf between AusNet's assessment and our own. This table uses AusNet's own criteria to highlight the fundamental discrepancies between its theoretical, regional-scale assessment and the undeniable, severe impacts on our community. The WVCA's ratings are based on our evidence of our lived experience of the WRL project's potential to cause irreversible harm to our land, livelihoods, and our wellbeing.

EES Impact Rating System Criterion	Description	EES/AusNet Rating	WVCA Assessment	Cumulative Rating
Sensitivity of environmental or community values	How vulnerable or important the affected environment or	Minor to Negligible	Severe	Severe

EES Impact Rating System Criterion	Description	EES/AusNet Rating	WVCA Assessment	Cumulative Rating
	community asset is			
Magnitude, extent, and duration of the impact	The scale, reach, and time span of the impact (e.g., temporary vs. permanent)	Minor to Negligible (for most land use)	Severe (for individual properties and landscapes)	Severe
Existing activities and cumulative effects	Other ongoing or planned activities that may amplify the impact	Minor	Major	Major
Benchmarks, policies, and standards	Evaluation against legal or regulatory thresholds and best-practice guidelines	Consistent (with some residual impacts)	Non-Compliant	Non-Compliant
Effectiveness of mitigation measures	How well the proposed measures are expected to reduce or offset the impact	Effective (with EPRs)	Unenforceable	Unenforceable

The WVCA argues that AusNet's ratings of "Minor" to "Negligible" for impacts on our community and land are simply not credible. We have rated the impacts as "Severe" or "Major" because we understand the permanent and catastrophic effects on our family businesses, our property values, and have seen first-hand the adverse effects on the mental health of our community already inflicted by the project.

This table is a clear representation of AusNet's EES's being unfit to provide a transparent or trustworthy basis for decision-making.

PART 6: THE FAILURE OF INTEGRITY: A MISSING PEER REVIEW

The credibility of an EES is underpinned by a transparent and rigorous quality assurance process. The EES documentation for the WRL project critically fails this test.

Victorian government guidelines require that a peer review report be published as an appendix to the study to provide evidence of transparency and identify any unresolved issues. The AusNet's EES for the WRL, however, contains no such report for Technical Report E: Land Use and Planning Impact Assessment.

Without a published peer review report, it is impossible for the IAC, government agencies, or the public, to know if a review was conducted at all, who the reviewer was, or what flaws, errors, or concerns they may have identified in the assessment. This is a fundamental failure of the quality assurance process that is designed to ensure the technical integrity of the EES. It undermines the credibility of the entire land use and planning assessment and suggests AusNet's work cannot withstand independent expert scrutiny.

PART 7: CONCLUSION

Our collective voice, built on five years of unwavering unity and informed by our research, is clear: AusNet's EES Chapter 12: Land Use and Planning is fundamentally inadequate and non-compliant. It is a document that systematically and intentionally minimises the devastating, on-the-ground impacts on our land, our livelihoods, and our community.

Our analysis shows that AusNet has based its assessment on a flawed methodology that misrepresents severe, localised impacts as "minor" on a regional scale. It fails to comply with key legal requirements by ignoring the economic consequences of its restrictions and by providing no specific contingencies for when things go wrong.

Proposed Land Use EPRs are unenforceable and deceptive, and the absence of a published peer review for this critical document is a major failure of transparency that renders its technical claims untrustworthy.

PART 8: RECOMMENDATION

We therefore urge the IAC and the Minister for Planning to reject AusNet's EES Chapter 12 and its supporting Technical Report E as inadequate.

Based on the WVCA's concerns over the WRL Project assessment of land use and planning impacts, as outlined in Section 6, we recommend that the IAC and the Minister for Planning:

1. **Reject the Land Use and Planning Assessment:** Reject AusNet's land use and planning assessment (Chapter 12 and Technical Report E) and direct AusNet to undertake a new assessment using a methodology that is fit for purpose for a linear infrastructure project and quantifies the severe, localised impacts on individual landholders
2. **Mandate Inclusion of Economic Consideration:** Mandate that AusNet's land use and planning reassessment includes a comprehensive economic analysis of the consequences of easement restrictions on our agricultural businesses.

3. **Redesign the EPRs:** Direct AusNet to completely redesign the Land Use and Planning EPRs to provide clear, measurable and auditable standards to be assessed by external parties and remove all vague and non-committal language.
4. **Mandate Independent Peer Review:** Mandate that any future submission of a WRL EES Land Use and Planning report be accompanied by a full, independent peer review conducted by suitably qualified and mutually agreed-upon experts appointed by the Department of Transport and Planning.

SECTION 7

WVCA ASSESSMENT OF AUSNET'S EES CHAPTER 13 - BUSHFIRE

This Section provides an evaluation of AusNet's WRL EES assessment, specifically focusing on Chapter 13, Bushfire, and its supporting Technical Report K.

The WVCA analysis establishes that AusNet's bushfire impact assessment is fundamentally deficient and fails to meet the legal and ethical standards required for a project of this scale and risk profile.

Executive Summary: The Central Finding of Our Evaluation

The WVCA's analysis demonstrates how the bushfire assessment systematically understates the project's true risks, is pervasively non-compliant with key planning policies that prioritise public safety and defers critical mitigation measures to vague and unenforceable post-approval processes.

Section 7 is structured in seven parts:

1. Systemic Deficiencies in Methodology and Risk Assessment
2. Pervasive Non-Compliance with the Statutory and Policy Framework
3. Underestimation of Construction and Operational Impacts
4. Inadequacy of Proposed Mitigation and Governance Measures
5. Failure of Transparency and Public Engagement
6. Conclusion
7. Recommendations

PART 1: SYSTEMIC DEFICIENCIES IN METHODOLOGY AND RISK ASSESSMENT

The credibility of any impact assessment rests on the integrity of its methodology. A rigorous examination of AusNet's Chapter 13 and Technical Report K reveals a framework that is not fit for purpose. AusNet's approach is not based on a robust assessment of the project's true impacts but rather on a framework that systematically understates the risk, leading to predetermined and misleading conclusions.

1.1 A Siloed Analytical Framework and a Failure of Integrated Risk

A core deficiency in the bushfire analysis is its reliance on a simplistic framework based on five discrete categories of potential impact:

- on-site ignition
- off-site ignition
- fire suppression
- fuel management; and
- access/egress.

While these categories may appear logical, their application represents a siloed approach to a complex problem. A genuine risk assessment would model the synergistic and compounding effects that define real-world bushfire emergencies. AusNet's EES Chapter 13 fails to conduct this form of multi-variate analysis.

It does not assess, for example, a scenario where an on-site ignition on a day of extreme fire danger simultaneously compromises a key egress route and impedes the initial fire suppression response.

AusNet's fragmented approach is further exposed by the failure to integrate project-specific social risks into the bushfire assessment. AusNet's own stakeholder engagement reports, documented in Chapter 7 and Attachment IV, acknowledge a highly volatile social environment with significant "Community distrust" and a history of over 262 reported incidents, including protests and threats to project personnel leading to disdain and contempt for transmission infrastructure.

These factors materially elevate the risks to fire suppression and will complicate emergency response efforts. The technical bushfire risk assessment presented in EES Chapter 13 and Technical Report K is de-coupled from the social environment of the project and is therefore not a credible basis for ensuring public safety.

1.2 Constrained Modelling and the Exclusion of Catastrophic Scenarios

The bushfire behaviour modelling that informs AusNet's understanding of potential fire spread and impact is deficient and presents a misleadingly optimistic picture of the project's dangers.

AusNet used the PHOENIX Rapidfire model to simulate fires under three weather scenarios, with a maximum Forest Fire Danger Index (FFDI) of approximately 130. This selection of parameters is a critical failure of due diligence. Catastrophic historical events, such as the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires, which directly impacted communities within the project's study area, saw FFDI values ranging from 160 to over 200.

By capping the modelling at an FFDI of 130, AusNet has selected a constrained modelling approach that avoids an assessment of the project's performance and safety under the most dangerous, yet entirely plausible, conditions historically experienced in the state.

The EES's failure to model pyroconvective events - fire-generated thunderstorms that can cause extreme and erratic winds and have been implicated in transmission tower failures - constitutes a deliberate selection of less-than-catastrophic scenarios. This approach allows AusNet to generate favourable conclusions by not testing the proposed infrastructure against conditions that would overwhelm minor mitigating factors, such as a cleared easement.

In this sense, the EES fails to answer the most critical question: how does this infrastructure perform, and what risk does it pose to the community, under conditions equivalent to Black Saturday?

1.3 Mischaracterisation of Climate Change Impacts

AusNet's EES acknowledges that climate change is projected to increase the number of extreme fire weather days in the region. However, it treats this critical long-term risk as a superficial qualitative factor rather than a fundamental parameter of the risk assessment. It fails to integrate these projections into its core risk modelling, choosing instead to base its analysis on historical climate data.

An 80-year asset requires an 80-year risk outlook. By basing its risk assessment only on historical data, AusNet has assessed the risk for the project as it stands today, not as it will exist in the future for the majority of its operational life. This temporal mismatch violates the precautionary principle and the EES requirement to assess long-term effects.

PART 2: PERVASIVE NON-COMPLIANCE WITH THE STATUTORY AND POLICY FRAMEWORK

AusNet's submission exhibits a pattern of non-compliance with key Victorian legislation and policy, which are foundational failures that compromise the EES as a basis for regulatory decision. A comparison of AusNet's submission against these specific requirements reveals a pattern of profound failure to meet the required statutory standard for a project of this risk profile.

2.1 Failure to Adhere to the Intent of Clause 13.02-1S

The central pillar of Victoria's bushfire planning policy is Clause 13.02-1S of the Victoria Planning Provisions, which mandates the prioritisation of human life in all risk-based planning decisions. AusNet's claim of compliance with this clause is unsubstantiated.

The WVCA's assessment is that the EES demonstrably fails to prioritise the protection of human life through its inadequate risk modelling, its failure to resolve critical access blackspots, and its reliance on a consultation process that has generated documented community hostility. This suggests that other considerations, such as project cost and route efficiency, were given primacy over a rigorous, safety-first approach.

AusNet's argument that because the project is not a "settlement," some aspects of the clause are not directly applicable constitutes a misinterpretation of the clause's scope and intent. The policy explicitly applies to any development on bushfire-prone land that "may create a bushfire hazard".

The 190 km transmission line is, by AusNet's own admission, a potential ignition source that fundamentally alters the bushfire risk profile for existing communities along its entire length.

AusNet is attempting to lower the standard for compliance by re-interpreting its statutory obligations. The project creates a new hazard profile for existing communities and must therefore be assessed against the highest standards of the planning framework designed to protect those communities.

2.2 Deficient Assessment under the Bushfire Management Overlay (BMO)

The proposed route intersects 25 distinct polygons designated under a Bushfire Management Overlay (BMO). The BMO is a statutory tool applied to land with an extreme bushfire hazard. AusNet's assertion that "None of the types of potential impact of the Project... or the potential residual impacts... are specific to the BMO" is an unsubstantiated claim.

The BMO exists precisely because the risks in these areas are specific and more severe. AusNet's failure to conduct a heightened, specific assessment for these 25 extreme-risk locations demonstrates a profound lack of rigor in assessing the project's most significant bushfire risks and represents a major compliance gap.

2.3 Conflating Compliance with Mitigation: A Misapplication of Regulatory Intent

Throughout the EES, AusNet repeatedly cites compliance with the *Electricity Safety Act 1998* and its subordinate regulations, as well as AusNet's existing Electricity Safety Management Scheme (ESMS), as a primary mitigation measure. This reliance is misplaced and insufficient to meet the requirements of an EES.

AusNet's EES conflates baseline regulatory compliance with project-specific mitigation. These regulations and schemes provide a crucial baseline for the entire Victorian transmission network.

The purpose of an EES, however, is to go beyond baseline compliance to assess and manage the significant environmental effects of a new, major project that necessitate the EES process in the first place.

By presenting its standard operating procedure as a sufficient response to a non-standard level of risk, AusNet has engaged in a circular argument that fails to address the very reason an EES was required.

PART 3: UNDERESTIMATION OF CONSTRUCTION AND OPERATIONAL IMPACTS

AusNet's assessment of impacts, particularly the assignment of risk ratings, is consistently contradicted by the evidence presented within the EES documentation itself. Key risks related to ignition, fire suppression, and emergency access are systematically downplayed, resulting in a misleadingly optimistic portrayal of the project's safety profile.

3.1 The Unresolved North Darley Egress Trap

AusNet's assessment of the project's impact on emergency access and egress routes is dangerously complacent. The analysis in Technical Report K concludes that for most settlements, the residual impact is rated as "very low," with the situation at Lerderderg Gorge Road in North Darley rated as "low".

This assessment contains a fundamental flaw: it fails to appropriately weigh consequence over probability. AusNet acknowledges that for residents along Lerderderg Gorge Road, there is "no alternative safe route" if the primary egress is blocked by a fallen tower or powerline. A scenario that can trap residents in the path of a bushfire with no alternative escape route is, by any definition of robust risk management, an unacceptable risk, regardless of its perceived probability.

Assigning a "low" risk rating to a potentially fatal scenario demonstrates a profound disregard for the core planning principle of prioritising human life. AusNet's entire risk assessment for access and egress is predicated on the "exceedingly low" probability of a tower collapse, a methodology that fundamentally devalues the catastrophic consequence of a safety failure in favour of a statistical claim.

3.2 Material Impairment of Fire Suppression Capabilities

AusNet concludes that the residual impact of the project on fire suppression capabilities is "low," stating that while tactics "may need to adapt locally," the effect would likely be "negligible" on an established fire. This conclusion systematically underestimates the impact on initial response capabilities.

The most critical phase of firefighting is the initial attack, where rapid access and the direct application of water or retardant are essential to prevent a small fire from becoming a conflagration. It is precisely during this critical phase that the project's infrastructure creates the most significant impediment.

The evidence presented in AusNet's own technical report demonstrates a material, not negligible, impairment to firefighting efforts. The report acknowledges that fire response aircraft

cannot apply water or retardant directly below the lines. Furthermore, the Country Fire Authority's (CFA) standard operating procedure requires an 8-metre clearance from active lines, preventing direct attack on fires under the easement.

AusNet also identifies 115 farm dams and Pykes Creek Reservoir and Lake Merrimu as key water sources for the highest risk fire areas that will be rendered unusable for helicopter refilling as a result of the proposed route, a material handicap to aerial support. AusNet's focus on "established" fires downplays the material degradation of initial attack capabilities.

The following table provides a comparative assessment of the EES ratings against a more robust, consequence-based evaluation.

EES Criterion	EES/AusNet Rating	WVCA Re-Assessment	Justification
Sensitivity of environmental or community values	Very low	High	The EES rating fails to account for the catastrophic, unmitigated risk to human life and property at North Darley.
Magnitude, extent, and duration of the impact	Low	High	The impact is permanent and extends along the entire 190 km route, materially impairing firefighting capabilities and introducing a new, unassessed ignition source.
Existing activities and cumulative effects	Low	Major	The project compounds existing risks by introducing a new, 190 km potential ignition source into a volatile social and climatic environment, which the EES's risk assessment fails to integrate.
Benchmarks, policies, and standards	Compliant	Non-compliant	The assessment fails to comply with the core objective of Clause 13.02-1S and the requirements of the BMO by not conducting a heightened, rigorous analysis for designated high-risk areas.

EES Criterion	EES/AusNet Rating	WVCA Re-Assessment	Justification
Effectiveness of mitigation measures	Effective	Unenforceable	Critical mitigation measures are deferred to post-approval processes and governed by vague conditions that lack the specificity required to be audited or enforced.

PART 4: INADEQUACY OF PROPOSED MITIGATION AND GOVERNANCE MEASURES

The framework proposed by AusNet to manage bushfire risk is procedurally flawed, lacks specificity, and creates a critical accountability gap. The EES defers critical safety measures to post-approval plans, and the conditions intended to govern them are too vague to be effectively enforced.

4.1 A Framework of Procedural Deferral

The Environmental Management Framework (EMF), presented in EES Chapter 29, is positioned as the primary governance tool. However, for the critical issue of bushfire, the EMF defers all specific actions to post-approval plans, most notably the Construction Bushfire Management Plan and the Emergency Management Plan. These crucial plans are to be developed not by AusNet but by a future, yet-to-be-appointed Principal Contractor.

This structure is a critical procedural failure. The EES process is intended to assess a defined project with defined mitigations, not to approve a concept where the essential safety details are to be delegated to a contractor.

By not including specific, measurable, and auditable Bushfire Environmental Performance Requirements (EPRs) within the EMF itself, AusNet is deferring the detailed design of critical public safety measures until after the project has been approved and public scrutiny has concluded. This creates a compliance and accountability vacuum, as there are no clear, enforceable standards against which an Independent Environmental Auditor (IEA) can audit the contractor's bushfire plans.

4.2 Vague and Unenforceable Conditions

The proposed conditions for the Incorporated Document, which are intended to govern the contractor's development of bushfire plans, are vague and lack the specificity required for robust enforcement. As listed in Technical Report K, these conditions require the preparation of plans that merely "address" certain issues, such as "Controls on hot works" and "Measures to manage bushfire risk".

These conditions state what topics must be included in the plans but fail to define the standard to which those topics must be addressed.

This lack of specificity leaves critical safety parameters to the discretion of the future contractor. The conditions are a checklist of topics, not a list of measurable outcomes. This is

insufficient for a project of this risk profile and fails to provide the community or the regulator with any certainty about the level of safety that will be delivered.

PART 5: FAILURE OF TRANSPARENCY AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

The credibility of the EES is further damaged by significant procedural failures related to transparency and a demonstrated pattern of disregarding substantive stakeholder concerns about safety.

5.1 A Missing Chain of Technical Verification

Technical Report K states that an "independent review of this assessment has been completed by Graeme Taylor and Mark Potter of Fire Risk Consultants". While these individuals are credible and experienced experts, the full peer review report - detailing the reviewers' scope, findings, recommendations, and any outstanding or unaddressed concerns - is not included anywhere in the EES documentation.

This is a failure of due process and transparency. The purpose of an independent peer review within an EES is to provide the public, IAC, and the Minister for Planning with third-party confidence in the technical adequacy and integrity of the proponent's work. By commissioning a review but withholding the report, AusNet has obstructed the EES process and made independent verification impossible.

This action asks decision-makers to accept AusNet's claim of a favourable review without any evidence, a position that must be considered untenable in a rigorous, evidence-based assessment process. This omission fatally undermines the credibility of the entire Bushfire Impact Assessment.

5.2 The Misconception of Consultation

The EES documentation reveals a clear and consistent disconnect between the serious safety issues raised by the community and the dismissive conclusions of the technical assessment.

Attachment IV and Chapter 7 document a consistent theme of community concern regarding bushfire risk, the potential for tower collapse, and the project's impacts on firefighting capabilities. While AusNet claims to have "responded" to these concerns with fact sheets and webinars, the technical report effectively dismisses these same concerns by assigning them "low" or "very low" risk ratings.

This demonstrates that AusNet has misconstrued consultation as a procedural exercise rather than a substantive input. The EES fails the fundamental test of a consultation process, which is to use community feedback to genuinely shape and improve the project and its assessment.

PART 6: CONCLUSION

The WVCA's analysis of AusNet's EES Bushfire Impact Assessment for the proposed WRL shows that it is fundamentally and irredeemably flawed:

- It is based on a deficient risk methodology that fails to consider compounding effects and documented social risk factors.
- It fails to comply with the core tenets of Victorian bushfire planning policy, particularly the legislative requirement to prioritise the protection of human life.

- Its proposed mitigation measures are deferred, vague, and unenforceable, creating an unacceptable governance and safety risk.
- It systematically underestimates material impacts on fire suppression capabilities and creates an unresolved egress trap for residents in North Darley.
- It fails to integrate legitimate community safety concerns.

To compound these failures, the entire assessment is procedurally compromised by a critical lack of transparency regarding its independent peer review. Until these fundamental requirements are met, the project as proposed presents an unassessed and unacceptable bushfire risk to the Victorian community.

PART 7: RECOMMENDATION

Based on the WVCA's evaluation of AusNet's WRL EES Chapter 13 and its supporting Technical Report K, as outlined in Section 7, we recommend that the IAC and the Minister for Planning:

1. **Reject the Bushfire Impact Assessment:** Reject AusNet's WRL EES Chapter 13 and its supporting Technical Report K in their entirety. Project approval should be withheld until AusNet submits a completely new Bushfire Impact Assessment that rectifies all deficiencies identified.

SECTION 8

WVCA ASSESSMENT OF AUSNET'S EES CHAPTER 14 - ECONOMIC

This Section presents an evaluation of AusNet's assessment of economic impacts of the proposed WRL project, specifically focusing on the WRL EES Chapter 14, "Economic", and its supporting Technical Report G.

Executive Summary: The Central Findings of Our Evaluation

This submission demonstrates how AusNet's economic assessment is fundamentally deficient and fails to meet the legal and ethical standards required for an EES. WVCA analysis shows that the EES's central claim of a net economic benefit is built on a foundation of obsolete data, its compliance with legal requirements is selective, its promises of mitigation are hollow, and its assessment of the human cost is dismissive.

Section 8 is structured in seven parts:

1. A Fundamentally Flawed Methodology
2. Systemic Non-Compliance with EES Scoping Requirements
3. A Deceptive Mitigation Framework
4. The Failure of Integrity: A Missing Peer Review
5. Comparative Impact Rating Assessment
6. Conclusion
7. Recommendations

PART 1: A FUNDAMENTALLY FLAWED METHODOLOGY

The credibility of any economic assessment rests on the integrity of its methodology and the quality of its inputs. Our detailed analysis of Chapter 14 and its supporting Technical Report G reveals that while a standard modelling technique was used, it is populated with critically outdated and inappropriate data that renders its conclusions invalid.

AusNet's headline claim of a significant net economic benefit to Australia is built on a model solving the wrong problem. The core deficiency lies in the data used to generate the "shocks" that drive the Computable General Equilibrium (CGE) model.

The proponent relies entirely on a market modelling report from February 2023 to forecast the project's gross market benefits, but this data is now critically outdated. It fails to incorporate Victoria's current, legally mandated renewable energy targets of 65% by 2030 and 95% by 2035, as legislated under the *Renewable Energy (Jobs and Investment) Act 2017*.

AusNet's assessment is based on achieving previous targets (40% by 2025 and 50% by 2030), not the more ambitious targets of 65% by 2030 and 95% by 2035. AusNet's analysis is grounded in AEMO's 2022 Integrated System Plan (ISP), which has been superseded by the 2024 ISP.

Furthermore, the EY market modelling assumes a project commissioning date of 1 July 2027 that contradicts the proponent's own construction schedule, which indicates completion in late 2028. This 18-month discrepancy materially affects the Net Present Value of all costs and benefits due to discounting, making the financial outputs inaccurate.

These are not minor technical errors; they represent a cascade of methodological failures. The use of outdated data means the CGE model is calculating the benefits of a project designed for

a less ambitious and differently structured energy transition from the one mandated by current Victorian law and reflected in current national planning. The model's outputs are consequently disconnected from reality and irrelevant to the actual policy and planning environment in which the project would operate.

Furthermore, the methodology relies on a "simplifying assumption" that compensation payments will fully offset the disruption and productivity impacts on us, the landholders. This assumption, which is not supported by evidence from our community, effectively assumes that the local economic costs are zero.

By assuming away major project costs, the CGE model's "net benefit" calculation is fundamentally flawed and presents a gross overestimation of the project's value.

PART 2: SYSTEMIC NON-COMPLIANCE WITH EES SCOPING REQUIREMENTS

An EES should be a direct and binding response to the Scoping Requirements issued by the Minister for Planning under the *Environment Effects Act 1978*.

The WVCA's comparison of the proponent's submission against these specific requirements reveals a pattern of systemic non-compliance. These are not minor oversights; they are fundamental failures that leave the IAC and the Minister for Planning without the necessary information to make a sound assessment.

2.1 Disaggregation of Economic Impacts

The most significant compliance failure is the deliberate disaggregation of economic impacts. Technical Report G, AusNet's primary economic analysis, explicitly states: "For clarity, businesses within the Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing industry have not been considered in this analysis".

This is a direct contravention of the Scoping Requirements.

The report defers this critical assessment to Technical Report H, which describes physical impacts on agriculture but does not quantify their economic cost or, crucially, integrate these costs back into the main economic model presented in Technical Report G.

This decision effectively isolates the project's most significant negative economic impacts from its headline benefit-cost analysis. The WVCA view this as a fundamental flaw that violates the principle of integrated assessment. The logical inference from this choice is that the disaggregation is not an oversight but a deliberate decision to avoid quantifying and subtracting the most severe negative impacts from the headline "net benefit."

2.2 Impacts on Tourism

Similarly, the assessment of impacts on our tourism industry is inadequate. The Scoping Requirements mandate the identification of "potential impact on tourism and tourist attractions". In response, Technical Report G acknowledges our concerns but dismisses the impacts as "highly localised" and assigns a "neutral" impact at the industry level.

This qualitative dismissal fails to adequately assess the economic consequences for a key regional industry and does not meet the standard of a rigorous impact assessment. The process of acknowledging a severe impact and then classifying it as "neutral" at an industry level is a form of statistical misdirection that masks concentrated, severe costs to a specific subset of businesses

PART 3: A DECEPTIVE MITIGATION FRAMEWORK

The proposed Environmental Performance Requirements (EPRs) are AusNet's primary mechanism for managing the project's economic impacts. However, WVCA analysis shows that these EPRs are critically flawed, relying on vague and non-committal language that provides no enforceable protection for our community.

The key economic EPRs (EC1, EC2, and EC3) commit only to processes of consultation and offers, not guaranteed outcomes. They rely on subjective terms like "to the extent reasonably practicable."

The WVCA has long argued that this phrase is not a performance standard; it is an escape clause that gives the proponent and its contractors sole discretion to decide what is "reasonable," a decision that will inevitably be biased by cost and convenience rather than the protection of our landholder interests.

This language makes the EPRs effectively un-auditable and unenforceable, providing the illusion of mitigation without any legal obligation to deliver. AusNet's approach is a clear case of shifting the burden and risk of mitigation onto us, the affected parties. This is deliberately designed as a liability management tool for AusNet, leaving unacceptable levels of residual risk with our affected communities.

PART 4: THE FAILURE OF INTEGRITY: A MISSING PEER REVIEW

The credibility of an EES is underpinned by a transparent and rigorous quality assurance process. The EES documentation for the WRL project critically fails this test.

The economic assessment, arguably the most complex and model-heavy component of the EES, was not subjected to a published independent peer review. This omission is a stark departure from established best practice and denies decision-makers and the public any independent assurance of the report's technical validity.

AusNet claims that an independent review was completed, but by commissioning a review and then withholding the report, the proponent makes this independent verification impossible.

The decision to withhold the report strongly suggests that the review was either critical of the proponent's work, raised difficult questions that have not been resolved, or was constrained in a way the proponent does not wish to disclose. AusNet is asking decision-makers to simply trust that the review was favourable, a position that the WVCA argue should be viewed as untenable in a rigorous, evidence-based assessment process.

PART 5: COMPARATIVE IMPACT RATING ASSESSMENT

The table below demonstrates the gulf between AusNet's assessment and our own. This table uses AusNet's own criteria to highlight the fundamental discrepancies between the proponent's theoretical assessment and the undeniable, severe impacts on our community.

Our ratings are based on the evidence and our lived experience of the project's potential to cause irreversible harm to our land, livelihoods, and wellbeing.

AusNet's WRL EES Impact Rating System Criterion	Description	EES/AusNet Rating	WVCA Assessment	Cumulative Rating
Overall impact score across all criteria	The overall impact score across all criteria	Net positive for Australia (\$4.7B welfare benefit), neutral for most local businesses	Catastrophic for us, the individual landholders, due to severe, localized harm that is not quantified in the report's methodology	Catastrophic
Sensitivity of environmental or community values	How vulnerable or important the affected environment or community asset is	Very low to low, based on regional scale analysis and a failure to assess impacts on individual properties and livelihoods	Severe - The report fails to acknowledge the high vulnerability of our family farms and our semi-rural lifestyle, which are of immense personal value and are irrevocably harmed by the project	Severe
Magnitude, extent, and duration of the impact	The scale, reach, and time span of the impact (e.g., temporary vs. permanent)	Minor to Negligible (for most land use impacts)	Severe - The project creates a permanent, severe impact on the viability of our farms and a permanent loss of visual amenity, which has a long-term impact on our property values	Severe

AusNet's WRL EES Impact Rating System Criterion	Description	EES/AusNet Rating	WVCA Assessment	Cumulative Rating
			and mental health	
Existing activities and cumulative effects	Other ongoing or planned activities that may amplify the impact	Largely neutral effect for most industries and highly localised negative impacts for a few	Major - The assessment fails to address the cumulative and compounding effects of multiple state projects on our communities over time, which has led to significant distrust and distress	Major
Benchmarks, policies, and standards	Evaluation against legal or regulatory thresholds and best-practice guidelines	Consistent (with some residual impacts)	Non-Compliant - The assessment is based on outdated policy and planning documents (e.g., AEMO 2022 ISP) and ignores current legislated targets, rendering it non-compliant with the current policy environment	Non-Compliant

AusNet's WRL EES Impact Rating System Criterion	Description	EES/AusNet Rating	WVCA Assessment	Cumulative Rating
Effectiveness of mitigation measures	How well the proposed measures are expected to reduce or offset the impact	Effective (with EPRs)	Unenforceable - The EPRs rely on vague, non- committal language such as "so far as reasonably practicable," which provides no certain or auditable standard for accountability	Unenforceable

PART 6: CONCLUSION

The WVCA's analysis of AusNet's Economic Impact Assessment shows that it is fundamentally inadequate and non-compliant. It is a document that systematically and intentionally minimizes the devastating, on-the-ground economic impacts on our land, our livelihoods, and our community.

The Economic Impact Assessment is based on a flawed methodology that uses obsolete data and intentionally isolates the most severe economic costs to our community. This failure to adequately account for costs creates a "Macro-Micro Disconnect" where a diffuse national benefit is claimed while significant, concentrated local costs are unquantified and ignored. This renders the headline "net welfare benefit" materially misleading.

Chapter 14 fails to comply with key legal requirements by not providing an integrated assessment of agricultural and tourism impacts. Its EPRs are unenforceable and deceptive, and the absence of a published peer review for this critical document is a major failure of transparency that renders its technical claims untrustworthy.

PART 7: RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the WVCA's evaluation of AusNet's WRL EES Chapter 14 and its supporting Technical Report G, as outlined in Section 8, we recommend that the IAC and the Minister for Planning:

1. **Reject the Economic Assessment:** Formally reject EES Chapter 14 and Technical Report G as not fit for purpose and non-compliant with the requirements of the *Environment Effects Act 1978* and the EES Scoping Requirements.

2. **Require a New, Integrated Assessment:** Direct AusNet to undertake a new, comprehensive, and integrated economic impact assessment. This new assessment should be required to fully quantify and integrate the economic costs to all affected sectors, including agriculture, tourism, and impacts on land values.
3. **Mandate Current Data and Policies:** Mandate that the new assessment be based on current, legislated Victorian renewable energy targets, the latest AEMO Integrated System Plan, and a project timeline consistent with the proponent's own construction schedule.
4. **Mandate Independent Peer Review:** Mandate that the new economic assessment and its supporting technical report be subjected to a transparent and independent peer review by suitably qualified experts, with the peer review report to be published as part of the revised EES documentation.

SECTION 9

WVCA ASSESSMENT OF AUSNET'S EES CHAPTER 15 - AGRICULTURE AND FORESTRY

This Section provides an evaluation of AusNet's WRL EES assessment, specifically focusing on Chapter 15, Agriculture and Forestry, and its supporting Technical Report H.

Executive Summary: The Central Findings of Our Evaluation

The WVCA's analysis of Chapter 15 establishes that AusNet's submission demonstrates a profound violation of its legally mandated duties under the *Environment Effects Act 1978* and the project-specific EES Scoping Requirements.

The key findings of this evaluation are severe and systemic:

- **Unsound Foundational Methodology:** The assessment's foundational methodology is demonstrably unsound, and its conclusions therefore cannot be relied upon. This is evidenced by an inexcusably low rate of direct landholder consultation, an over-reliance on generic desktop analysis, and a disregard for established best-practice guidelines.
- **Procedural and Legal Non-Compliance:** AusNet has engaged in a pervasive subversion of the EES process by systematically deferring its core assessment responsibilities to a post-approval stage. This constitutes a breach of the governing legislation, which mandates that a complete assessment of environmental effects must be considered *before* a decision is made.
- **Incomplete Economic Evaluation:** The economic evaluation is fatally incomplete and presents a dangerously deceptive account of the true financial exposure to affected parties. AusNet's analysis omits critical categories of impact, such as the costs of land isolation and redundancy, and employs rhetorical devices to aggregate severe individual impacts into a misleadingly minor regional outcome.
- **Selective Quality Assurance:** AusNet has disregarded the independent peer review process, choosing to reject its most critical and substantive recommendations. The refusal to adhere to a core quality assurance mechanism undermines the credibility and integrity of the entire assessment.
- **Insufficient Long-Term Risk Analysis:** The assessment fails to integrate foreseeable climate change projections, resulting in an assessment that is dangerously myopic and fails to account for the compounding effects of project impacts over its intended 80-year lifespan.

The primary recommendation of our analysis is that AusNet's EES assessment of agriculture and forestry impacts be formally rejected, and the proponent be directed to submit a new assessment that comprehensively rectifies all identified deficiencies.

Section 9 is structured in eight parts:

1. Foundational Deficiencies in Assessment Methodology
2. Systemic Contravention of Statutory and Procedural Duties
3. A Fundamentally Deceptive Economic Assessment
4. Transfer of Unquantified Risk to Affected Parties

5. Profound Disregard for Independent Quality Assurance
6. The Failure to Integrate Climate Change and Long-Term Risks
7. Conclusion
8. Recommendations

PART 1: FOUNDATIONAL DEFICIENCIES IN ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGY

A credible and rigorous EES must be built upon a robust methodology that is fit for purpose and capable of providing an accurate and reliable assessment of a project's potential impacts. This section demonstrates that AusNet's assessment methodology for agriculture and forestry impacts falls short of this fundamental requirement on several fronts, rendering its conclusions scientifically and empirically unreliable.

The deficiencies are not minor or incidental; they are systemic, pervasive, and strike at the very heart of the document's credibility.

1.1 The Failure of Engagement: A Critical Data Deficit

A project of the scale and nature of the Western Renewables Link, which traverses approximately 190 kilometres and directly impacts 229 individual properties, is critically dependent on a deep, property-specific understanding of each affected business.

However, AusNet's stakeholder engagement process represents a demonstrable and fundamental failure. Technical Report H explicitly admits to achieving an indefensibly low interview rate of just 6% of affected landholders (14 of 229), a figure that falls significantly short of its own modest target of 10%. AusNet's subsequent assertion that this "relatively low interview rate has not compromised the assessment" is a self-serving conclusion. The statement lacks independent validation and is directly contradicted by the immense scale and complexity of the potential impacts. Ausnet could well have selected only favourable stakeholders with aligned interests to interview.

The systemic nature of this failure is illuminated by information contained elsewhere in the EES. Chapter 7 of the EES, for example, reveals a process fraught with "pervasive community distrust," a "significant number of resignations" from the Community Consultation Group, and a forced resort to invoking statutory powers under the *Electricity Industry Act 2000* to gain land access when landholders refused entry.

This context demonstrates that the low interview rate is not a statistical anomaly but rather the most visible symptom of a profound breakdown in AusNet's engagement process. The low rate of participation serves as an active indicator of a failed engagement strategy, demonstrating that the vast majority of landholders who were not interviewed harbor significant concerns that have been systematically overlooked and therefore have not been captured in the EES.

AusNet's inability to engage with 94% of the directly impacted parties means that the data collected is not merely incomplete but is unrepresentative and, consequently, fatally compromised. The assessment's foundation is built upon a data deficit that fundamentally undermines its capacity to provide an accurate portrayal of the project's impacts.

1.2 Methodological Compromise: An Over-Reliance on Generic Analysis

AusNet's primary assessment technique involved a remote, "arms-length" desktop analysis of aerial imagery and spatial data, supplemented by limited ground-truthing from public roads and

the handful of interviews that were conducted. This approach is utterly inadequate for a project of this scale and complexity.

The independent peer review, commissioned by the Department of Transport and Planning, explicitly criticized this methodology, recommending that the report "be updated to provide details of the agricultural use and infrastructure of each property likely to be impacted by the project". In a clear and revealing act, the proponent rejected this critical recommendation as both "impractical and unnecessary".

This rejection is, in effect, a de facto admission of the assessment's inadequacy. Modern agricultural systems, particularly those involving high-value horticulture, precision-guided machinery, and intricate irrigation networks, cannot be accurately understood from satellite imagery alone.

The placement of a single tower can render a multi-million-dollar centre-pivot irrigator useless or sever a critical stock laneway system. These business-critical impacts are impossible to accurately assess from a remote perspective. The proponent has not conducted a true "impact assessment"; they have merely performed a high-level land-use categorisation exercise.

The assessment's failure to conduct property-specific analysis means it is incapable of assessing the actual, on-the-ground impacts that will be felt by individual farming enterprises.

1.3 Rejection of Established Standards and Best Practice

A rigorous regulatory assessment must adhere to established, transparent standards to ensure its rigor and completeness. AusNet's approach demonstrates a clear disregard for such standards. The peer reviewers repeatedly recommended that the proponent refer to established best-practice guidelines, such as the *NSW Guideline for Agricultural Impact Statements*, to structure and guide their assessment. AusNet rejected this advice, stating that it was not "appropriate for linear infrastructure projects," a position that the peer reviewers explicitly and correctly contested.

This is not a minor methodological dispute; it is a fundamental rejection of a standardised, rigorous, and transparent assessment framework in favour of a self-defined, less rigorous, and ultimately inadequate approach.

The NSW guidelines, for example, call for detailed soil information and a minimum ten-year history of agricultural enterprises, a level of detail entirely absent from Technical Report H.

AusNet's justification that a property-by-property assessment is "impractical" for it to conduct is not merely a rejection of a recommendation. It is an implicit admission that the project, by its very nature and scale, may not be assessable to the standard required by law. This highlights a fundamental and irreconcilable conflict between the project's scale and the legal and regulatory framework designed to provide proper oversight.

PART 2: SYSTEMIC CONTRAVENTION OF STATUTORY AND PROCEDURAL DUTIES

AusNet's EES submission is not merely flawed in its methodology; it is a profound procedural failure that contravenes the core intent of the EES process and the governing legislation. The central argument of this part is that the proponent has not assessed impacts but rather has subverted the process by systematically deferring its core assessment responsibilities to a post-approval stage.

2.1 The Subversion of the Environmental Assessment Process

The WRL EES Scoping Requirements are not optional suggestions; they are the specific, legally mandated terms of reference for the WRL EES. Section 4.4 explicitly mandates that the EES must address "potential adverse impacts on agriculture" and "identify potential economic effects of the Project". AusNet's primary response to these legal mandates is the creation of the Environmental Performance Requirement (EPR) AF1, a "strategy" that requires the proponent to, prior to construction, "consult with landholders to discuss their individual business and specific impacts that their business may experience".

This is not an assessment; this is a framework to conduct the assessment at a later date. This procedural design represents a direct and systemic subversion of the EES process.

The statutory mandate requires that the EES document itself must *contain the assessment* of these impacts to inform a decision. The proponent has, instead, created a management plan (EPR AF1) that outlines a *process to conduct the assessment after the decision has been made*.

This places the affected landholders in a position of extreme disadvantage. They are forced to make submissions on an EES without knowing the specific impacts on their properties or the mitigations that will be offered. By the time the EPR AF1 process begins, the project will have already secured primary approval, fundamentally shifting the balance of power from the landholder, who is now in a negotiation for compensation and mitigation, to the proponent. This is not a technical issue; it is a deliberate and procedural failure that bypasses the democratic and legal purpose of the EES.

2.2 A Profound Breach of the Governing Legislation

The deferral of assessment is a clear and profound breach of the foundational principles of the governing legislation. The purpose of the *Environment Effects Act 1978* is to ensure that the assessment of significant effects is "considered" by the decision-maker *before* any decision is made. Section 8C(1)(b) of the Act is unequivocal: no decision can be made by a decision-maker until "the assessment [of the environmental effects] has been considered".

AusNet's WRL EES submission does not contain a complete assessment of agriculture effects. It contains a promise for a future assessment via EPR AF1. The WVCA argue that the Minister for Planning cannot lawfully consider an assessment that has not yet been performed.

To approve the WRL based on the current EES would be to make a decision based on an incomplete and deferred assessment, which constitutes a clear and profound failure of public administration that contravenes both the letter and the spirit of the Act.

The table below provides a visual representation of this profound compliance gap.

EES Scoping Requirement	What AusNet Delivered in the WRL EES	Gap Analysis & Risk Rating
Key Issue: "Potential adverse impacts on	Acknowledges these impacts exist in general terms (e.g., on	Failure to Assess: The EES does not contain the required assessment for each of the 229 properties. It

EES Scoping Requirement	What AusNet Delivered in the WRL EES	Gap Analysis & Risk Rating
agriculture... including constraints on cropping or grazing... and restrictions on farming practices."	irrigation, aerial spraying). Defers detailed, property-specific assessment to the post-approval EPR AF1 process.	contains a <i>framework to conduct the assessment later</i> . The specific constraints on cropping for Farm A or grazing for Farm B are not assessed. Risk Rating: High.
Likely Effect: "Identify potential economic effects... on land use, farming and agriculture..."	Provides a high-level regional economic loss figure. Explicitly excludes economic effects of land isolation and redundancy. Defers property-level economic impact assessment to the compensation negotiation process.	Incomplete Identification: Fails to identify and quantify a key category of economic effect (isolation/redundancy), which it admits could be "significant" at the property level. The assessment is therefore incomplete and presents a deceptive portrayal. Risk Rating: High.
Performance Criteria: "Outline measures to monitor the success of commitments to mitigate or manage effects on land use..."	Proposes monitoring through EPRs. The success of EPR AF1 is based on reaching "agreed mitigation measures" with landholders, a process with no defined environmental outcome.	Uncertain and Unenforceable: The success criteria are based on future, private agreements, not on defined, measurable, and auditable environmental outcomes. The use of vague language ("practicable," "feasible") makes the commitments impossible to monitor for compliance and difficult to enforce. Risk Rating: High.

PAE 3: A FUNDAMENTALLY DECEPTIVE ECONOMIC ASSESSMENT

The economic impact analysis presented by AusNet in the WRL EES Chapter 15 and Technical Report H is fundamentally flawed and omits critical categories of impact. The methodology appears on our assessment to be designed to present a misleadingly low overall economic loss figure and a dangerous understatement of the financial risks to affected landholders.

3.1 The Unjustified Exclusion of Core Financial Burdens

A fatal flaw in AusNet's economic assessment is its explicit exclusion of a major category of impact. Technical Report H states that "The estimates do not include the potential impacts from isolation or redundancy of agricultural land... as it is not possible to provide an accurate estimate of the economic impact of these".

This omission is indefensible, as the report itself acknowledges the potential severity of this impact, noting that it "could result in significant parts of affected farms being unable to be put to their best economic use".

The failure to quantify this impact is a fatal methodological flaw. For a high-value horticultural enterprise using a centre-pivot irrigator, a single misplaced tower can render a multi-million-dollar asset useless and dozens of hectares unproductive. This is not an incidental impact; it can be an existential threat to the business.

AusNet's justification that quantification is "not possible" is not an acceptable reason for exclusion; it is an admission of their methodological failure to conduct the necessary property-level analysis. By excluding this potentially catastrophic category of loss, the headline economic loss figure of "\$6.3 million per year" during construction is rendered meaningless and dangerously downplays the true financial exposure to affected parties.

3.2 A Rhetorical Device to Obscure Significant Impacts

Chapter 15 employs a deceptive rhetorical device to downplay the severity of the project's impacts. It repeatedly concludes that the residual regional impact on agriculture is "minor". However, in a stark contradiction, it simultaneously states that "at the individual property level, residual impacts to some individual agricultural properties or enterprises may be more significant".

This is a classic fallacy of composition, where a collection of potentially "major" or "significant" individual impacts is aggregated and dismissed as a "minor" regional issue. The fundamental purpose of an EES is to protect individual environmental and economic values, not merely to ensure that regional statistical averages remain stable.

The use of this flawed methodology, combined with the explicit exclusion of core financial burdens, suggests a pattern of deliberate action aimed at minimising the appearance of economic loss. The economic analysis relies on Gross Value of Agricultural Production (GVAP), while correctly acknowledging that this metric "does not indicate the profitability of the enterprise". It also assigns each property to its "highest-value enterprise," a practice the report admits "may over-estimate the actual economic value of production".

The confluence of using a potentially inflated baseline, an unreliable metric for profitability, and the outright exclusion of a major cost category results in an analysis that is not just unreliable but is an actively deceptive portrayal of reality, designed to support AusNet's pre-determined narrative.

PART 4: TRANSFER OF UNQUANTIFIED RISK TO AFFECTED PARTIES

The Environmental Performance Requirements (EPRs), detailed in Chapter 29 related to agriculture and forestry, are not genuine mitigation measures. Instead, they function as procedural mechanisms designed to defer AusNet's statutory assessment obligations and transfer significant, unquantified risk and uncertainty entirely to affected landholders.

4.1 EPR AF1: A Framework for Future Negotiation, Not Mitigation

EPR AF1 requires the proponent to develop a "Mitigation and Support Strategy" to "consult with landholders to discuss their individual business and specific impacts" prior to construction. This procedural design is in direct and irreconcilable conflict with the purpose of the EES process. The EES is meant to assess impacts to inform a decision; EPR AF1 is designed to assess impacts *after* the decision has been made.

This subversion places landholders in a position of extreme disadvantage. They are forced to negotiate with the proponent after the proponent has already secured its primary approval, a situation that shifts the balance of power entirely to them.

4.2 Unenforceable Commitments and Ambiguous Language

Agriculture and forestry EPRs are drafted with non-committal, discretionary language that renders them weak and difficult to enforce. Examples include mitigating impacts "to the extent reasonably practicable" and providing support "where feasible". This is not the robust, legally binding language required for a major project.

The use of these ambiguous words creates loopholes, allowing the proponent to become the sole arbiter of what is "practicable" or "feasible" and to avoid mitigation measures on the basis of cost or convenience. These are not enforceable commitments; they are statements of intent that provide no certainty to landholders or regulators, and the risk of non-performance rests almost entirely with the landholder.

4.3 A Case Study in Risk Transference: The Deferral of Irrigation Assessments

AusNet's approach to high-value horticultural areas further demonstrates this transfer of risk. The proponent "may" undertake an "irrigation evaluation" to determine if a redesign could reduce production losses, but this entire process is discretionary. Support is only provided "where feasible," and compensation only "where there is an ongoing economic loss". This is not a guaranteed solution; it is a multi-stage process fraught with uncertainty for the farmer, who is left to bear the financial and operational burden of the project.

PART 5: PROFOUND DISREGARD FOR INDEPENDENT QUALITY ASSURANCE

The independent peer review (Appendix G of Technical Report H), commissioned by the Department of Transport and Planning, provides the most definitive indictment in the overall EES.

AusNet was made aware of the assessment's fundamental flaws by an independent expert body but chose to ignore the advice, demonstrating a profound lack of good faith in the EES process.

5.1 The Systematic Rejection of Expert Guidance

AusNet systematically rejected or failed to substantively address the most critical recommendations from the peer review:

- Failure to Assess Alternatives:** The peer reviewers recommended the Agriculture Impact Assessment (AIA) "be updated to address project alternatives, including the placement of the conductors underground." AusNet's response was "No change made," with the justification that it was addressed in another report. This is a failure of

integrated assessment, as the AIA should have been a self-contained analysis of agricultural impacts, including how they could be avoided by alternatives.

- **Failure to Provide Property-Level Data:** The peer reviewers recommended the AIA be updated to "provide details of the agricultural use and infrastructure of each property." Again, AusNet's response was "No change made," with the justification of it being "impractical and unnecessary". This is a direct rejection of the core requirement of a site-specific impact assessment.
- **Failure to Justify Technical Concerns:** The peer reviewers requested "further justification for the low susceptibility of soil erosion." The final peer review memo states that this recommendation remains outstanding. This demonstrates a failure to adequately address a specific technical concern.
- **Failure to Adopt Best-Practice Guidelines:** AusNet simply disagreed with the expert advice on best-practice methodology and proceeded with its own, less rigorous approach, a position the reviewers explicitly contested.

5.2 The Consequences of Ignoring Independent Scrutiny

The purpose of a peer review is to provide independent, expert quality assurance to ensure that the EES is scientifically robust and credible.

AusNet's systematic rejection of these critical recommendations is not a simple disagreement between experts; it is a refusal to adhere to the standards of rigor, detail, and transparency demanded by the independent body overseeing the technical quality of the EES. This active refusal to participate in the quality assurance process suggests a deeper, more fundamental problem than a mere technical disagreement. It implies the proponent is not genuinely participating in the EES process in good faith and is, instead, attempting to subvert regulatory scrutiny and gain approval for a document that has not been properly vetted.

This disregard fatally undermines the credibility of the entire Agriculture and Forestry Impact Assessment, leaving the IAC and the Minister for Planning unable to have confidence in a report that has failed its own quality control measures.

PART 6: THE FAILURE TO INTEGRATE CLIMATE CHANGE AND LONG-TERM RISKS

A project with an 80-year design life must be assessed within the context of future environmental conditions. The Agriculture and Forestry assessment fails to meaningfully integrate the climate change projections detailed in Technical Report N, resulting in an assessment of long-term viability that is incomplete and dangerously optimistic.

The EES's Technical Report N projects a future for the region that is "Warmer," "Drier," with "heavier" extreme precipitation, and an increased "frequency of days with highly elevated fire weather conditions". Despite acknowledging these projections in its general terms, the Agriculture and Forestry assessment assesses impacts on *current* agricultural systems based on *current* practices. There is no analysis of how the project's impacts - such as restricted access for firefighting, new ignition sources, or constraints on water management - will be compounded by these future climate conditions.

This creates a critical disconnect. The proponent is asking for approval for a project that will exist for a century, yet it has only assessed its impacts within a static, present-day climate

context. AusNet has failed to conduct a crucial compounding risk assessment and instead has assessed the project's impacts in a climate vacuum.

AusNet fails to ask, for example, how a 70-100m wide easement that cannot be easily traversed by fire-fighting vehicles affects a farmer's ability to defend their property during a "catastrophic" fire day, a condition projected to become more frequent.

AusNet does not assess how restrictions on aerial application affect the ability to manage pests and diseases that may become more prevalent in a warmer climate, or how impacts on irrigation systems interact with increased water scarcity from reduced rainfall and higher evaporation. By failing to ask and answer these questions, AusNet presents an incomplete and unreliable assessment of the project's long-term impacts on agricultural viability.

PART 7: CONCLUSION

The evidence presented in this report leads the WVCA to one inescapable conclusion: AusNet's WRL EES for Agriculture and Forestry is a fundamentally deficient document. It is not a complete and adequate assessment, and it fails to meet the legal and statutory requirements of the EES process. Its methodology is unsound, its consultation process is a clear failure, and its economic analysis is fatally incomplete and misleading.

The proponent has demonstrated a profound disregard for the affected community, for independent expert review, and, most importantly, for the legal and statutory requirements of the EES process.

Chapter 15, and its supporting Technical Report H, create unacceptable, unquantified risks for landholders and a profound compliance risk for the Minister for Planning. To proceed with this project based on this assessment would be to make a decision in the absence of the required information, a clear failure of public administration that contravenes the spirit and letter of the *Environment Effects Act 1978*.

The following table demonstrates the fundamental disconnect between AusNet's analysis and the reality of the impacts as observed by the WVCA's review.

Assessment Criterion	AusNet's Rating in the EES	WVCA Assessment
Overall magnitude of consequence	Minor	Major to Severe
Impact on sensitive environmental and community values	Minor to Moderate	Major to Severe
Scale and duration of impact	Minor to Moderate	Major to Severe
Cumulative effects from other projects	Minor to Negligible	Major

Assessment Criterion	AusNet's Rating in the EES	WVCA Assessment
Conformance with legal and industry benchmarks	Minor	Major
Efficacy of proposed mitigation measures	Minor	Negligible

PART 8: RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the WVCA's evaluation of AusNet's WRL EES Chapter 15 and its supporting Technical Report H, as outlined in Section 9, we recommend that the IAC and Minister for Planning:

1. **Reject the Agriculture and Forestry Assessment:** Formally reject Chapter 15 and Technical Report H as manifestly inadequate.
2. **Require a new Assessment:** Direct AusNet to prepare and exhibit a new EES for Agriculture and Forestry for the proposed WRL that:
 - a. Includes a property-by-property impact assessment for all 229 affected properties, based on genuine, on-the-ground validation and comprehensive consultation and formally endorsed by the property owners.
 - b. Quantifies the economic impacts of land isolation, redundancy, and business disruption.
 - c. Aligns the methodology with established, best-practice agricultural impact statement guidelines.
 - d. Addresses all outstanding recommendations from the extant independent peer review.
 - e. Includes a compounding risk assessment that accounts for the effects of project impacts in the context of projected climate change.
3. **Mandate Independent Peer Review:** Mandate that the new agriculture and forestry assessment be subjected to a transparent and independent peer review by suitably qualified experts, with the peer review report to be published as part of the revised EES documentation.

SECTION 10

WVCA ASSESSMENT OF AUSNET'S EES CHAPTER 16 - AVIATION

This Section provides an evaluation of AusNet's WRL EES assessment, specifically focusing on Chapter 16, Aviation, and its supporting Technical Report J.

Executive Summary: The Central Finding of Our Evaluation - A Systemic Failure to Prioritise Aviation Safety

The core finding of the WVCA's analysis is that AusNet's assessment is simply a collection of technical deficiencies, and a systemic failure to meet its statutory obligations under the Victorian *Environment Effects Act 1978*.

Our analysis of AusNet's aviation impact assessment reveals:

- a methodology that fundamentally obscures rather than reveals risk
- an unjustifiable mischaracterisation of impacts on key community assets
- a dangerous reliance on inadequate mitigation measures, and
- a logically unsound analysis of cumulative effects.

Collectively, these shortcomings demonstrate that the proponent has failed to provide a clear, objective, and integrated analysis sufficient for informed statutory decision-making. AusNet's WRL EES Chapter 16 and Technical Report J, presents an unacceptable risk to public and aviation safety and should be formally rejected by the IAC and the Minister for Planning.

Section 10 is structured in eight parts:

1. The Critical Flaw in Assessment Methodology: Externalising Risk to Pilots
2. Mischaracterisation of Impacts on Melton Aerodrome (YMEL)
3. Inadequate Mitigation: A Dangerous Reliance on Low-Order Controls
4. Ambiguous and Unenforceable Environmental Performance Requirements
5. The Flawed Logic of Cumulative Impact Analysis
6. Comparative Impact Assessment
7. Conclusion
8. Recommendations

PART 1: THE CRITICAL FLAW IN ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGY: EXTERNALISING RISK TO PILOTS

1.1 The Case for Unbiased Assessment

A project of the scale proposed for the WRL, in for a region where low-flying aircraft are integral to farming practices, emergency services, and medical transport, demands an assessment of the highest calibre. The associated EES should be a comprehensive and objective document that rigorously evaluates all potential impacts.

A foundational requirement for any credible EES is a robust, objective, and transparent methodology for assessing environmental effects. The EES Scoping Requirements explicitly mandate a "clear, objective and well-integrated analysis of the potential effects" and establish a

primary evaluation objective to "Avoid, or minimise where avoidance is not possible, adverse effects on... aviation safety". A detailed examination of the methodology employed in Technical Report J reveals a framework that fails to meet these essential requirements.

1.2 The Subjective Framework and its Consequences

AusNet's aviation impact rating system is based on subjective definitions that systematically obscure the significance of permanent safety impacts, failing to provide a sound basis for decision-making. The critical deficiency lies in the definitions for "Minor" and "Moderate" impacts.

The report classifies a "Minor" impact as one where a pilot must make "immaterial" adjustments and a "Moderate" impact as one requiring "material but not unachievable" adjustments.

This distinction is vague, unquantifiable, and ultimately subjective. By defining impacts based on a pilot's capacity to adapt rather than on the project's inherent degradation of the aviation environment, the framework creates a critical deficiency that the WVCA argues violates the EES Scoping Requirements.

1.3 A Systemic Failure to Assess Inherent Risk

The most significant consequence of this subjective framework is that it reverses the fundamental principles of modern safety management. Rather than evaluating the project's inherent impact on the environment, the methodology focuses on the pilot's ability to navigate a new, more hazardous environment.

This approach represents a profound and systemic breach of professional duty of care. Modern safety management systems operate on a principle that the hazard owner - in this case, AusNet - is responsible for controlling risk at its source before relying on operator-level controls.

AusNet's methodology effectively inverts this hierarchy. Instead of identifying and mitigating the physical hazard of the towers and wires, the proponent classifies the impact based on the procedural controls that a pilot must apply. This is not a simple procedural error; it constitutes a failure to meet the standard of care required for a major infrastructure project.

In abrogating its responsibilities and passing the burden of safety to pilots and operators, AusNet simultaneously transfers liability and accountability to third parties, which is legally and ethically indefensible.

The resulting assessment systematically downplays significant, permanent safety degradations.

PART 2: MISCHARACTERISATION OF IMPACTS ON MELTON AERODROME (YMEL)

AusNet's assessment of the Melton (YMEL) Uncertified Aerodrome serves as a profound example of how its flawed methodology leads to misleading and indefensible conclusions. The EES documentation acknowledges that the project will permanently impose significant operational constraints on this vital community asset yet concludes that the residual impact is merely "minor".

This finding is a direct contradiction of the evidence presented within AusNet's own technical report.¹

2.1 Permanent Degradation vs. "Minor" Impact

AusNet's Technical Report J explicitly details that a landing aircraft on Runway 14/32 "will require a steeper approach path and/or a touchdown point further along the runway" and a departing aircraft will need to "ensure climb after take-off is sufficient to avoid the tall structures crossing the extended runway centreline".

These are not "immaterial" adjustments. They are material, non-standard procedures that reduce safety margins during critical flight phases and permanently degrade the utility of the aerodrome.

Forcing a steeper approach path reduces the margin for error, and displacing the landing threshold effectively shortens the available runway length, which could restrict the types of aircraft that can safely use the aerodrome. This permanent degradation of a community asset is unjustifiably classified as "minor."

Many aircraft incidents attributed to engine failure occur upon take-off, and any significant obstacle in the flight path will change a potentially survivable scenario, to an almost invariably fatal one.

The mischaracterisation of the YMEL impact is not merely a technical assessment error; it represents a permanent, uncompensated loss of a community asset with significant economic and safety repercussions.

The aerodrome supports a flight training school and maintenance facilities, and its utility is defined by its operational safety margins and available runway length. AusNet's failure to assess the economic impact of this diminished utility and propose genuine compensation measures demonstrates a profound lack of respect for local infrastructure.

2.2 Illogical Disparity between Temporary and Permanent Impacts

Further evidence of AusNet's flawed assessment is found in the internal contradiction regarding temporary versus permanent impacts.

The EES rates the temporary construction impact at Melton as "Moderate to Major," but concludes that the permanent residual impact from the finished towers is only "minor". This assessment is illogical and unacceptable. It suggests a deliberate attempt to downplay the long-term consequences of the project.

A temporary hazard, which is rated as moderate, cannot logically be considered more severe than the permanent imposition of the same hazard. This inconsistency highlights a clear lack of objective analysis and a failure to meet the core evaluation objectives of the EES.

PART 3: INADEQUATE MITIGATION: A DANGEROUS RELIANCE ON LOW-ORDER CONTROLS

The EES Scoping Requirements explicitly identify the "adverse effects of overhead transmission infrastructure on aviation, especially with respect to use of aircraft for farming work and firefighting" as a key issue. Low-flying activities are inherently high-risk, often conducted in dynamic and challenging conditions where pilot workload is extremely high.

The introduction of new, hard-to-see obstacles like transmission towers and catenary wires represents a significant increase in this risk. AusNet's proposed mitigation for this risk is critically deficient.

3.1 The Conflation of Notification with Mitigation

AusNet concludes that the project will have a "minor" residual impact on these life-critical activities and presents the primary mitigation measure as Environmental Performance Requirement (EPR) AV1: to "Provide notification to Airservices Australia" so the project's details can be published on aeronautical charts.

This approach fundamentally conflates notifying of a hazard with mitigating it.

From a safety management perspective, EPR AV1 is a low-order administrative control. While necessary, it is entirely insufficient as the sole mitigation for a permanent, large-scale physical hazard. A pilot engaged in high-workload, low-level manoeuvres - such as aerial firefighting in smoky conditions or at night using night vision equipment, or agricultural spraying near complex terrain - is susceptible to human error, and the physical hazard remains unchanged regardless of whether it is marked on a chart.

AusNet's reliance on purely administrative controls represents a failure to adhere to the legally mandated hierarchy of controls. Under modern safety standards, the owner of a permanent hazard has a duty to make it "so far as is reasonably practicable" to minimise the risk to others. The legal binding hierarchy prioritises Elimination and Substitution first, followed by Engineering Controls (e.g., markers), then Administrative Controls (e.g., charts), and finally Personal Protective Equipment.

3.2 A Failure to Implement Higher-Order Physical Controls

WVCA analysis reveals that the EES provides no substantive analysis of higher-order engineering controls. The document makes no commitment to implementing high-visibility markers, such as spherical marker balls, on the transmission lines themselves.

Such markers are a standard mitigation measure for transmission lines and are explicitly provided for in Australian Standard AS 3891.2. AusNet's approach skips directly to a low-order administrative control without demonstrating that higher-order engineering controls are not reasonably practicable.

This is a significant legal and ethical failure. By placing the full responsibility for avoiding the new hazard on pilots, it increases the probability of a catastrophic event, particularly during critical low-altitude operations where the consequences of a collision would be severe and immediate. This transfers a legally defined duty of care from the proponent to a third party.

PART4: AMBIGUOUS AND UNENFORCEABLE ENVIRONMENTAL PERFORMANCE REQUIREMENTS

Environmental Performance Requirements (EPRs) are the primary mechanism for ensuring that a proponent's environmental commitments are implemented and enforced. To be effective, EPRs must be clear, specific, unambiguous, and auditable. WVCA review of the key aviation EPRs reveals significant deficiencies that render them ineffective and, in the case of EPR AV2, dangerously ambiguous and potentially non-compliant with the very standards they cite.

4.1 Vague and Unenforceable EPRs

EPR AV2, which addresses the marking of infrastructure near Melton Aerodrome, requires towers and "associated catenary" to be marked "as per Australian Standard AS 3891.1:2021 and AS 3891.2". This wording is profoundly ambiguous. The Australian Standards provide a range of

options for obstacle marking, including different types of lighting, colours, and characteristics. These are also in direct contradiction with the Visual Amenity mitigations and are excluded from the Landscape Visual Impact Assessments. The EPR fails to specify which of these options will be implemented. This ambiguity makes the EPR unenforceable, as a contractor could choose the cheapest and least effective option and still claim compliance, thereby defeating the safety purpose of the requirement. An effective EPR would specify the exact performance standard required, leaving no room for interpretation.

4.2 Critical Omission of Catenary Wires

The most dangerous flaw in EPR AV2 is a critical omission. While the heading mentions marking the "associated catenary" (the wires), the operative part of the EPR, which lists the specific towers to be marked, fails to include any explicit requirement to mark the wires themselves.

The wires are the most difficult-to-see and, therefore, most dangerous component of a transmission line for low-flying aircraft. This failure to address the primary hazard is a significant compliance failure that undermines the credibility of the entire environmental management framework.

The ambiguous and incomplete aviation EPRs create a regulatory loophole that transfers accountability and risk. It is either a serious oversight or a deliberate attempt to avoid a significant cost while creating the appearance of a commitment to safety. This erosion of trust in the statutory process leaves the community vulnerable.

PART 5: THE FLAWED LOGIC OF CUMULATIVE IMPACT ANALYSIS

The EES Scoping Requirements mandate an assessment of "potential cumulative impacts arising in conjunction with other existing or proposed projects". The region is subject to numerous other major energy projects, and a credible EES must assess the aggregate risk posed by this proliferation of tall obstacles.

AusNet's cumulative impact assessment fails to do this, relying instead on a flawed and dangerous premise to dismiss these compounded risks.

5.1 Deconstructing the "Shielding" Fallacy

AusNet's central argument for dismissing cumulative impacts is the concept of "shielding." The report claims that taller structures from other projects, such as the Nyaninyuk Wind Farm, "would become the key aviation obstacle, shielding any effects associated with the Western Renewables Link Project".

This "shielding" argument is a logical fallacy that is contrary to all established aviation safety principles. The presence of one hazard does not negate another; instead, it creates a more complex, cluttered, and hazardous environment. From a pilot's perspective, the landscape is not simplified; it is a chaotic visual environment with multiple, dissimilar obstacles of varying heights and locations.

5.2 The Aggravated Risk of Cluttered Airspace

AusNet's analysis is a failure to understand and address the real-world, human-centric risks of the WRL project in a complex, multi-project landscape. Aviation safety is heavily influenced by human factors, and pilots rely on clear sightlines, spatial awareness, and low cognitive load to operate safely, especially at low altitudes in dynamic environments.

The presence of multiple, dissimilar obstacles creates "visual clutter" that increases a pilot's cognitive burden and reduces the available volume of safe airspace. A pilot taking evasive action to avoid one obstacle could be forced into a flight path that conflicts with a supposedly "shielded" transmission line. AusNet's assessments are also made on the assumption that aircraft will be operating under normal weather conditions, not in adverse conditions where low cloud, fog, or smoke will prevent Visual Flight Rules applying. The hazards are compounded, not mitigated.

AusNet's dismissal of cumulative impacts, based on a scientifically and logically unsound premise, is a profound failure to meet the standard of care required for such a project. This prevents decision-makers from understanding the true, long-term degradation of regional airspace safety resulting from the combined effect of the WRL and other projects.

PART 6: COMPARATIVE IMPACT ASSESSMENT

The preceding sections have demonstrated a fundamental disconnect between AusNet's ratings and our on-the-ground reality and analysis.

The table below provides a clear, at-a-glance summary of this disparity, distilling complex technical and legal critiques into a simple, easy-to-understand format. It reinforces our core argument that the proponent has systematically downplayed the risks and failed to meet its statutory obligations.

EES Impact Rating System Criterion	Description	WRL EES/AusNet Rating	WVCA (Our) Assessment
Overall impact score across all criteria	Overall impact score across all criteria	Minor to Moderate	Major to Severe
Sensitivity of environmental or community values	How vulnerable or important the affected environment or community asset is	Minor	Major to Severe
Magnitude, extent, and duration of the impact	The scale, reach, and time span of the impact (e.g., temporary vs. permanent)	Minor to Moderate	Major to Severe
Existing activities and cumulative effects	Other ongoing or planned activities that may amplify the impact	Negligible to Minor	Major

EES Impact Rating System Criterion	Description	WRL EES/AusNet Rating	WVCA (Our) Assessment
Benchmarks, policies, and standards	Evaluation against legal or regulatory thresholds and best-practice guidelines	Minor	Major
Effectiveness of mitigation measures	How well the proposed measures are expected to reduce or offset the impact	Minor to Moderate	Negligible

PART 7. CONCLUSION

The WVCA contend that the evidence presented in this section is overwhelming. AusNet's WRL EES for Aviation is a fundamentally deficient document. Its methodology is subjective and flawed, its assessment of community assets is misleading, its mitigation measures are critically inadequate, and its EPRs are ambiguous and unenforceable.

This proposes unacceptable risks for our community by permanently degrading the aviation environment, increasing the risk to low-flying emergency and agricultural services, and externalising the burden of managing a hazardous environment onto our pilots and aerodrome operators.

Chapter 16 of AusNet's WRL EES does not provide a legally sufficient basis for the Minister for Planning to make an informed assessment of the impacts on aviation and approval of the project based on this would be a profound failure of public administration.

PART 8: RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the WVCA's evaluation of AusNet's WRL EES Chapter 16 and its supporting Technical Report J, as outlined in Section 10, we recommend that the IAC and Minister for Planning:

1. **Reject the Aviation Assessment:** Reject Chapter 16 Aviation and Technical Report J as manifestly inadequate.
2. **Require a new Assessment:** Direct AusNet to prepare and exhibit a new EES for Aviation for the proposed WRL that:
 - a. Re-assesses all impacts using a risk-based methodology with objective, quantifiable criteria.
 - b. Re-characterises the permanent operational impacts on Melton Aerodrome as significant and proposes genuine mitigation or offset measures for the permanent loss of utility.

- c. Includes a comprehensive risk assessment for all low-flying activities, particularly aerial firefighting in smoke, low visibility, or at night using night vision equipment, and a commitment to implementation of higher-order physical mitigation measures, such as undergrounding, or high-visibility cable markers in accordance with Australian Standards.
 - d. Redrafts all aviation EPRs to be specific, measurable, and auditable, with an explicit requirement to mark catenary wires.
 - e. Includes a robust and credible cumulative impact assessment that properly analyses the aggregate risk of all regional energy projects on airspace complexity, pilot workload, and overall aviation safety.
3. **Mandate Independent Peer Review:** Mandate that the aviation assessment be subjected to a transparent and independent peer review by suitably qualified experts, with the peer review report to be published as part of the revised EES documentation.

SECTION 11

WVCA ASSESSMENT OF AUSNET'S EES CHAPTER 21 - SOCIAL

This Section provides an evaluation of AusNet's Social Impact Assessment (SIA) for the WRL EES, specifically focusing on Chapter 21, Social, and its supporting Technical Report F.

Executive Summary: The Central Findings of Our Evaluation

The core finding of the WVCA analysis is that the SIA is a fundamentally flawed and non-compliant document that fails to meet its statutory obligations under the Victorian *Environment Effects Act 1978* and the project's own EES Scoping Requirements. Consequently, we argue that the document should be dismissed as a credible foundation for regulatory decision-making by the IAC and Minister for Planning.

The deficiencies the WVCA has identified are not minor technical issues but represent a systemic breakdown in the assessment process itself. The SIA relies on a methodologically unsound metric for "landholder sentiment" - a protocol defined internally by AusNet - which fundamentally undermines the assessment's integrity and objective character.

AusNet mischaracterises the nature of community dissent, portraying it as a remediable concern over "amenity" despite the proponent's own records substantiating a core opposition to the overhead transmission design itself. This misrepresentation results in a critical failure to identify and evaluate the primary social impact, which is the profound and lasting sense of powerlessness, loss, and the erosion of social fabric among communities who do not consent to the project.

Furthermore, AusNet's proposed mitigation measures (Environmental Performance Requirements (EPRs)) such as landscape screening and a community fund, are demonstrably inadequate to address the "Major" negative residual psychosocial harms it identifies.

The associated monitoring and contingency plans are similarly lacking, fabricating an appearance of a management framework without providing any substance or means of enforcement.

A significant procedural breach is also evident in the apparent absence of an independent peer review, a standard requirement for such a critical and contentious EES component, which brings the report's credibility into serious question.

The WVCA also note significant discrepancy between the technical report's detailed findings and the sanitised, compliant-sounding conclusions presented in the Chapter 21, which compromises the EES's overall SIA narrative and integrity.

Section 11 is structured in six parts:

1. Foundational Flaws in the Social Impact Assessment Framework
2. Mitigation, Monitoring, and Compliance
3. Procedural Failures and Lack of Accountability
4. Analysis of Community Concerns Against the EES Assessment
5. Conclusion
6. Recommendations

PART 1: FOUNDATIONAL FLAWS IN THE SOCIAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK

The credibility of any impact assessment is contingent upon the rigor and objectivity of its foundational methodology. Examination of the WRL SIA reveals that its framework is compromised from the outset, failing to meet fundamental standards of social research and regulatory compliance.

1.1. Invalidation of the SIA Methodology: The "Landholder Sentiment" Metric

The SIA presents data on community support and opposition as objective fact to underpin its conclusions. For example, it claims in Section 1, that "58.1% of directly affected landholders are supportive of the Project" and only "17.6% are opposed". The SIA relies on this data, gathered through a self-devised "Landholder Sentiment Assessment Protocol," to characterize the social environment and justify its findings.

However, the WVCA call out this metric as a significant methodological failure. The protocol is not an independent survey but is an "internal classification system applied by the proponent's Land Liaison Officers". This means the data presented as factual is actually based on the "subjective judgment of AusNet staff".

This approach violates the core principles of credible social impact assessment practice, namely objectivity, independence, and verifiability. The individuals collecting the data have a vested interest in demonstrating project support, creating a profound and unmanageable conflict of interest and an inherent risk of bias. The absence of the protocol's details in the main technical report itself further highlights a lack of transparency and a failure to provide a replicable and independently verifiable methodology.

The strategic consequence of this methodological flaw is profound. By presenting internal, subjective classifications as objective "sentiment data," the SIA constructs a narrative that is favourable to the project.

The SIA commits another logical fallacy by interpreting the relative lack of organised, vocal opposition in Section 1 as evidence of active support. This approach uses an absence of direct feedback to build an unsubstantiated and false narrative. The report is not simply making a technical error; it is attempting to manufacture a veneer of social license by presenting biased, internal judgments as factual evidence, which is a critical failure of methodological rigor that renders all of AusNet's conclusions about community support untrustworthy.

1.2. The Contradiction of Community Opposition: Amenity vs. A-priori Rejection

A central contradiction exists between how the SIA characterizes community opposition and the reality of that opposition as documented in the proponent's own engagement data and the community's perspective.

The SIA frames community opposition as an issue of "Rural Character and Amenity" that can be managed through mitigation measures, suggesting that a "new equilibrium" will eventually be reached.

However, the WVCA's analysis of the proponent's Stakeholder and Community Engagement Consultation Report reveals that opposition is not a secondary issue of amenity but a "fundamental rejection of the project's overhead design". The report explicitly notes that a primary and consistent community demand has been for the transmission line to be placed underground.

This finding is critical because it exposes a fundamental mischaracterisation of the social conflict. The report attempts to resolve a non-negotiable grievance - the community's rejection of the overhead design - with superficial, technical solutions like visual screening or a community fund. This demonstrates a systemic failure to understand the social dynamic at play, as it reduces a complex issue of procedural justice and imposition to a simplistic matter of physical impacts.

The implication is that the SIA is assessing a hypothetical project, not the one the community is actually experiencing. The proposed mitigation measures are designed to address secondary symptoms (visual intrusion, financial loss) rather than the root cause of the social conflict. This disconnect invalidates the SIA's conclusions.

By misrepresenting the source of the conflict, AusNet's SIA avoids assessing the true social impact - the effect of imposing a rejected technology on an unwilling community - and its assessment does not logically follow.

1.3. Omission of the Primary Social Impact: The Psychosocial Dimension

The Victorian *Environment Effects Act 1978* and the EES Scoping Requirements mandate a holistic assessment of effects on the "social fabric of the community". AusNet's SIA fails to meet this core requirement by misinterpreting what constitutes the primary adverse effect.

While it identifies and rates "Major" negative residual impacts, such as "ongoing frustration and resentment" and "an enduring sense of loss" in its technical report, AusNet fails to characterise these as the central impact of the project's imposition.

The WVCA argues that the profound social and psychological harm caused by a perceived lack of procedural justice is the project's primary adverse effect, not a residual one.

This profound sense of loss and powerlessness is the very source of the documented community distress, division, and fundamental opposition. The SIA's failure to recognise this reversal of causality - that the psychosocial harm is the fundamental cause of opposition, not a secondary effect of amenity impacts - demonstrates a failure to comprehend the social dynamics of the project.

AusNet's assessment avoids evaluating the most significant and least mitigable impact, which is the effect of an unwanted project on unwilling communities, thereby failing to comply with the core requirements of the EES process.

PART 2: MITIGATION, MONITORING, AND COMPLIANCE

Even if the methodological flaws of the SIA could be overlooked, the proposed management and mitigation framework is deemed to be ineffective, unenforceable, and entirely mismatched to the scale of the harms identified.

2.1. Inadequate Mitigation Measures (EPRs): Mismatch of Harm and Remedy

The SIA proposes a suite of Environmental Performance Requirements (EPRs) to manage and mitigate social impacts. Chapter 21 claims that with the implementation of these EPRs, the project "meets the social aspects of the evaluation objective".

However, the WVCA's analysis reveals a significant mismatch between the severity of the identified impacts and the adequacy of the proposed remedies. The SIA's own technical report explicitly identifies profound and long-term psychosocial harms, such as "an enduring sense of

loss and powerlessness" and challenges to "a shared sense of identity," as "Major" negative residual impacts.

The proposed mitigation measures, such as landscape screening and a Community Benefit Fund, are designed to address physical and economic issues, not these deep-seated psychological harms.

Landscape screening, for instance, addresses a visual impact but cannot mitigate a "sense of powerlessness" or loss of trust. Similarly, a Community Benefit Fund is often perceived as an attempt to "buy" social license and does not compensate for the loss of an aspirational lifestyle or intergenerational connection to land.

The inference that the WVCA draw from this mismatch is that AusNet is admitting the severity of the project's effects in its technical detail while proposing superficial solutions that are not designed to solve the most intractable problems.

This systemic failure of logic and responsibility within the assessment framework renders the mitigation plan ineffective and the overarching claim of compliance invalid. The proposed social EPRs address secondary, physical symptoms while ignoring the primary, psychosocial disease.¹

2.2. Deficiencies in Monitoring and Contingency

The EES Scoping Requirements mandate that the proponent "describe and evaluate proposed measures to monitor potential residual social... impacts and describe contingency measures". Our analysis identifies that the SIA's response to this is perfunctory and inadequate.

AusNet's proposed monitoring plan focuses on easily quantifiable metrics like "Employment outcomes" and "Community benefit projects funded". However, it completely fails to provide a specific methodology or indicators for tracking the predicted "Major" social impacts, such as community cohesion, resident well-being, or levels of "ongoing frustration".

The contingency plan is similarly hollow, consisting of a vague commitment to "implement contingency measures... if and when... monitoring tasks reveal unforeseen social impacts". This commitment is meaningless for two key reasons:

- First, the most severe impacts are not "unforeseen"; they are explicitly predicted by the SIA itself
- Second, the plan offers no specific actions, triggers, or responsibilities for what will be done when these predicted "Major" negative impacts actually occur, nor whether funding will be available, nor enforcement controls.

This creates the illusion of a management framework but provides no substance or enforceability, representing a high risk to regulatory compliance and the project's credibility.

PART 3: PROCEDURAL FAILURES AND LACK OF ACCOUNTABILITY

The SIA's integrity is further compromised by procedural and structural deficiencies that exist independent of the content's validity.

3.1. Absence of Independent Peer Review

The EES Scoping Requirements for the WRL project are explicit: "For critical components of the EES studies, peer review will be required". Given the high level of public controversy, AusNet's

acknowledgment of "community distrust," and the SIA's prediction of "Major" unmitigated residual social impacts, the SIA is unequivocally a "critical component".

WVCA review of the provided EES documents, including the technical report and Chapter 21, reveals no mention of an independent peer review having been conducted for the SIA. The author of the SIA lists their own data collection activities, but these are standard parts of preparing a report and do not constitute an independent review of the final product.

The WVCA contend that the absence of an independent peer review for such a methodologically questionable report is a major procedural deficiency.

Peer review is the cornerstone of quality assurance in the EES process, serving to ensure objectivity, methodological rigor, and the credibility of scientific findings. The absence of this crucial quality control layer removes a vital layer of validation and provides strong grounds for the IAC to question the validity of the entire social impact assessment.

3.2. Contradiction Between Technical and Summary Reports

A major contradiction exists between the detailed findings of the SIA's Technical Report F and the sanitised conclusions presented in the main EES summary Chapter 21. The technical report explicitly identifies profound and unmitigated "Major" negative residual impacts, such as challenges to a "shared sense of identity" and "ongoing frustration and resentment toward the Project". Yet, Chapter 21 concludes, in direct contradiction, that with the implementation of EPRs, "the Project meets the social aspects of the evaluation objective".

The Chapter 21 conclusion is not logically supported by the evidence in its source technical report.

An outcome that leaves a significant portion of the community with "Major" negative residual impacts cannot reasonably be said to have met the objective of minimising adverse effects on the "social fabric of the community". This discrepancy suggests a deliberate "papering over" of severe impacts.

The EES appears to be structured with a bifurcated narrative: a technical appendix that, in its detail, acknowledges severe impacts, and a public-facing summary that downplays them to present a more palatable, compliant-sounding case to decision-makers and the public who may not read the full technical document. This represents a significant failure of transparency and integrity in the EES's overall narrative.

PART 4: ANALYSIS OF COMMUNITY CONCERNS AGAINST THE EES ASSESSMENT

The conflict between AusNet and the affected communities is highlighted by comparing the EES's findings with the specific concerns raised by WVCA members. This reveals a fundamental chasm between the two perspectives.

4.1 Fire Risk and Safety

WVCA members share extensive concerns regarding fire risk, citing a history of bushfires caused by electricity infrastructure and the specific danger of overhead lines in high-risk areas. The community argues that the WRL will exacerbate fire risk through "flashovers," "creating fire corridors," and "restricting firefighting efforts", and point out the contradiction of installing overhead lines in a high-risk area where some local power is already underground to mitigate fire risk.

In contrast, the SIA's assessment of bushfire risk, based on Technical Report K, states that firefighting tactics may need to be adapted, but that the risk of structural failure of a tower can be "eliminated under all reasonably foreseeable extreme wind conditions" even though recently weather events have shown this to be untrue..

While AusNet acknowledges the potential for impedance to egress from homes on Swans Road in North Darley, it concludes that alternative routes are generally available. This is a significant point of divergence rooted in a dichotomy between a lived experience of risk and a technical, foreseeable-risk model.

The EES's risk assessment is based on a narrow, "reasonably foreseeable" scope, while the community's position is based on a worst-case, lived-experience reality that includes the potential for "unforeseeable" events and the psychological distress of living with that increased risk. This breakdown in risk perception is not reconciled in the EES, leading to a profound feeling of being unheard and that risks are being "whitewashed".

4.1.2. Health Impacts (EMFs): The Precautionary Principle vs. Confirmed Harm

WVCA members share concerns related to Extremely Low Frequency (ELF) Electromagnetic Fields (EMFs), citing scientific studies and resolutions from bodies like the International Commission on Electromagnetic Safety (ICEMS) that recommend a "Precautionary Principle". The community's position echoes scientific best practice that even if the evidence of harm is not conclusive, the potential for adverse effects is sufficient to warrant "prudent avoidance". The WVCA argues that the burden of proof lies with the proponent to demonstrate safety, not with the community to prove harm.

However, the WRL EES Chapter 21 and a related FAQ take a different stance, stating that "leading health authorities worldwide, such as the World Health Organisation, have found no evidence that confirms the existence of any health consequences" from low-level EMF exposure. The EES therefore frames the risk as negligible but omits the principle of 'prudent avoidance'.

This is a critical point of conflict rooted not in a dispute over scientific fact, but over a fundamental ethical approach to risk management. AusNet dismisses the community's concerns by focusing on the lack of "confirmed" evidence, which is a direct rejection of the precautionary principle that the community is advocating for.

4.2. The Community's Alternative Proposals and a Critique of the RIT-T Process

The WVCA's opposition to the WRL project is not merely reactive; it is framed around a demand for less impactful alternatives and a critique of AusNet's failure to fully explore them. The community points to three specific case studies to demonstrate the viability of undergrounding:

- Murraylink
- Marinus Link, and
- the Syncline Community Cable (SCC).

The SCC, in particular, is a direct alternative proposal to the WRL, also using underground HVDC technology.

The fact that the SIA documents provide no justification for the choice of an overhead line over underground alternatives is a profound failure of the assessment process. WVCA members collectively claim that AusNet has "systematically dismissed lower-impact alternatives" based on cost and "feasibility" without adequate environmental comparison. WVCA members are aligned in the belief that the Regulatory Investment Test for Transmission (RIT-T) process dictated the project's design and pre-selected an overhead route. The absence of any justification for the choice of an overhead line over underground alternatives in the SIA indicates that the SIA is not a genuine assessment of the proposed WRL project, but it has been manufactured to validate a pre-determined outcome.

PART 5: CONCLUSION

The WVCA's evaluation of AusNet's SIA for the WRL project reveals a cascade of interconnected failures that compromise the integrity and credibility of the entire document. The findings demonstrate a systemic failure to meet the core tenets of the EES process.

The SIA is built on an invalid method, utilising a flawed, unscientific "landholder sentiment" metric that is subjective, biased, and non-transparent, rendering its conclusions about community support untrustworthy.

The SIA fundamentally misrepresents the nature of community opposition, framing it as a manageable amenity issue rather than a non-negotiable rejection of the overhead design. This strategic mischaracterization allows the SIA to avoid assessing the most significant social impact - the psychosocial harm associated with imposing a rejected technology on an unwilling community.

The proposed Social EPRs are wholly inadequate to address the "Major" negative psychosocial impacts - such as a sense of loss and powerlessness - that the SIA itself predicts.

The mitigation measures are disproportionate to the nature of the harm, focusing on secondary symptoms while ignoring the primary cause of social distress.

The monitoring and contingency plans are deficient, failing to provide any mechanism to track or respond to the explicitly predicted "Major" social impacts. This creates an illusory management framework without providing any substance or enforceability.

The SIA lacks any evidence of an independent peer review, a required quality-control mechanism for a "critical and contentious" EES component. This procedural failure, coupled with a major contradiction between the technical report and the EES summary Chapter 21, severely undermines the document's trustworthiness and suggests a deliberate attempt to present a more palatable narrative.

PART 6: RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the WVCA's evaluation of AusNet's WRL EES Chapter 21 and its supporting Technical Report F, as outlined in Section 11, we recommend that the IAC and Minister for Planning:

1. **Reject the Social Impact Assessment:** Reject the Social Impact Assessment (Technical Report F) on the basis that it is non-compliant and does not meet the requirements of the *Environment Effects Act 1978* and the EES Scoping Requirements and is not credible or objective.

2. **Require a Reinvigorated Assessment:** Require a new SIA and mandate that this new assessment address the fundamental community opposition to the overhead design and properly assess the social impacts of a lack of social license, going beyond superficial amenity issues and address the profound psychosocial harm caused by the imposition of an unwanted project on unwilling communities.
3. **Mandate an Independent SIA:** Mandate that AusNet commission a new, genuinely independent SIA, conducted by a qualified expert in accordance with national and international best practice guidelines, and subject to peer review.

SECTION 12

WVCA ASSESSMENT OF AUSNET'S EES CHAPTER 29 – ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

This Section provides an evaluation of AusNet's Environmental Management Framework (EMF) for the WRL EES, specifically focusing on Chapter 29, the Environmental Management Framework.

Executive Summary: The Central Findings of Our Evaluation

Our examination of the Chapter 29 EMF reveals a framework designed for self-regulation, one that systematically diminishes public accountability and transfers a disproportionate amount of control to the project proponent, AusNet. This is not a transparent process; it is a system engineered to circumvent public scrutiny and undermine the very purpose of a Victorian EES.

The WVCA believes that this framework is unfit for purpose and should be rejected in its entirety and replaced with a new objective, auditable and accountable EMF. Critical features required of this new EMF are identified in the list of recommendations at Section 8.

Section 12 is structured in eight parts:

1. Improper Delegation of Responsibility
2. A Framework of Procedural Deferral
3. Unenforceable Environmental Performance Requirements
4. The Lack of Audit Independence
5. Improper and Uncontrolled Change Management
6. Absence of Peer Review
7. Conclusion
8. Recommendations

PART 1: IMPROPER DELEGATION OF RESPONSIBILITY

The WVCA finds that the EMF improperly transfers the Minister for Planning's statutory authority to the proponent. A close inspection of the framework indicates that it repeatedly positions AusNet as the primary authority for the approval of critical environmental management plans, giving them the power to "accept" or "approve" their own environmental plans.

This structure creates an irreconcilable conflict of interest.

While AusNet's commercial objective is to deliver the project on time and within budget, the EMF asks the community to accept that the company will simultaneously act as an impartial regulator of its own work.

The Construction Environmental Management Plan (CEMP) - a key document governing all construction activities on farms and in the community - is explicitly listed as being "accepted" by AusNet itself.

This governance model effectively removes the detailed, on-the-ground management plans that protect the land from issues like surface water pollution, erosion, and damage to heritage sites from independent regulatory scrutiny.

The WVCA has no confidence that this process will protect the land and livelihoods from harm. This approach effectively privatises a public regulatory function and shifts the risk from AusNet onto the community and the environment.

This represents a high-risk governance failure that fundamentally invalidates the integrity of the entire framework.

PART 2: A FRAMEWORK OF PROCEDURAL DEFERRAL

An additional procedural failure is the proponent's strategic use of EPRs to defer numerous critical assessments to a post-approval stage. The Environment Effects Act 1978 requires that a decision-maker's assessment be based on a comprehensive understanding of a project's environmental effects before a decision is made. AusNet's framework, however, subverts this core legal principle.

For example, EPR BD1 defers crucial ecological surveys until "prior to the finalisation of the detailed design". The proponent has admitted that approximately 24% of the project area was not surveyed due to access constraints. By deferring this fieldwork, AusNet is asking the IAC and the Minister to approve a project with a promise that the full extent of its impacts will be identified later.

Similarly, EPR AF1 requires the proponent to "consult with landholders to discuss their individual business and specific impacts" only "prior to the commencement of construction". This means the critical, property-by-property agricultural impact assessment will be performed after the project has been granted its primary approval.

This procedural design creates an unacceptable governance and legal risk, as it transfers the burden of proof and associated uncertainty to the affected parties, and by deferring the assessments, removes the public's ability to scrutinise the full scope of the project's impacts.

PART 3: UNENFORCEABLE ENVIRONMENTAL PERFORMANCE REQUIREMENTS

AusNet's proposed Environmental Performance Requirements (EPRs) are intended to be the central mechanism for ensuring environmental outcomes, but WVCA analysis identifies they are systematically vague and ultimately unenforceable.

The proposed EPRs rely on subjective and non-committal language that provides AusNet with excessive latitude to avoid firm commitments.

Our review of the EPRs reveals a systematic use of subjective and non-committal language, such as "so far as reasonably practicable," "if necessary," or "minimise impacts," which lack any measurable baselines or specific targets.

For example, EPR LV1, designed to "minimise visual impacts," only requires the proponent to "Determine appropriate measures (if any)". The inclusion of "(if any)" renders the entire requirement optional and shifts the framework's focus from a commitment to an outcome to a commitment to a process.

The WVCA contend that it is impossible to audit a process that is so discretionary, which means the community has no guarantee of the environmental protection the project claims to provide.

This is a high-risk deficiency, as the EMF lacks the fundamental controls necessary to guarantee the protection of the land.

PART 4: THE LACK OF AUDIT INDEPENDENCE

AusNet's WRL EES Chapter 29 purports that compliance with the EMF will be monitored by an "Independent Environmental Auditor" (IEA), but this is mere pretence. The framework explicitly stipulates that the Independent Environmental Auditor (IEA) is to be engaged and compensated directly by AusNet.

From the community's experience, an auditor who receives payment from the proponent effectively functions as a consultant, not a truly independent watchdog. This relationship creates a powerful disincentive for the auditor to produce findings that could be costly or cause delays for their client.

This is not a robust check on environmental compliance; it is a fundamental flaw that compromises the integrity of the audit function. Without a truly independent mechanism to verify that the project is adhering to its own rules, the entire management framework becomes ineffective. It provides no assurance to the community, the IAC or the Minister that the project's impacts will be managed properly.

This simply creates the appearance of oversight without its substance and will put the community at risk.

PART 5: IMPROPER AND UNCONTROLLED CHANGE MANAGEMENT

The change management process detailed by AusNet in the EES is framed as a procedural control, however, the WVCA review has identified that this is a major procedural failing.

The proposed change management process is structured to allow AusNet to make material changes to the project after receiving primary approval with minimal to no independent scrutiny. This process hinges on a subjective criterion: "Generally in accordance with the endorsed Development Plan". This term is not defined with any objective measures, leaving its interpretation entirely to AusNet.

This process would allow the project's configuration to be altered after IAC and Minister for Planning approval based on an internal, subjective judgment. This creates a strong incentive for AusNet to characterise potentially significant changes as "minor" to avoid the time and scrutiny of seeking a formal amendment.

If conducted correctly, the EES should assess the impacts of a specific project, but this change management loophole allows a materially different project to be built.

The risk to the community and the Victorian Government is that the project AusNet construct will not be the project the IAC has assessed, and that its impacts will not be properly managed, mitigated, or compensated.

PART 6: ABSENCE OF PEER REVIEW

The WVCA's review of Chapter 29 finds no record of an independent peer review for the EMF. This represents a fundamental procedural deficiency.

The EES Scoping Requirements explicitly state that "For critical components of the EES studies, peer review will be required". Given the high level of public controversy the EMF is unequivocally a "critical component" of the WRL EES.

The absence of peer review is a severe and inexplicable procedural failing that compromises the scientific integrity and credibility of the EMF.

Peer review is the cornerstone of quality assurance, ensuring objectivity and credibility. The WVCA argues that its absence removes a crucial layer of validation and provides strong grounds for the IAC and Planning Minister to question the validity of the entire EES.

PART 7: CONCLUSION

This submission demonstrates a cascade of interconnected failures within the WRL EES. It is not a document that can be trusted to ensure project compliance or manage the WRL's impacts and risk.

The proposed EMF is fundamentally compromised by a series of systemic flaws. It delegates public authority to a private company, proposes hollow and unenforceable EPRs, proposes a compromised compliance model, and a change process devoid of scrutiny and public accountability.

The absence of any documented independent peer review further undermines these deficiencies and should confirm the case for rejection.

PART 8: RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the WVCA's evaluation of AusNet's WRL EES Chapter 29 and EPRs detailed therein, as outlined in Section 12, we recommend that the IAC and Minister for Planning:

1. **Reject the Environmental Management Framework:** Reject the proposed WRL EMF detailed in Chapter 29 of the WRL EES as not meeting the legal requirements of the Environment Effects Act 1978 and the EES Scoping Requirements.
2. **Mandate a New Assessment:** Mandate that AusNet be required to redesign a **new** Environmental Management Framework for the proposed WRL that:
 - a. Ensures all General Management plans, including the CEMP and all sub-plans required by EPRs are required to be approved by the Minister for Planning prior to the commencement of any works.
 - b. Requires the proponent to develop, implement, and maintain an Environmental Management System (EMS) that is certified to AS/NZS ISO 14001:2016, which must integrate all other plans required by EMF, and be subject to independent and ministerially appointed audit.
 - c. Requires that Property Access Management Plans be submitted to and approved by the respective Shire Councils prior to the commencement of any works within that Shire.
 - d. Requires an independent environmental compliance auditor to be appointed by and funded by the Minister for Planning prior to commencement of any works, to report directly to the Minister and have the power to issue stop-work orders if required.

- e. **Change Management Process.** Includes a new change management process which avoids subjective language and establishes clear and quantitative thresholds defining what constitutes a "major" versus a "minor" change, with:
 - i. all major changes to require a formal amendment to the relevant plan to be submitted to and approved by the Minister for Planning
 - ii. minor changes be submitted and approved by the impacted Councils or statutory bodies or agencies.
3. **Require New EPRs.** Require AusNet to include new specific EPRS (not exclusive) in the new EMF which:
- a. Do not contain any subjective or discretionary language such as "if necessary," "where practicable," and "so far as reasonably practicable".
 - b. Must include specific, measurable, auditable, relevant, and time-bound environmental outcomes.
 - c. **For Social Impacts:**
 - i. Require the proponent, prior to the commencement of construction, to develop a comprehensive Social Management Plan, based on a methodology with specific, measurable metrics for community well-being and including a mandatory, pre-defined trigger for intervention and support, based on the severity of the psychosocial harm being experienced.
 - ii. Require the proponent, prior to commencement of construction, to develop and implement a Residential Mitigation and Support Strategy that offers enforceable outcomes to directly affected landholders. This must include an option for the proponent to purchase the affected property at full, pre-project market value, as determined by an independent valuer mutually agreed upon by the landholder and the respective Shire Council.
 - d. **For Landscape and Visual Amenity Impacts:**
 - i. Require the Proponent, prior to the commencement of construction, to undertake a new visual impact assessment and avoid all visual impacts on culturally and socially significant public sites, and obtain written confirmation from the respective Shire Councils that the project will not compromise the values of those Shire's Significant Landscape Overlays.
 - ii. Require the Proponent, prior to the commencement of operation, to provide a binding commitment to either implement effective visual mitigation measures on all affected properties or to purchase the affected property at full, pre-project market value, as determined by an independent valuer mutually agreed upon by the landholder and the respective Shire Council.
 - e. **For Agriculture and Forestry Impacts:**
 - i. Require the proponent, prior to the approval of the EES, to complete a comprehensive, pre-approval, property-by-property Agricultural Impact Assessment for all 229 affected properties. This assessment must quantify the

economic costs of all impacts, including land isolation, redundancy, and constraints on machinery and irrigation.

- ii. Require the proponent, for the life of the project, to minimise the construction footprint and rectify and rehabilitate all disturbed land to its original state. These outcomes must be measured against clear, auditable standards. All plans for rehabilitation and rectification must be submitted to and approved by the respective Shire Council prior to the commencement of any works.

f. For Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Impacts:

- i. Require the proponent, prior to the approval of the EES, to complete all Cultural Heritage Management Plans (CHMPs) and have them approved by the relevant Registered Aboriginal Parties (RAPs).
- ii. Require the proponent to implement all recommendations arising from each RAP's Cultural Values Assessment.
- iii. Require the proponent, prior to the commencement of works, to enter into a binding legal agreement with each of the RAPs to guarantee the implementation of the recommendations and that the RAPs can stop works if they deem the recommendations are not being met.

g. For Biodiversity and Habitat Impacts:

- i. Require the proponent not proceed with the project until 100% of all required ecological surveys are complete and a full impact assessment is submitted to the Minister for Planning and is subjected to public review.
- ii. Require the proponent, prior to the commencement of works in identified habitat for threatened fauna, to implement specific, auditable mitigation measures and prove their efficacy through a peer-reviewed monitoring program. The efficacy should be verified by a ministerially appointed independent environmental auditor.

h. For Bushfire Risk and Management:

- i. Require the proponent, prior to the commencement of any works, to prepare a new Bushfire Management Plan. This plan should be required to include new, higher-level modelling of the project's performance under a range of catastrophic climate and fire weather scenarios, including FFDI values over 200. The plan should be approved by the Country Fire Authority (CFA) and the respective Shire Council.
- ii. Require the proponent, prior to the commencement of construction in any high-risk area, to implement specific, physical mitigation measures to resolve all identified emergency access and egress issues. AusNet should be required to obtain a formal, written statement from the CFA that it has confirmed a safe, unimpeded fire suppression and emergency access plan.

i. For Aviation Safety Impacts:

- i. Require the proponent, prior to the approval of the EES, to conduct a comprehensive risk assessment of the project's cumulative impact on all regional airspace, particularly for low-flying activities. The project should not proceed until

this assessment is submitted to the Minister for Planning and is publicly exhibited for review.

- ii. Require the proponent, prior to the approval of the EES, to replace the vague requirement to mark towers and catenary wires with a specific and auditable obligation to implement higher-order physical controls, such as high-visibility markers, on all conductors in areas of low-flying activity, and to fund all changes required at Melton Aerodrome for safety.
4. **Mandate Independent Peer Review:** Mandate that the new Environmental Management Framework be subjected to a transparent and independent peer review by suitably qualified experts appointed by the Minister for Planning, with the peer review report to be published as part of the revised EES documentation.

SECTION 13

CONSOLIDATED RECOMMENDATIONS

Section 1 Recommendations – Rationale and Consideration of Alternatives

1. **Reject AusNet’s EES:** The IAC and the Minister for Planning should reject AusNet’s EES for the WRL as inadequate and non-compliant, given the systemic failures identified in the project development and alternatives assessment processes.
2. **Mandate Unconstrained Re-evaluation:** Mandate a new, unconstrained assessment of alternatives for the WRL. This new process must begin with a new, transparent, multi-criteria analysis that gives equal weight to environmental, social, and economic factors.
3. **Independently Analyse Cost and Benefit:** Require a comprehensive and independently peer-reviewed cost-benefit analysis comparing overhead and underground alternatives. This analysis must move beyond narrow capital costs to explicitly monetise and weigh the long-term economic, environmental, and social externalities of both options, consistent with the holistic assessment principles of the EE Act.
4. **Demand Proportionality:** For highly constrained areas like Darley, and critical fire risk areas, demand that the new assessment must conduct a robust, detailed, and truly proportionate investigation into all viable alternatives, including partial undergrounding, with an explicit focus on the principle of impact avoidance over mere mitigation.

Section 2 Recommendations - Community and Stakeholder Engagement

5. **Mandate a New Process:** Mandate a new, genuine community and stakeholder engagement process that is transparent, independently overseen, and explicitly structured around the "Collaborate" level of the IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation. This new process must begin with a genuine re-evaluation of alternatives, including the full and partial undergrounding of the line, in collaboration with our community and independent experts.
6. **Require Independent Oversight:** Require the new community and stakeholder engagement process, and all resulting documentation, to be subject to ongoing oversight and final peer review by suitably qualified, independent experts in public participation and social performance, with all reports made publicly available.

Section 3 Recommendations – Biodiversity and Habitat

7. **Reject the EES:** Reject AusNet’s Biodiversity Impact Assessment for the proposed WRL as it fails to provide a credible foundation for assessing the project's environmental effects.
8. **Mandate a New Assessment:** Mandate a new, comprehensive assessment process that is based on complete baseline data from the entire Project Area. Require AusNet to complete all necessary field surveys before the EES is considered for approval.
9. **Require Independent Peer Review:** Require the revised assessment, including the biodiversity methodology and findings, to be subject to rigorous, independent peer review by suitably qualified experts.

10. **Redraft Enforceable Commitments:** Require AusNet to redraft all biodiversity and habitat EPRs to be specific, measurable, and legally enforceable, without relying on vague loopholes like "to the extent practicable".

Section 4 Recommendations – Aboriginal Cultural Heritage

11. **Reject the EES:** AusNet's assessment of Aboriginal Cultural Heritage must be found inadequate and non-compliant with the *Environment Effects Act 1978* and the EES Scoping Requirements. Reject AusNet's EES in its current form.
12. **Direct the Proponent to Withdraw and Complete All Investigations:** Direct AusNet to withdraw the EES and complete all nine Cultural Heritage Management Plans in their entirety, without exception.
13. **Mandate Genuine Consultation and Co-designed EPRs:** Require AusNet to re-engage in a genuine and respectful consultation process with all RAPs to meaningfully address the recommendations in the Cultural Value Assessments, and co-design new Aboriginal Cultural Heritage EPRs that are specific, measurable, and legally enforceable, and which do not contain permissive or discretionary language.
14. **Mandate Independent Peer Review:** Mandate that any future submission of a WRL EES Aboriginal Cultural Heritage report must be accompanied by a full, independent peer review conducted by suitably qualified and mutually agreed-upon experts.

Section 5 Recommendations – Landscape and Visual

15. **Reject the EES:** Reject AusNet's landscape and visual impact assessment as it fails to provide a credible foundation for assessing the project's profound landscape and visual effects.
16. **Mandate a New Assessment:** Mandate a new, comprehensive landscape and visual impact assessment process that is transparent, independently overseen, and fully evaluates the comparable advantages of genuine alternatives, including undergrounding in high-value visual landscapes.
17. **Require Independent Oversight:** require the new landscape and visual impact assessment, and all resulting documentation, to be subject to rigorous, independent peer review by suitably qualified experts, with all reports made publicly available.

Section 6 Recommendations – Land Use and Planning

18. **Reject the Land Use and Planning Assessment:** Reject AusNet's land use and planning assessment (Chapter 12 and Technical Report E) and direct AusNet to undertake a new assessment using a methodology that is fit for purpose for a linear infrastructure project and quantifies the severe, localised impacts on individual landholders
19. **Mandate Inclusion of Economic Consideration:** Mandate that AusNet's land use and planning reassessment includes a comprehensive economic analysis of the consequences of easement restrictions on our agricultural businesses.
20. **Redesign the EPRs:** Direct AusNet to completely redesign the Land Use and Planning EPRs to provide clear, measurable and auditable standards to be assessed by external parties and remove all vague and non-committal language.

Section 7 Recommendations – Bushfire

21. **Reject the Bushfire Impact Assessment:** Reject AusNet’s WRL EES Chapter 13 and its supporting Technical Report K in their entirety. Project approval should be withheld until AusNet submits a completely new Bushfire Impact Assessment that rectifies all deficiencies identified.

Section 8 Recommendations – Economic

22. **Reject the Economic Assessment:** Formally reject EES Chapter 14 and Technical Report G as not fit for purpose and non-compliant with the requirements of the *Environment Effects Act 1978* and the EES Scoping Requirements.
23. **Require a New, Integrated Assessment:** Direct AusNet to undertake a new, comprehensive, and integrated economic impact assessment. This new assessment should be required to fully quantify and integrate the economic costs to all affected sectors, including agriculture, tourism, and impacts on land values.
24. **Mandate Current Data and Policies:** Mandate that the new assessment be based on current, legislated Victorian renewable energy targets, the latest AEMO Integrated System Plan, and a project timeline consistent with the proponent's own construction schedule.
25. **Mandate Independent Peer Review:** Mandate that the new economic assessment and its supporting technical report be subjected to a transparent and independent peer review by suitably qualified experts, with the peer review report to be published as part of the revised EES documentation.

Section 9 Recommendations – Agriculture and Forestry

26. **Reject the Agriculture and Forestry Assessment:** Formally reject Chapter 15 and Technical Report H as manifestly inadequate.
27. **Require a new Assessment:** Direct AusNet to prepare and exhibit a new EES for Agriculture and Forestry for the proposed WRL that:
- a. Includes a property-by-property impact assessment for all 229 affected properties, based on genuine, on-the-ground validation and comprehensive consultation.
 - b. Quantifies the economic impacts of land isolation, redundancy, and business disruption.
 - c. Aligns the methodology with established, best-practice agricultural impact statement guidelines.
 - d. Addresses all outstanding recommendations from the extant independent peer review.
 - e. Includes a compounding risk assessment that accounts for the effects of project impacts in the context of projected climate change.
28. **Mandate Independent Peer Review:** Mandate that the new agriculture and forestry assessment be subjected to a transparent and independent peer review by suitably qualified experts, with the peer review report to be published as part of the revised EES documentation.

Section 10 Recommendations – Aviation

29. **Reject the Aviation Assessment:** Reject Chapter 16 Aviation and Technical Report J as manifestly inadequate.
30. **Require a new Assessment:** Direct AusNet to prepare and exhibit a new EES for Aviation for the proposed WRL that:
- a. Re-assesses all impacts using a risk-based methodology with objective, quantifiable criteria.
 - b. Re-characterises the permanent operational impacts on Melton Aerodrome as significant and proposes genuine mitigation or offset measures for the permanent loss of utility.
 - c. Includes a comprehensive risk assessment for all low-flying activities and a commitment to implementation of higher-order physical mitigation measures, such as undergrounding, or high-visibility cable markers in accordance with Australian Standards.
 - d. Redrafts all aviation EPRs to be specific, measurable, and auditable, with an explicit requirement to mark catenary wires.
 - e. Includes a robust and credible cumulative impact assessment that properly analyses the aggregate risk of all regional energy projects on airspace complexity, pilot workload, and overall aviation safety.
31. **Mandate Independent Peer Review:** Mandate that the aviation assessment be subjected to a transparent and independent peer review by suitably qualified experts, with the peer review report to be published as part of the revised EES documentation.

Section 11 Recommendations – Social

32. **Reject the Social Impact Assessment:** Reject the Social Impact Assessment (SIA) (Technical Report F) on the basis that it is non-compliant and does not meet the requirements of the *Environment Effects Act 1978* and the EES Scoping Requirements and is not credible or objective.
33. **Require a Reinvigorated Assessment:** Require a new SIA and mandate that this new assessment address the fundamental community opposition to the overhead design and properly assess the social impacts of a lack of social license, going beyond superficial amenity issues and address the profound psychosocial harm caused by the imposition of an unwanted project on unwilling communities.
34. **Mandate an Independent SIA:** Mandate that AusNet commission a new, genuinely independent SIA, conducted by a qualified expert in accordance with national and international best practice guidelines, and subject to peer review.

Section 12 Recommendations – Environmental Management Framework

35. **Reject the Environmental Management Framework:** Reject the proposed WRL EMF detailed in Chapter 29 of the WRL EES as not meeting the legal requirements of the *Environment Effects Act 1978* and the EES Scoping Requirements.

- 36. Mandate a New Assessment:** Mandate that AusNet be required to redesign a **new** Environmental Management Framework for the proposed WRL that:
- a. Ensures all General Management plans, including the CEMP and all sub-plans required by EPRs are required to be approved by the Minister for Planning prior to the commencement of any works.
 - b. Requires the proponent to develop, implement, and maintain an Environmental Management System (EMS) that is certified to AS/NZS ISO 14001:2016, which must integrate all other plans required by EMF, and be subject to independent and ministerially appointed audit.
 - c. Requires that Property Access Management Plans be submitted to and approved by the respective Shire Councils prior to the commencement of any works within that Shire.
 - d. Requires an independent environmental compliance auditor to be appointed by and funded by the Minister for Planning prior to commencement of any works, to report directly to the Minister and have the power to issue stop-work orders if required.
 - f. **Change Management Process.** Includes a new change management process which avoids subjective language and establishes clear and quantitative thresholds defining what constitutes a "major" versus a "minor" change, with:
 - i. all major changes to require a formal amendment to the relevant plan to be submitted to and approved by the Minister for Planning
 - ii. minor changes be submitted and approved by the impacted Councils or statutory bodies or agencies.
- 37. Require New EPRs.** Require AusNet to include new specific EPRS (not exclusive) in the new EMF which:
- a. Do not contain any subjective or discretionary language such as "if necessary," "where practicable," and "so far as reasonably practicable".
 - b. Must include specific, measurable, auditable, relevant, and time-bound environmental outcomes.
 - c. **For Social Impacts:**
 - i. Require the proponent, prior to the commencement of construction, to develop a comprehensive Social Management Plan, based on a methodology with specific, measurable metrics for community well-being and including a mandatory, pre-defined trigger for intervention and support, based on the severity of the psychosocial harm being experienced.
 - ii. Require the proponent, prior to commencement of construction, to develop and implement a Residential Mitigation and Support Strategy that offers enforceable outcomes to directly affected landholders. This must include an option for the proponent to purchase the affected property at full, pre-project market value, as determined by an independent valuer mutually agreed upon by the landholder and the respective Shire Council.

d. For Landscape and Visual Amenity Impacts:

- i. Require the Proponent, prior to the commencement of construction, to undertake a new visual impact assessment and avoid all visual impacts on culturally and socially significant public sites, and obtain written confirmation from the respective Shire Councils that the project will not compromise the values of those Shire's Significant Landscape Overlays.
- ii. Require the Proponent, prior to the commencement of operation, to provide a binding commitment to either implement effective visual mitigation measures on all affected properties or to purchase the affected property at full, pre-project market value, as determined by an independent valuer mutually agreed upon by the landholder and the respective Shire Council.

e. For Agriculture and Forestry Impacts:

- i. Require the proponent, prior to the approval of the EES, to complete a comprehensive, pre-approval, property-by-property Agricultural Impact Assessment for all 229 affected properties. This assessment must quantify the economic costs of all impacts, including land isolation, redundancy, and constraints on machinery and irrigation.
- ii. Require the proponent, for the life of the project, to minimise the construction footprint and rectify and rehabilitate all disturbed land to its original state. These outcomes must be measured against clear, auditable standards. All plans for rehabilitation and rectification must be submitted to and approved by the respective Shire Council prior to the commencement of any works.

f. For Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Impacts:

- i. Require the proponent, prior to the approval of the EES, to complete all Cultural Heritage Management Plans (CHMPs) and have them approved by the relevant Registered Aboriginal Parties (RAPs).
- ii. Require the proponent to implement all recommendations arising from each RAP's Cultural Values Assessment.
- iii. Require the proponent, prior to the commencement of works, to enter into a binding legal agreement with each of the RAPs to guarantee the implementation of the recommendations and that the RAPs can stop works if they deem the recommendations are not being met.

g. For Biodiversity and Habitat Impacts:

- i. Require the proponent not proceed with the project until 100% of all required ecological surveys are complete and a full impact assessment is submitted to the Minister for Planning and is subjected to public review.
- ii. Require the proponent, prior to the commencement of works in identified habitat for threatened fauna, to implement specific, auditable mitigation measures and prove their efficacy through a peer-reviewed monitoring program. The efficacy should be verified by a ministerially appointed independent environmental auditor.

h. For Bushfire Risk and Management:

- i. Require the proponent, prior to the commencement of any works, to prepare a new Bushfire Management Plan. This plan should be required to include new, higher-level modelling of the project's performance under a range of catastrophic climate and fire weather scenarios, including FFDI values over 200. The plan should be approved by the Country Fire Authority (CFA) and the respective Shire Council.
- ii. Require the proponent, prior to the commencement of construction in any high-risk area, to implement specific, physical mitigation measures to resolve all identified emergency access and egress issues. AusNet should be required to obtain a formal, written statement from the CFA that it has confirmed a safe, unimpeded fire suppression and emergency access plan.

i. For Aviation Safety Impacts:

- i. Require the proponent, prior to the approval of the EES, to conduct a comprehensive risk assessment of the project's cumulative impact on all regional airspace, particularly for low-flying activities. The project should not proceed until this assessment is submitted to the Minister for Planning and is publicly exhibited for review.
- ii. Require the proponent, prior to the approval of the EES, to replace the vague requirement to mark towers and catenary wires with a specific and auditable obligation to implement higher-order physical controls, such as high-visibility markers, on all conductors in areas of low-flying activity, and to fund all changes required at Melton Aerodrome for safety.

38. Mandate Independent Peer Review: Mandate that the new Environmental Management Framework be subjected to a transparent and independent peer review by suitably qualified experts appointed by the Minister for Planning, with the peer review report to be published as part of the revised EES documentation.