



TransGrid

Review of Humelink engagement process

Findings of the Review

Landowner and Community Advocate - July 2021

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1. Background

1.1 The Humelink project

Humelink will upgrade the Southern Shared Network. The network carries power from generators across southern NSW, and electricity imported from Victoria and South Australia, to major population centres.

Currently, the network is heavily congested at times of high demand and will become more congested as new generators in southern NSW connect to the grid. Better access to cheaper renewable energy generators has the potential to reduce electricity prices for consumers, while meeting increasing demand.

TransGrid is currently completing the Australian Energy Regulator’s (AER) Regulatory Investment Test – Transmission (RIT-T) for Humelink. If the AER approves investment, TransGrid will complete the NSW Government planning process as Critical State Significant Infrastructure. If those approvals are granted, construction is planned to start mid 2024 and be completed by 2026.

Table 1 – Proposed timeline for the Humelink project

Milestone	Date
Start Regulatory Test for Transmission Investment (RIT-T)	Early 2019
Preliminary investigation and Humelink scoping	Mid 2019
Environmental impact assessment starts	Late 2019
Community consultation period	Mid 2020 – mid 2022
EIS submission	Mid 2022
EIS approved	Late 2022
Final investment decision and AER approval	Early 2024
Construction starts	2024

1.2 Landowner and community engagement

The project requires general engagement with the community in which the new lines will be located and more specific engagement with the landowners on whose land the infrastructure may cross. Initial engagement is based around an identified study corridor through the route is proposed to travel. The precise route is determined through examination of the various aspects of the land such as historical significance and ecological importance and landowner considerations.

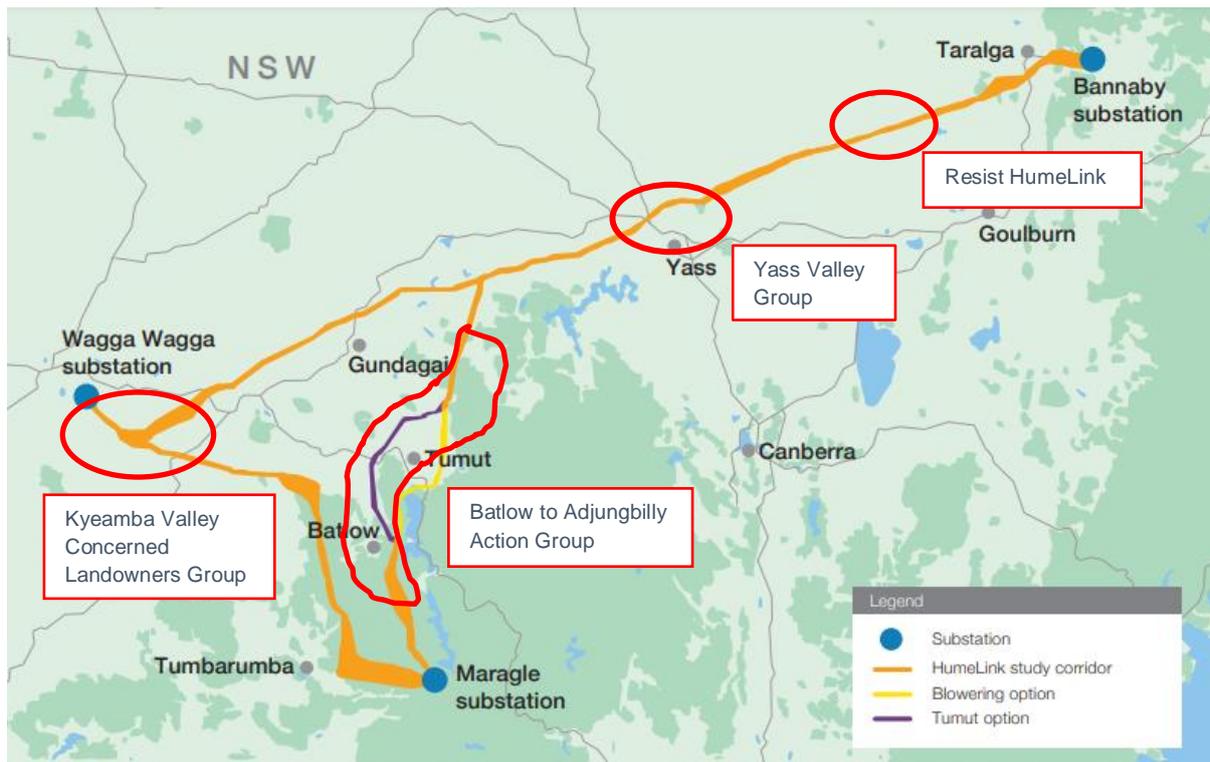
Engagement with landowners about the project commenced on 17 April 2020 with a mailout of general project information, followed by a second mailout on 25 May 2020 seeking specific mapping details about each of their properties. Covid-19 restrictions in NSW meant that little face-to-face engagement occurred for the remainder of the year. During this period several groups of activist landowners emerged along the Humelink route and began to raise concerns in

the media regarding the TransGrid consultation process and the proposed route. TransGrid maintained video, email and phone contact with individual landowners and groups as requested by them.

In November 2020 TransGrid Land Access Officers began contacting individual landowners to arrange site visits with a view to obtaining access to each property for technical and ecological studies to be undertaken.

In February 2021 a third landowner information package (Project Update) was sent to landowners. This, combined with the site visits by Land Access Officers, led to an increased local media campaign by the landowner action groups during March and April.

Map 1: Approximate locations of the action groups along the Humelink study corridor



2. The review

2.1 The review process

The review was conducted from the perspective of a Landowner Advocate. It is acknowledged that the TransGrid staff involved in the engagement process are highly conscientious and committed.

The findings of the review relate to the experience of the landowners impacted by the consultation process. The key concerns raised by landowners were:

- > the community engagement process was not transparent;
- > all the appropriate people had not been included in the process;
- > landowners were not always treated with respect;
- > the engagement tools were not always appropriate, up to date and user friendly;
- > all options were not being appropriately considered; and
- > landowners did not feel that they had been heard.

In order to gain an understanding of the consultation process to date the Office of the Advocate undertook:

- > briefings and discussions with TransGrid community engagement staff;
- > review of TransGrid's website in relation to consultation on Humelink;
- > review of the Community Engagement Plan for Humelink;
- > review of community engagement tools and documentation;
- > review of selected entries in TransGrid's Consultation Manager¹ platform;
- > meetings with two of the groups of potentially affected landowners²; and
- > review of local media articles on the project.

It is also acknowledged that the two groups of potentially affected landowners interviewed is not necessarily representative of all landholders involved in the process.

2.2 Findings

- ***Is the consultation process open and transparent?***

The review found that, from a landowner perspective, the process was not open and transparent because:

- > the project and engagement process were not clearly and fully explained at the outset;
- > there was not clarity over:
 - the purpose and scope of the community input;
 - how and when community input would be sought;
 - who is responsible for the decision making;
 - how and when the decision will be notified; and
 - the negotiables and non-negotiables;

¹ TransGrid's platform for managing stakeholder enquiries and complaints

² Concerned Landholders of Kyeamba Valley (KVCL) and Resist Humelink

- > all options were not being adequately assessed;
- > all affected landowners did not have access to the same information about the project; and
- > adequate feedback was not provided on the reasons for eliminating any option.

It was also noted that the mid-year timeframe for a decision on the route was unlikely to be met.

- ***Are the appropriate people included in the process?***

The review found that only landowners with properties within the study corridor had been included in the consultation. Owners of properties adjacent to the corridor may have provided alternative viable route options or may be suddenly brought into the process at a late stage when changes are made to the original corridor.

The review also found that all landholders did not have access to the same information. Information provided to a particular landholder group, in response to their concerns, was not always shared with all affected landholders.

- ***Are landowners and community representatives treated with respect?***

The review found that some TransGrid staff have acted in a manner which doesn't respect the knowledge of the landowner or understand the level of anxiety that the landowner may be feeling.

- ***Are the engagement tools appropriate, up to date and user friendly?***

The review examined the maps, letters, fact sheets, landowner packages and web page used for landowner engagement and found that the engagement tools and found:

- > the nature and presentation of some of TransGrid's consultation tools have contributed to the landowners' sense of being 'collateral roadkill';
- > the website is not being used to best advantage to provide clear, consistent information to all potentially affected landowners;
- > large periods with no information provides a vacuum for misinformation to be disseminated.
- > There has been little direct rebuttal of misinformation that has been distributed by some activist groups.

- ***Do landowners feel that they have been heard?***

The review found that landowners definitely do not feel that they have been heard because:

- > information they provide about their property is not incorporated into TransGrid's project maps;
- > alternative options proposed by landowners are not seriously explored, or if seriously explored an understandable reason for their rejection has not been provided;
- > some TransGrid staff avoid discussion and observation of the issues raised by the landowner about their property during site visits and their views on vegetation are not valued; and
- > feedback is often not received on the outcomes of TransGrid's consideration of the issues raised by the landowner.

2.3 Conclusion

The reviewers found that the landowners they engaged with were both angry with the consultation process itself and distressed by the ongoing uncertainty about whether their property was affected or not and a concern that they would not be adequately compensated if their property is affected.

Overall the engagement process on the Humelink project was found from a landowner perspective to not meet best practice standards to date as:

- > it has not been seen by landowners as being open and transparent;
- > all the appropriate people have not been included in the process;
- > landowners have not always felt that they have been treated with respect;
- > engagement tools have not always been appropriate, up to date and user friendly; and
- > landowners definitely do not feel that they are being heard.

The recommendations of the review largely seek to reinforce the identified best practice engagement principles. It is the Advocate's view that adoption of the recommendations will be critical in helping to re-establish trust and restore credibility in the engagement process which has been severely eroded at this point. It is the Advocate's view that this process may be assisted by a good faith gesture that directly addresses emerging concerns. For example, some landowners have mentioned experiencing high levels of anxiety and distress in the current uncertain environment. Accordingly, TransGrid could consider providing, for a limited period, free access to a counselling service for impacted landowners.

A further strategy aimed at demonstrating that there is "light at the end of the tunnel", could be to have a landowner who has previously been through the process, speak to potentially impacted communities to share experience and evidence that it is possible to have a successful negotiation with TransGrid.

The reviewers also concluded that there could be utility in establishing a community reference group as a consultation mechanism to be employed for the duration of the project. Such groups could include representatives from communities impacted by the project, including from local government, existing community organisations and landowners. One of the advantages in creating such bodies would be to facilitate feedback and communication with the whole community rather than narrowly based interest groups. To this end, and recognising the disparate nature of the landscapes covered by the Humelink project, it is suggested that TransGrid give consideration to forming reference groups corresponding with discrete geographical areas in the route study corridor.

The Advocate noted that while this report constitutes observations and conclusions about community engagement on TransGrid's Humelink project, many of the recommendations should have application across TransGrid's other major projects.

2.4 List of recommendations

It is recommended that TransGrid:

1. *“re-set” landowner and community consultation by holding a meeting with all potentially impacted parties to:*
 - a. *examine all proposed transmission route options (including those proposed by landowners) with detailed advice as to feasibility and reasons for exclusion;*
 - b. *have experts available to discuss all aspects of the project;*
 - c. *provide advice on how TransGrid is using international best practice infrastructure technology in transmission line project; and*
 - d. *provide advice on the remaining steps in the consultation process and how they will be conducted;*
2. *review the mid-year time frame for disclosure of the proposed transmission route and advise landowners;*
3. *conduct a general information session with each regional group along the corridor prior to the commencement of each new stage of the consultation process, such as the commencement of on-site visits. This should explain the process, what it aims to achieve, how it will be conducted and what will be required of them. This should be supported by a fact sheet on the website at the same time;*
4. *review the number of staff required to conduct the consultation on this major project using a best practice model;*
5. *review the list of landowners it is consulting with to ensure that all appropriate landowners are included;*
6. *review the capacity, skills and suitability of staff and contractors involved in landowner and community engagement activities;*
7. *provide appropriate training to all engagement staff focusing on empathy and customer centrality in business operations;*
8. *require all TransGrid staff involved in landowner engagement activities to:*
 - a. *comply with TransGrid guidelines for property visits i.e. provide accurate information about the identity and number of staff/consultants attending the property. Any variation to the originally agreed arrangements should be renegotiated with the property owner;*
 - b. *generally ensure the number of TransGrid staff/consultants attending a property does not significantly exceed the number of owners present at the property. (e.g. a ratio of five TransGrid staff to one property owner would normally not be considered desirable.); and*
 - e. *ensure that all landowner feedback/communication is responded to in a timely manner and comply with commitments to provide advice by a specific timeframe;*
9. *re-examine how it represents key features on the maps it provides to landowners so as to explain how data is sourced;*
10. *review its consultation documents to remove excessive irrelevant images and marketing material and to provide a less clinical and impersonal tone;*
11. *utilises its website more to provide a ‘source of truth’ for responses to questions that arise and to share presentations that are given to one group of landowners with all the affected landowners so that all are aware of the same information;*
12. *considers the use of a newsletter to provide progress reports on the consultation process;*

13. *upload revised project maps, reflecting appropriate information provided by landowners, at relevant intervals;*
14. *a Q and A be prepared on the question “Why doesn’t the information I provided about my property and/or surrounds now appear on the map?”*
15. *staff, in individual discussions with potentially impacted landowners, have regard to feedback received about the specific property and explain why landowner requests can/cannot be acceded to;*
16. *formally respond to the matters raised by Kyeamba landowners at the meeting of 31 March 2021;*
17. *advise affected landowners of its intended response to the Advocate’s recommendations;*
18. *consider making a limited EAPS like service available to potentially impacted landowners who might be experiencing anxiety during the route selection process;*
19. *TransGrid consider the use of a landowner from a previous project to speak with the landowners who are potentially affected by Humelink; and*
20. *consider the establishment of one or more reference groups to provide input into the consultation process for the Humelink project.*

Rod Stowe
Landowner and Community Advocate
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Barbara El-Gamal
Deputy Landowner and Community Advocate