Woolomin community information session

New England Renewable Energy Zone (REZ)

May 2024

Questions and answers

Q. **Why can't existing transmission** lines be upgraded instead of building the REZ transmission project?

The existing 330 kilovolt (kV) transmission lines that currently transfer power between Bayswater, Tamworth and Armidale, and between Armidale, Kempsey and Newcastle, are operated by Transgrid. They currently operate at near full capacity.

Upgrading the existing network would require lengthy system outages during construction which would have a significant impact on the operation of the National Electricity Market (NEM). The existing lines would need to be taken down, easements widened and new structures rebuilt. This option would also take much longer to construct.

This option was excluded early in the option assessment process as it interacts with a larger number of communities as the existing lines are close to regional centres which have experienced major growth since the lines were first built. It would also have a significantly longer line length than other options considered (therefore increasing time, cost and constructability constraints).

Upgrading existing lines was considered during the options development process in line with EnergyCo's planning principles. The outcomes are summarised below.

- **People**: It would have the greatest impact to built up areas and rural dwellings out of all options considered.
- **Environment**: It would significantly impact National Parks estate and require more vegetation clearing than all other options due to line length.
- **Economic**: It has the longest line length of all options (therefore increasing cost) and it would impact critical industry cluster (CIC) and cropping land.
- **Strategic**: It maximises co-location with existing transmission routes.
- **Technica**l: It has the most significant slope and flooding constraints of all the options.

Further detail about how this was considered in the options assessment process will be outlined in the scoping report. The scoping report is due to be released shortly and we will notify the community once it is available to view.

Q. Why does the 500kV transmission corridor co-locate with Transgrid's existing network and then deviate towards Chaffey Dam?

EnergyCo has sought to co-locate the study corridor with existing transmission lines where feasible. The revised study corridor includes about 80km of co-location with Transgrid's existing transmission lines between Bayswater and Armidale.

The existing Transgrid 330kV line is close to the regional centre of Tamworth which has undergone significant development and urban growth since the line was first built in the 1960s. Given the proximity of this major regional centre, co-location through this area would have substantial impacts to numerous private properties and townships. This is why the study corridor deviates east around Tamworth.

Q. Why does the study corridor intersect landholdings, which would impact farming activities and infrastructure? How is EnergyCo mitigating impacts to individual landholdings?

EnergyCo is currently engaging with landowners to identify potential opportunities and constraints for the transmission route. We are working to identify potential locations within the study corridor that minimise impacts to existing agriculture and farming activities.

If you own land in the study corridor, we want to meet with you to understand your farming and business operations, details of sensitive flora and fauna and the locations of existing dwellings, sheds and other features. This information will help us achieve better outcomes for landowners, communities and the environment when planning the transmission route. It will also help ensure the transmission route can co-exist with agriculture and other important land uses.

Importantly, the transmission route has not yet been determined and we are still working within a broad study area to identify potential locations for transmission lines, energy hubs and related infrastructure. The upcoming release of the scoping report does not mean the transmission route is finalised and we will continue to assess and refine the corridor in response to ongoing consultation and field investigations. This will occur up until the lodgement of the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) in late 2025.

Our Property and Place Managers are available to meet at your convenience. We encourage you to get in touch with our team so we can better understand your individual circumstances.

Q. When is EnergyCo going to complete its assessment of the alternative route suggested by the community which uses travelling stock reserve (TSR) routes to the east of the revised study corridor? Can the scoping report be paused while this is carried out?

The alternative route suggested by the community is similar in part to the mid-western corridor option previously considered by EnergyCo as part of the early corridor assessment process in 2023. In summary, the western corridor option was selected as the preferred option for the study corridor, as it represented the best overall solution when all factors were balanced and considered against EnergyCo's planning principles (people, technical, strategic, economic and environment). This

process is summarised in our December project update and will be addressed in the scoping report. You can read the December project update at energyco.nsw.gov.au/ne/project-documents.

We acknowledge there is strong support in the community to further investigate the alternative suggestion using TSR routes and we have committed to carrying out a further review of this option. We will notify the community once this has been completed.

We will lodge the scoping report concurrently while this review is carried out. Lodgement of the scoping report is an important step that supports EnergyCo's request for Secretary's environmental assessment requirements (SEARs) which will guide the development of the environmental impact statement. The scoping report does not mean the route is finalised however, and the corridor will be subject to further assessment and refinement as a result of our ongoing consultation and field investigations.

Q. Why does the Strategic Benefit Payment Scheme only provide payments for 20 years?

Under the NSW Government's Strategic Benefit Payment Scheme, private landowners hosting new high voltage transmission projects critical to the energy transformation will be paid a set rate of $200,000 per km of transmission hosted, paid out in annual instalments over 20 years.

Importantly, the payments are in addition to the compensation private landowners are entitled to for easement acquisition under the *Land Acquisition (Just Terms Compensation) Act 1991* (Just Terms Act). Compensation under the Just Terms Act is paid on settlement and does not include ongoing payments.

The Strategic Benefit Payment Scheme was announced in 2022 to ensure landowners share in the benefits of this significant economic investment in the energy transition. It recognises the vital role of private landowners in delivering new critical transmission infrastructure projects.

The 20-year period is consistent with the access rights that will be granted to renewable energy generation and storage projects to connect to the new transmission infrastructure in REZs. It is structured to ensure that the private landowners hosting new transmission infrastructure will receive a share of the benefits, and that if the ownership of land changes over time, then the new landowner will continue to receive any future scheme payments.

Further details are available at energyco.nsw.gov.au/community/strategic-benefit-payments-scheme.

Q. What is EnergyCo doing to support community mental health?

We understand that potential property impacts from the REZ transmission project can be emotionally challenging and stressful. EnergyCo takes the wellbeing and mental health of landowners and affected parties seriously.

Landowners in the study corridor have been provided a dedicated Property Manager and Place Manager to act as dedicated points of contact for property impacts and other matters. Our team is

available to answer questions and provide guidance. We encourage landowners and community members to engage with our team to ask questions and provide feedback to inform our planning.

The NSW Government has engaged an independent service provider to deliver a free and confidential Property Acquisition Support Line. Community members can call the Property Acquisition Support Line on 1300 089 551 and talk to qualified psychologists and social workers 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

This service is available to property owners, their families, tenants, commercial property and business owners, and employees directly affected by property acquisition and other EnergyCo property discussions such as access agreements. More information is available online at energyco.nsw.gov.au/community/support-landowners.

For community members impacted by transmission infrastructure projects or REZs, but whose property is not directly impacted, existing NSW Government support services are already available. Information is available at service.nsw.gov.au/guide/mental-wellbeing-resources.

Q. How did EnergyCo engage with communities about the revised study corridor?

Key activities to inform communities about the revised study corridor included:

- direct contact and letters to around 230 landowners in the study corridor, including door knocking
- sending a media release to local news outlets
- advertising in the Armidale Express, Northern Daily Leader, The Land, Glenn Innes Examiner, Inverell Times, Guyra Gazette and Apsley Advocate
- sending an email update to around 800 registered subscribers
- holding information sessions in Tamworth, Armidale and Muswellbrook which were attended by 160 people in total.

We welcome feedback from the community about our engagement activities. We are planning a range of activities to inform communities about the upcoming scoping report release, including information sessions, pop-up events, letterbox distribution, email updates, advertising, a project update, fact sheets and other resources.

To receive our latest updates and announcements via email, you can register for our mailing list by contacting our team at nerez@energyco.nsw.gov.au.

Q. What about engagement with landowners near the study corridor who may be affected by visual amenity and other impacts?

EnergyCo is committed to engaging with landowners in the vicinity of the project in addition to those that are directly affected by the study corridor. All feedback received from the community will be considered as we refine the project design. We encourage community members to register for email

updates to ensure you receive our latest updates and announcements, including details of upcoming engagement activities.

It is important to note that the transmission route has not yet been determined and we are still investigating within a broad study corridor, meaning the specific impacts to individual neighbouring properties are still to be confirmed. This will be considered in detail as part of the environmental impact statement (EIS) which will include a visual impact assessment and other studies to determine the expected level of impact to neighbouring properties. This will include photomontages showing the proposed transmission infrastructure from representative residences and viewpoints. The EIS will also outline a range of measures to avoid, mitigate and manage any potential impacts to surrounding communities and the environment.

Q. Why is undergrounding not being considered? Can undergrounding be used at Tamworth so the transmission corridor can follow Transgrid's existing 330kV lines?

The limitations of undergrounding have been addressed in the recent Standing Committee on State Development Inquiry on the Feasibility of undergrounding the transmission infrastructure for renewable energy projects (Parliament NSW, 2023), as well as the following Select Committee on State Development Inquiry on the same topic. You can read EnergyCo's submission to the inquiry here.

EnergyCo is proposing overhead transmission lines for the REZ transmission project as they have shorter construction timeframes, a smaller environmental footprint, lower costs and fewer constructability constraints than underground infrastructure. Limitations of underground transmission lines include:

- physical constraints when traversing steep terrain such as ravines and escarpments
- extensive trenching and earthworks, representing a significantly higher impact across a larger footprint than overhead lines, which may not be suitable in certain geology and areas of high biodiversity or cultural value
- restrictions on vegetation growth over the entire easement, meaning agricultural cropping may not be permitted within the easement
- the construction timeframe is substantially longer compared to the overhead equivalent, which extends construction amenity impacts and reduces benefits to energy consumers under the NSW Electricity Infrastructure Roadmap
- fault-finding and repair for underground systems is more challenging and time consuming than for overhead systems, requiring substantial excavation. This can result in prolonged outages and interruptions to power supply.

EnergyCo is not considering undergrounding for the New England REZ transmission project due to these constraints.

Q. How will firefighting occur around transmission lines? Will the transmission lines prevent water bombing aircraft using Chaffey Dam?

We acknowledge bushfire is a key concern for local communities living near the study corridor. While electrical infrastructure can present a fire risk, there are no records of a 500kV transmission line starting a fire across Australia, and they have the lowest bushfire risk of all powerline infrastructure (transmission and distribution) types. Lower voltage transmission lines and distribution lines (such as those found in our streets and towns) have a greater fire risk, with distribution lines (particularly 22kV/33kV) causing most fire ignitions associated with electrical infrastructure. Examples of distribution line fires include fires in California and the Victorian Black Saturday Kilmore East fire.

We will consult with NSW Rural Fire Service and other emergency services stakeholders through the planning, construction and operation of the project. Project infrastructure and facilities will be designed to provide safe access for firefighting operations in line with the standards set by the NSW Rural Fire Service.

There are established procedures and protocols in place for emergency services when fighting fires around transmission lines. Aerial water bombing may be carried out on and around transmission lines where approved by the incident control, air attack supervisor and pilot, and in accordance with Civil Aviation Safety Authority (CASA) requirements. Transmission lines are shown on aeronautical charts and incident action plan maps so aircraft operators are aware of their location, and they are covered in briefings by air attack supervisors prior to aerial firefighting operations.

The transmission line would not impact the operation of water scooping fixed wing aircraft when conditions are suitable. The study corridor is about 500 metres north of the waters of Chaffey Dam on elevated land. The location of the transmission route would not restrict the use of Chaffey Dam by both water scooping fixed wing aircraft and helicopters.

Firefighters are trained on protocols for fighting fires around power lines. For safety reasons, spraying water during ground operations directly on or near transmission lines isn't permitted and emergency personnel and vehicles are to maintain a safe distance of at least 25m from transmission infrastructure where a fire is burning directly under or adjacent to a line.

Q. Did EnergyCo access private property for ground-truthing along the transmission corridor without permission?

No. EnergyCo will always seek permission before accessing private property for field investigation work. This includes asking landowners to complete a land access agreement which outlines any special conditions of entry, including biosecurity requirements.

EnergyCo team members inspected the transmission study corridor from publicly accessible areas such as local roads and reserves, as well as desktop studies through aerial imagery and conducting flyovers.

Q. How will groundwater resources be protected when installing transmission foundations?

The potential for groundwater impacts is expected to be low due to the limited extent of excavation required for the transmission project. However, this will be assessed in detail as part of the environmental impact statement (EIS). The EIS will include specific assessments on groundwater, hydrology, water quality and flooding. The EIS will be informed by geotechnical field investigations to understand the existing ground conditions, including groundwater resources.

Studies and field investigations for the EIS will take place throughout 2024 and 2025, with the EIS expected to be placed on public exhibition in late 2025. The EIS will outline any potential impacts to groundwater as well as measures to avoid, mitigate and manage groundwater impacts during construction and operation.

For more information

Information about the New England REZ transmission project can be found on EnergyCo's website at energyco.nsw.gov.au/ne, including maps, fact sheets, project updates and more. You can view the revised study corridor on our interactive map at caportal.com.au/energyco/rez.

You can contact our team by calling 1800 061 114 (9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday) or by emailing nerez@energyco.nsw.gov.au. We have a dedicated team of Property Managers and Place Managers in the New England region that are available to meet with landowners, answer questions and listen to feedback.