

Senate Budget Estimates – 7 November 2022

Opening Statement – Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before Senate Estimates. For those members new to the committee, my terms of reference, role, annual reports and other resources that may be helpful are available on the Commissioner's website, www.aeic.gov.au

I have tabled my full Opening Statement to the Committee so hopefully you will have a copy to refer to. In the interests of time, I will just read out the introduction pages of the Statement. Further updates on our case data and activities can be found in the written statement that has been tabled.

By way of background, I commenced the role, as the National Wind Farm Commissioner, in November 2015 – for an initial three-year term. The role is independent and has no formal powers.

Our accommodation, staff and IT support are provided by the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water. Our Office is in the Melbourne CBD and close to many of our key stakeholders. I am supported by three staff members.

Following a comprehensive review of the role in 2018 by the Climate Change Authority, the then Government accepted the review's recommendations and renewed the role for a further three years, with the Commissioner's scope expanded to include large-scale solar and energy storage projects.

In March 2021, the then Government announced the expansion of the Commissioner's role to include new major transmission projects. The name of the role was also changed to the Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner.

In the May 2021 budget, the government announced funding for the continuation of the role for an additional four years from November 2021.

The responsibilities of the current role include:

- facilitating the handling of complaints from concerned community residents about planned and operating wind farms, solar farms (5 MW or more), energy storage facilities (1 MW or more) and new, significant transmission projects
- identifying and promoting the adoption of best practices for industry, government and related agencies – with regard to the development, planning, construction, operation and governance of such projects, and
- improving information transparency about the industry – including information about proposed and operating projects, proponents, planning applications and other information that may be relevant to the public interest.

As I write, top issues that are on my mind include:

- Large-scale transmission project impacts – including matters relating to landholders, neighbours, the broader community and project governance.
- Offshore wind energy – contributing our knowledge and experience to the establishment of the industry, governance regulations and frameworks, community and stakeholder engagement and common-sense approaches to the required on-shore transmission.
- Benefits and challenges of ‘Renewable Energy Zones’.
- Fairness of commercial agreements between landholders and project proponents.
- Decommissioning of projects – who is responsible, who pays, how is funding guaranteed, implications of tenant default and subsequent risks to landholders and governments.

- Workplace and community safety – transparency and management of safety incidents related to large scale renewable energy projects (such as incident alerts, incident response, fleet analysis, root cause analysis, corrective actions).

Included in the rest of this Opening Statement document are the following:

- An update on our case statistics and some observations on trends
- An update on transmission matters
- Examples of our more recent stakeholder engagement, advocacy and initiatives.

Our 2021 Annual Report to the Federal Parliament has been tabled and is available on our website. This is our first Annual Report since our role was expanded to include transmission. The report contains commentary along with key observations and recommendations in relation to new, significant major transmission projects.

In response to growing concerns raised with our Office regarding the fairness of commercial agreements, we also released a guideline for landholders to assist them in reviewing and negotiating agreements before they sign.

I recently presented to the Energy Minister's Meeting in Melbourne on 28 October 2022. I provided a summary of key issues to be solved to enable the timely and effective deployment of major transmission projects along with the status of progress of resolutions to the issues. The presentation also conveyed a number of initiatives and interventions we have implemented.

In closing, I would like to thank the Department for their ongoing support and assistance to our Office – we receive timely and wise advice at all times.

And, my deep appreciation and thanks to our small but dedicated team in our Office, providing a national service across the country.

With that, I will hand back to the Chair for any questions the Committee may have.