Notice of Decision – Project EnergyConnect (NSW - Western Section)

Section 2.22 and Clause 20 of Schedule 1 of the *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979*

Application type	Critical State Significant Infrastructure
Application number and project name	Project EnergyConnect (NSW – Western Section) (SSI-10040)
Proponent	TransGrid
Approval Authority	Minister for Planning and Public Spaces

Decision

Under section 5.19 of the *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979* (**the Act**), the Minister for Planning and Public Spaces has approved the critical State significant infrastructure (CSSI) application to develop the Project EnergyConnect (NSW - Western Section), subject to conditions.

The key components of the project include:
- constructing and operating a new 130 km long 330 kV transmission line between the NSW / SA border near Chowilla to the existing Buronga substation;
- upgrading a 22 km section of the existing 220 kV transmission line between the Buronga substation and the NSW / Vic border;
- upgrading the existing Buronga substation; and
- developing construction facilities, such as construction compounds and accommodation camps.

Construction of the transmission infrastructure would take 24 months and upgrade of the Buronga substation would take 36 months, and once operational provides a direct link between the NSW and SA energy markets between Chowilla in SA, Buronga in NSW and Red Cliffs in Victoria.

A copy of the Department's assessment report and Minister's infrastructure approval are available here.

Date of decision

28 September 2021

Reasons for decision

The following matters were taken into consideration in making this decision:
- the relevant matters required under the Act, including the objects of the Act;
- relevant Commonwealth and NSW legislation, policies and guidelines;
- all information submitted to the Department during the assessment of the application;
- the findings and recommendations in the Department's assessment report; and
- the views of the community about the project (see Attachment 1).

The findings and recommendations set out in the Department's Assessment Report were accepted and adopted as the reasons for making this decision.

The key reasons for approving the application are as follows:
- the project would provide a range of benefits for the State and the National Electricity Market (NEM) as a whole, including directly linking the NSW and SA energy markets between Chowilla in SA, Buronga in NSW and Red Cliffs in Victoria;
- the broader Project EnergyConnect is consistent with relevant NSW Government policies and guidelines, including the *Transmission Infrastructure Strategy,* the *Electricity Strategy,* and more broadly the *Climate Change Policy Framework and Net Zero Stage 1: 2020 – 2030*.;
- the impacts on the community and the environment can be appropriately minimised, managed or offset to an acceptable level, in accordance with applicable NSW Government policies and standards;
- none of the NSW Government agencies objected to the project and Council is supportive of the project;
- the issues raised by the community during consultation and in submissions have been considered and adequately addressed through changes to the project and the recommended conditions of consent; and
- weighing all relevant considerations, the project is in the public interest, subject to strict conditions of approval.

Attachment 1 – Consideration of Community Views

The Department exhibited the application from 30 October to 10 December 2020 and received five submissions including three from special interest groups and two from the general public and advice from 15 government agencies, including Wentworth Shire Council (Council).

Of the five submissions received from the community and organisations, one submission provided support for the development, two submissions provided comments on the development; and two submissions objected to the development.

A summary of how the key issues raised by the community were taken into consideration is provided in the below table.

Issue	Consideration
Assessment methodology based on indicative design: • biodiversity and • heritage	• TransGrid considered a range of corridor options to determine the alignment of Project EnergyConnect based on opportunities and constraints to select its corridor alignment. • The Department acknowledges that the construction of a 155 km transmission line between Chowilla (SA) and Buronga substation would inevitably result in impacts to biodiversity and heritage values, as well as a range of amenity impacts to the community (such as traffic and noise). • The Department recognises that large linear infrastructure projects need to be developed and assessed through an iterative process and that this approach has long been adopted for large-scale linear infrastructure projects in NSW. • There is a well-established process of assessing the nature and scale of potential impacts before determination, while also allowing for further assessment and reduction of impacts post-determination. *Conditions* • Further minimisation of impacts during the detailed design of the project. • Implement a range of mitigation and adaptive management measures through the Construction Environmental Management Plan. • Prepare and implement an Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Strategy, including undertaking subsurface testing of the potential archaeological deposits prior to commencing construction, identifying measures to avoid or salvage and detailed justification where the final transmission line alignment is not able to avoid impacts to heritage items. • Prepare and implement a Biodiversity Offset Strategy.
Biodiversity • assessment methodology • impacts on threatened species • adequacy of offsets	• TransGrid has designed the development to avoid and minimise impacts on high quality vegetation and habitat. • The project would still disturb 643 ha of native vegetation, comprising 540 ha of vegetation in moderate to good condition and 103 ha of cultivated or degraded derived native grassland. • The impact on native vegetation and species would generate 10,715 ecosystem credits and 1,562 species credits for flora and fauna species. • The Department and BCS are satisfied that the offset credit requirements have been correctly calculated, noting that these credits would need to be re-calculated following detailed design. • Subject to further minimisation of impacts during the detailed design of the project, a range of mitigation and adaptive management measures, and by offsetting the residual biodiversity impacts of the project, the project is unlikely to result in a significant impact on the biodiversity values of the locality over the medium to long term. *Conditions* • Minimise the clearing of native vegetation and key fauna habitat. • Prepare and implement a Biodiversity Management Plan. • Prepare and implement a Biodiversity Offset Package. • As security, TransGrid would establish an escrow account (a third party account where an asset is held until certain requirements are met) for the amount calculated by the Biodiversity Offset Payment Calculator (as at 29 July 2021) for the credit liability which correlates to $48 million.
Aboriginal Heritage • assessment methodology • impacts on Sturts Billabong	• The Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Assessment (ACHA) identified 138 previously unrecorded Aboriginal heritage sites and 28 potential archaeological deposits (PADs) within the development survey area • Additional site surveys would be undertaken in consultation with RAPs to account for any additional disturbance confirmed during detailed design. • The transmission line corridor would pass through the central portion of the curtilage of Sturts Billabong, which is an Aboriginal burial site situated

Issue	Consideration
	on the banks of the Darling River. The development would not directly impact any of the features of significance to this item (landscape or mature trees), including the River Redgums. *Conditions* • Prepare and implement an Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Strategy prepared in consultation with RAPs and Heritage NSW, including additional site surveys for areas identified to be disturbed by the final development design and measures to avoid and minimise impacts on heritage items and PADs. • Prepare and implement an Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Management Plan, in consultation with Aboriginal stakeholders.
Traffic and transport • potential impact on Renmark Road • sought Renmark Road be sealed from Wentworth to the South Australian Border	• TransGrid has identified the primary access route that would be utilised by construction traffic moving between construction compounds and camp locations and access points to the site. • TransGrid provided a detailed assessment of the impacts along this route, which would accommodate around 80% of the project related traffic, including all over-dimensional vehicles. • TransGrid has identified secondary and water supply access routes that would assist in accessing construction areas and deliver water between the water supply points and construction locations along the corridor. These routes would be used for short durations during construction. • The potential traffic and transport impacts would be largely restricted to the construction period (24 months for construction and upgrade of transmission lines and 36 months for upgrade of Buronga substation). • Temporary traffic disruptions would be experienced on the road network, although TransGrid would be required to maintain traffic flows, access. and parking as far as possible. *Conditions* • Prepare and implement a Traffic Strategy to identify all necessary road upgrades for the development to the standard and satisfaction of the relevant roads authority prior to commencing construction. • Undertake dilapidation surveys of the relevant transport routes prior to construction and decommissioning, on an annual basis during construction, and repairing any damage resulting from construction traffic. • Prepare a detailed Traffic Management Plan in consultation with the relevant roads authorities.
Hazards and risk : • bushfire risks during construction and operation, • impacts from Electric and magnetic fields (EMF)	• The development site is classed as bushfire prone land. • TransGrid would be required to comply with the RFS's Planning for Bushfire Protection (2019) and prepare an Emergency Response Plan to manage the fire risk. • TransGrid has committed to a number of mitigation measures and strategies, including the preparation of a Emergency Management Plan and a Bushfire Risk Management Plan. • The Department, RFS and FRNSW are satisfied that the bushfire risks can be suitably controlled through the implementation of standard fire management plans and procedures. • The main sources of EMF from the development would be transmission lines, the substation and interconnecting underground and/or overhead cables. • All the predicted levels are well below the relevant International Commission on Non-Ionizing Radiation Protection (ICNIRP) EMF criteria of 2,000 mG for general public exposure. *Conditions* • Comply with the applicable EMF criteria. • Prepare and implement an Emergency Response Plan to manage the fire risk.
Land use and property impacts • impact to agricultural land	• The majority of the area is utilised for agriculture, however, agricultural productivity in the region is relatively low compared to other areas in NSW • Within the transmission line easement certain agricultural activities may be restricted but that grazing could continue within and immediately next to the easement including grazing. There may be a minor reduction to the land available for some cropping and horticultural land uses but that this is a small portion of the proposal study area (approximately 8%) and could be minimised in detailed design. • The project has been developed in consultation with impacted land holders, including discussion regarding areas of important agricultural which should be avoided.

Issue	Consideration
	• The project would cover a small fraction (about 0.6%) of the total agricultural land in the Wentworth LGA, and therefore the impacts on the overall agricultural activities in the region are not considered to be significant. *Conditions* • No specific conditions required.
Administrative and process: • inadequate length of public exhibition period • requested a public hearing	• The Department publicly exhibited the EIS from 30 October 2020 until 10 December 2020, advertised the exhibition in the Mildura Sunraysia Daily, Sydney Morning Herald, Daily Telegraph and The Australian and notified adjoining landowners adjacent to the project boundary. • Exhibition period (42 days) met and was longer than the statutory requirement of 28 days. • The Minister for Planning and Public Spaces did not direct that a public hearing should be held.
Development justification: • benefits of the development	• The Department considers that an interconnector between SA, NSW and Victoria is critical for energy security and reliability in NSW and would play a critical role in supporting the transition of the energy system, and linking the SA, NSW and Victoria electricity networks. • The broader Project EnergyConnect is also consistent with the AEMO's roadmap for the National Electricity Market, the Integrated System Plan and relevant strategic NSW planning and policy documents, including the Transmission Infrastructure Strategy the Electricity Strategy, and more broadly the Climate Change Policy Framework and Net Zero Stage 1: 2020 – 2030. • EnergyConnect (West) represents a logical important first step in in directly linking the NSW and SA and NSW energy markets between Chowilla (in SA), Buronga (in NSW) and Red Cliffs (in Victoria). • EnergyConnect (West) would deliver significant economic benefits to NSW including a capital investment of $418 million and creation of up to 600 construction jobs. • The residual impacts of the project can be minimised, managed, or offset in accordance with the objects of the EP&A Act, and other relevant legislation and government policy.