



Community engagement in decision-making for transmission projects

Community factsheet



To support the transition to renewable energy, new and upgraded transmission infrastructure is needed to connect new energy sources to the electricity system.

However, it's not always clear how and when communities can have their say as part of transmission project planning and landholders and communities often say they have no power to influence decisions that impact them. This includes decisions around whether to use overhead or underground technology and the selection of the transmission route.

This factsheet provides information about the role community engagement plays in decision-making for transmission projects.



Your voice is important

It is essential that local communities and potentially affected landholders are provided and take up engagement and feedback opportunities so that local voices are heard and considered early and throughout the decision-making process.

Local knowledge of the area and land uses can contribute valuable information to complement a transmission business' understanding of potential challenges and opportunities. When transmission businesses genuinely and transparently engage with communities to understand local concerns and opportunities, better decisions can be made.

The Energy Charter's *Better Practice Landholder and Community Engagement Guide*¹ and the Australian Government's *National Guidelines for Community Engagement and Benefits for Electricity Transmission Projects*² both outline what communities should expect when a transmission business engages about energy infrastructure.

¹ Energy Charter, *Better Practice Landholder and Community Engagement Guide*

² Energy and Climate Change Ministerial Council, *National Guidelines: Community Engagement and Benefits for Electricity Transmission Projects*

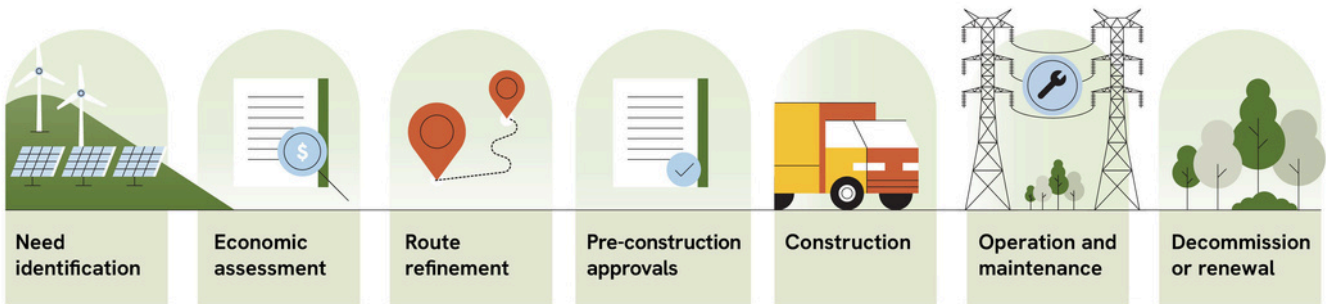
Project phases and key decisions

The details of decision-making and approval frameworks for transmission projects vary between states and territories and even within state borders. However, the project lifecycle phases³ (as shown) and key decisions relating to projects across locations are largely consistent.

A transmission project is progressively planned out step-by-step and improved over time through a series of decisions made by the transmission business and governmental approvals across the project lifecycle.

Key decisions include:

- Need for a transmission connection
- Use of overhead or underground technology
- Location of transmission corridors and selection of the final route
- Additional actions to avoid, minimise or mitigate potential impacts
- Initiatives to be delivered as part of the community benefits program.



What transmission businesses should provide

At every phase, the transmission business should provide information about:

- The purpose of community and stakeholder engagement activities
- How and when your feedback will be gathered and responded to
- How your feedback might, or might not, be considered as part of decision-making
- The decision-making process and reasons that key decisions are made
- Key decisions that have already been made and are not about to be influenced
- What you can do, at any stage, if you are not satisfied with the consultation process or outcomes.

³ Energy and Climate Change Ministerial Council, *National Guidelines: Community Engagement and Benefits for Electricity Transmission Projects*

When and how will you be engaged?

Transmission businesses engage with landholders and members of the community to gain a better understanding of local concerns and values, to support better project decisions and outcomes for impacted people and communities.

The engagement activities used will be tailored by a transmission business to the phase of the project, the decisions to be made, the needs of the project and to the community.

At all times transmission businesses should engage respectfully and professionally.



Economic assessment

Early in the lifecycle, there may be a high level of uncertainty about the project scope, the route and who will be impacted. Early engagement may therefore focus on gaining insights about the local area, local values, and local needs from community representatives (e.g. local council, regional bodies, local business chambers).



Route refinement

As the route is refined and the landholders, communities and Traditional Owners likely to be impacted are identified, engagement will become more targeted. On-the-ground engagement and field investigation activities will increase as potential options are investigated, tested and feedback sought. A range of engagement activities will occur, such as information sessions, discussion groups and direct landholder engagement to discuss route options and property access for site investigations.



Pre-construction approvals

During this phase, extensive engagement will be conducted with impacted landholders and neighbours. At this stage, the transmission business will focus on assessing the detailed impacts of the preferred route including property and business impacts, identifying mitigation measures and applying for planning and environmental approvals. The business will engage directly with affected landholders about property access protocols and the negotiation of compensation for easements. Further, the business will be working with community stakeholders to develop community benefit programs and local procurement strategies.



Construction

During the construction phase, engagement will be focused on minimising and managing impacts including direct engagement with landholders and neighbours to facilitate, coordinate and manage access for construction and remediation activities, and engaging with the community to implement community benefit activities.



Operation and maintenance

Once the project is operational, engagement with impacted landholders and communities will continue. It may include post-construction land reinstatement, access for maintenance activities, continued delivery of community benefit programs, or emergency preparedness and response.



Staying updated

If you have a project being planned in your area, signing-up with the transmission business for project updates will help keep you informed of progress and opportunities to provide your feedback.

Regardless of the phase of a project, at anytime you can contact a transmission business to find out more information about current or planned activities, or to make an enquiry or complaint.

Decision-making

It is essential that decision-making is transparent. Transmission businesses are expected⁴ to provide clear and accurate information about what decisions are yet to be made and can be influenced, what the feasible options are, explain any recommended option, explain how and when community feedback will be captured, and how the engagement outcomes will be considered in decision-making. Once a decision is made the business should explain how community feedback was considered and how the decision was made.

Tools for decision-making

Transmission businesses use various tools to help them make decisions, including cost-benefit analyses, evaluations of many qualitative and quantitative factors, mapping of constraints and opportunities, and assessments of impacts and risks.

All decision-making tools rely on the information available, and the factors selected as being important to the area in question. Local information, concerns and values – and their relative importance at a local level – can tailor the factors businesses consider, which can improve decision-making.



⁴ Energy and Climate Change Ministerial Council, *National Guidelines: Community Engagement and Benefits for Electricity Transmission Projects*

Factors in decision-making

Regardless of which analysis tool is used, at each key decision point a transmission business will need to consider a range of relevant factors.

The factors considered will be tailored for each project, each community and region, the type of decision being made and the local community values. The tool will be used to identify a recommended option that has the least overall impact from a social, environmental and economic perspective.

Many factors are able to be attributed to and readily included in the estimated cost of a transmission project.

These quantifiable costs including construction costs and timeframes, landholder compensation and payment arrangements, environmental offsets, impact controls including visual mitigations, and community benefit sharing programs. Other factors are qualitative and difficult to measure or cost, such as community sentiment, community disruption or visual amenity. These factors may be considered subjectively (e.g. high, medium or low impact) and comparatively between the options being compared

During a project lifecycle the estimated project cost will be re-evaluated multiple times. Estimates can vary over time due to changes in project scope or design, and also due to external factors that can affect the cost of resources and labour.

Examples of factors commonly considered in decision-making processes



Technical

- Solution meets the required transmission system need
- Geography and topography, including waterbodies
- Land uses, including incompatible uses such rain gun irrigators, airfields and airports
- Public safety (proximity to live conductors)



Environmental

- Significance of impact to native flora, fauna and habitats
- Significance of impact to soils, water and groundwater
- Disturbance of contaminated land



Social

- Proximity to residential dwellings, schools and hospitals
- Visual amenity impact
- Significance of impact to artefacts and places of Aboriginal cultural heritage significance
- Significance of impact to non-indigenous heritage items and places
- Community and business disturbance, especially during construction (e.g. traffic, noise, air quality)



Economic

- Cost of environmental, social and heritage impact mitigations
- Cost of land access, remediation and acquisition
- Cost of construction (which considers resources, equipment and construction duration)
- Cost of ongoing maintenance

Technology decisions in the Australian context

In contrast to international energy systems the Australian landscape is large with diverse geographies and climactic zones and characterised by a low and dispersed population. Due to the vast landscape transmission lines often have to travel long distances to connect areas of energy need with sources of renewable energy.

Internationally and here in Australia, tailored approaches are required to determine which transmission technology is best for a specific project and location. Each project has a unique set of relevant factors (social, environmental, technical and economic) and circumstances within which decisions and approvals are made.

It is critical that transmission businesses are transparent with landholders and communities about their decision-making processes, any constraints or obligations imposed on decisions, that they explain how community feedback is considered and the reasons for their decisions.

In Australia where capital costs can be high and the energy consumer population is low, transmission project costs weigh heavily in decision-making processes. For regulated transmission projects, where costs and revenue are approved by a government regulator, the selected project option must maximise the net economic benefit for energy consumers (such as households and businesses). This is generally the least cost option.

Alternating current (AC) overhead transmission lines have been proven, worldwide, to be the lowest cost system for safe and reliable delivery of large amounts of energy over long distances.⁵

In Australia, if an overhead transmission solution is feasible, it is often selected as it will usually be the least cost option for energy consumers by far.

5 UQ and Curtin University, *Comparing High Voltage Overhead and Underground Transmission Infrastructure*

For a more detailed overview of the project lifecycle, key decisions and engagement activities, download the *Project Lifecycle and Engagement Summary* resource via the QR code.



Scan this QR code or visit www.understanding-australian-transmission-projects.com to find more factsheets and resources about Australian energy transmission projects.

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