

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Local Government Funding and Services

Bendigo – Wednesday 21 August 2024

MEMBERS

Georgie Purcell – Chair

David Davis – Deputy Chair

John Berger

Katherine Copsey

Moira Deeming

Bev McArthur

Tom McIntosh

Evan Mulholland

Sonja Terpstra

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Gaelle Broad

Georgie Crozier

David Ettershank

Michael Galea

Renee Heath

Sarah Mansfield

Rachel Payne

Richard Welch

WITNESSES

Marcia McIntyre, and

Alexandra Matthews, Wallaloo and Gre Gre District Alliance Incorporated.

The CHAIR: I declare open the Legislative Council Economy and Infrastructure Committee's public hearing for the Inquiry into Local Government Funding and Services. Please ensure that mobile phones have been switched to silent and that background noise is minimised.

I would like to begin this hearing by respectfully acknowledging the Aboriginal peoples, the traditional custodians of the various lands we are gathered on today, and pay my respects to their ancestors, elders and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of this issue to the committee or who are watching the broadcast of these proceedings today. I also welcome any members of the public watching via the live broadcast or in the public gallery, and we welcome Mr Walsh to this hearing today as well.

To kick off we will have committee members introduce themselves starting down the end of the room and then on to the screen. Mrs McArthur.

Bev McARTHUR: Bev McArthur, Western Victoria Region.

Gaelle BROAD: Hi, I am Gaelle Broad, Member for Northern Victoria.

David DAVIS: David Davis, Southern Metro.

The CHAIR: Georgie Purcell, Northern Victoria.

John BERGER: John Berger, Southern Metro.

Sonja TERPSTRA: Sonja Terpstra, Member for North-Eastern Metropolitan Region.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Sarah Mansfield, Member for Western Victoria.

Moira DEEMING: Moira Deeming, Member for Western Metropolitan.

The CHAIR: Fantastic. Thank you. Thanks for appearing before us today. All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during this hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

For the Hansard record, could you both please state your full names and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of.

Alexandra MATTHEWS: Alexandra Matthews, Wallaloo and Gre Gre District Alliance.

Marcia McINTYRE: Marcia McIntyre, Wallaloo and Gre Gre District Alliance.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Thank you. We now welcome your opening comments but ask they are kept to around 10 to 15 minutes to ensure plenty of time for discussion and questions.

Alexandra MATTHEWS: Sure. Hi, I am Alex, and this is Marcia obviously, and we are both from the Wallaloo and Gre Gre District Alliance.

Visual presentation.

Alexandra MATTHEWS: We are based in the Northern Grampians shire, and that is what we will be speaking about specifically today. Our group formed in response to the announcement of the proposed VNI West project about 18 months to two years ago now. We formed to advocate for community, the farming community and small communities affected as part of the renewables and transmission projects going on federally and at state level at the moment. Did you want to say anything about that?

Marcia McINTYRE: No.

Alexandra MATTHEWS: Agriculture is a vital industry in Victoria and we think in the Grampians shire specifically. We believe that our shire will bear the costs of the state and federal renewables rush, which we will focus on a lot today, and therefore every effort should be made to protect this vital industry and affected local communities such as ours. Our agenda – we will speak to agriculture’s value within our Northern Grampians shire, the cost to agriculture to do with renewals and transmission lines, other costs associated with renewables and transmission lines and some recommendations that we have formed. We have endeavoured throughout our submission to keep relating it back to those criteria: cost shifting, delivery of core services, revenue structure and alternative models. Just to reiterate, we are talking about, essentially, the cost to agriculture that we think our Northern Grampians shire will ultimately bear.

Marcia McINTYRE: We are both farmers first and foremost. We have other qualifications as well. I particularly live in the Wallaloo and Kanya and Paradise area; that is where we farm. We run merino sheep, and we also have some broadacre cropping of canola, wheat and barley. We also do have some first-cross lambs for the meat industry as well. Within my specific area particularly I suppose there are a lot of very fine merino and very old merino studs, and we are well renowned for that in the area and also for our high-quality cropping land.

Alexandra MATTHEWS: Our farm is just south of Rupanyup, and we are broadacre farmers as well. To relate it back to the impact on the Northern Grampians shire, we employ about 10 full-time staff. That does not include other family members; it is a family-run farm, but it is quite large. Most of those 10 staff members live in the Northern Grampians shire as well. Once we start getting into our busy seasons of sowing and harvest we basically double our workforce and a bit more with overseas backpackers. Again, they live and contribute financially to the Northern Grampians shire when they are here for those months, and considerably so. Also, in terms of the farm, we are always trying to upgrade machinery and vehicles to keep modernising. We know that everything is getting bigger and better and there is more technology with farming, and a lot of that is purchased through local businesses as well, like Stawell Toyota – we are buying vehicles there all the time. We just think that our farms contribute a lot to the local economy, so we thought we would introduce our specific farms first before we go into the value of agriculture in the Northern Grampians.

Marcia McINTYRE: Just to elaborate on that, economically we support the organisations, but I suppose all farming communities tend to be very big players in the volunteer area as well. We are in the parents and friends, my husband is the president of the cricket club and has been of the golf club and they are all in the CFA. There is an enormous amount of volunteering as well as part of that, which I think is also maybe not really costed or considered.

In general we are talking about agriculture. Agriculture, we understand, contributes \$17.5 billion gross value to Victoria, with value added of an extra \$9.5 billion. Fifty-five per cent of all food and fibre is exported, making Victoria the largest food and fibre exporter in Australia, accounting for 26 per cent of all exports from just 3 per cent of Australia’s arable land. As an industry we are efficient, we are effective and we are extremely valuable. We think that all of this has occurred because this is not recognised anywhere, and unfortunately we are very poorly represented by nearly everybody.

Agriculture makes up 13.5 per cent of all Victorian industry, and it is the second-largest industry. Again, when value added, it surpasses all other industry, inclusive of manufacturing and retail. At least a third of all economic transactions in Northern Grampians shire are a direct result of agriculture. So, value added, agriculture is \$110 million in Northern Grampians shire.

The shire itself has a population of around 11,850 people and extends across 5918 square kilometres. It raises rates of about \$20.9 million, and about \$5.87 million is directly from farmland. I suppose you could estimate that, because it is such a sparse area, it is a minority of people paying these enormous amounts of rates. That

must also be noted. While receiving this significant contribution from agriculture, council has limited capacity, understanding or ability to protect and invest in developing the industry and supporting it. So again –

Alexandra MATTHEWS: I guess what we are saying too is, when we are paying these kinds of rates – a quarter of Northern Grampians rates coming from farmers – we expect to be at the forefront of decisions and advocacy.

Marcia McINTYRE: And you would expect them to actively protect one of their biggest rate-paying areas.

Some background research identified that rich agricultural land and mineral resources within Northern Grampians are key strategic advantages. Northern Grampians is at the southern end of Victoria's grain production heartland and has partnered with innovations and practices which propelled Australia's dryland production systems to become the most efficient in the world. We are one of the leaders and we do have a number of farmers in our area that are the leaders of the entire country in these areas. So we are significant innovators and contributors to efficiency and sustainability within agricultural areas.

Alexandra MATTHEWS: And we will keep reiterating that. Any sort of impact to the agricultural industry is an impact to the Northern Grampians shire economy. Any loss of productivity for us is a loss to the Northern Grampians shire.

Marcia McINTYRE: This became, unfortunately, extremely apparent to us once we became aware of the VNI West through a newspaper, which is a random way to find out that you are in the path of a transmission line and highly inappropriate. We all as a community got together and managed to, I suppose, dive deeply into what this means for us as a community, what this means for agriculture and what it means for farming going forward. We believe that agriculture is directly under attack in the transition to renewables as stated by the federal and Victorian governments, because it is coming from both federal and state. There is direct cost shifting that has occurred as the state and federal governments imposed these targets and these renewable energy zones, transmission lines and the removal of all local planning approvals of renewable energy projects within the regional shires. Most of these costs to real communities and agriculture have not even been calculated. They are not even aware that there are costs – not even aware. And the councils will wear all of those costs. The community and the farming community will wear it first, and agriculture, and then council. And they are real costs, but they are just sort of magically not even known about yet.

One of the most serious ones is the loss of high-quality food and fibre producing land. This other document here, the Victorian government's offshore wind directions paper in 2022 – you can read it yourself – actually said that wind and large-scale solar could require up to 70 per cent of all of Victorian agricultural land. That is a horrific statement. That is of course if you do not get all of your offshore wind, which has already been cut by a fifth down in the south-western region, and potentially there are a lot of question marks going on in terms of the cost of that industry going forward.

High-quality land – agricultural food producing land – is a finite asset. Northern Grampians has plenty of it and plenty of people that know how to farm it, protect it and sustain it in an environmentally sustainable way. But this is an enormous threat. The cost is to regional Victoria, to agriculture and to our food security, and ultimately it is councils who are going to bear the brunt.

David DAVIS: The council revenue bases, you are saying.

Marcia McINTYRE: Yes. In the shires above us it is up to 75 per cent of their rate base. In ours it is a quarter, but then a lot of these other industries actually are there because of value-adding because of the agricultural industry. So yes, the impacts will be enormous for councils, and because this is not even factored in, I think generally people are unaware that this is coming.

Alexandra MATTHEWS: I would just like to add that with the loss of land value that will occur as a result of transmission lines and renewables, obviously that corresponds to reduced rates, so less income for the shire.

Marcia McINTYRE: In the short term, but in the long term the loss of the agricultural land is a long-term loss of their main income.

David DAVIS: Or diminishment of the agricultural base.

Marcia McINTYRE: The base, yes.

Alexandra MATTHEWS: Marcia mentioned some of the impacts that have not really been costed so far, but it is more than just economics as well. The impact on our farming of VNI West specifically – we will have restrictions on what we can and cannot do underneath the lines, and they are not even clear yet. For instance, any machinery over 5 metres is going to require a safety assessment, which could take 10 days to come back. There are issues near Ballarat with their lines where when it is 30 degrees they cannot harvest because the lines are sagging so much. I want to keep coming back to: anything that inhibits our ability to be productive on the farm will come back and the costs will be borne by the council. We have got to look at it too from an OHS perspective. We have received correspondence from TCV that if something happens under those lines and you are using a machine over 5 metres, it is your responsibility if anything goes wrong. Already our farms are so tenuous with WorkSafe and everything, and we are just going to introduce more risk. We are all just one mistake away from our enterprises going under and that being lost to the shire. This has introduced unnecessary risk to us. There are things, like stubble burning, that cannot happen. Windrow burning definitely cannot happen. The lack of clarity around that too is actually dangerous. TCV have actually just deleted any reference to burning off from all of their paperwork because they could not really answer the question definitively.

David DAVIS: TCV?

Marcia McINTYRE: Transmission Company Victoria, AEMO's front company.

David DAVIS: Yes.

Alexandra MATTHEWS: We need to be able to do what we do without restrictions. Things like moving sheep will not be able to be done during construction. Our roads are going to be filled up by turbine blades coming from the port of Geelong or the port of Portland. We cannot afford this imposition, and neither can council. Do you want to speak to any more of that?

Marcia McINTYRE: No, I think you have covered it. We might come back to it if there is something.

Alexandra MATTHEWS: Some of these extra costs: we have got environmental damage, water and groundwater damage, road and infrastructure damage. With road infrastructure damage, we spoke to a wind facility proponent in our area and we asked about roads. We said, 'Are you going to set up bonds with the council for the road damage?' And – we have got it in writing – they said, 'No, we only have to look after our internal tracks.' So our road is going to be completely ruined. We leased some land up in Berrybank, where there is obviously a wind facility – the roads are ruined. The wind facilities will not pay for that; that will be borne by the shires. I think a lot of money is already being spent in that area on our roads. We have lots of flooding and things; they are constantly being damaged. Every day we would send six loads of grain out of our farm. The roads are already under stress. And TCV or whoever it is – AusNet or whoever it ends up being, the transmission network service provider – will not be paying for that. That will be council.

Marcia McINTYRE: And the same with the wind farms as well – there has been a lot of study done into the amount of road damage. I am sure you can refer to that. It is extensive. We have even heard stories that they basically control the road, even though it is a public road. Basically they will control it, and as a public road user you will not be able to access the road in a normal way for years. You can imagine what that would do to a business that needs to use that road numerous times daily and the impact that that will have on that business and also the constant harassment of shire during that period.

Alexandra MATTHEWS: Yes, that was another point – the shire is going to have to deal with the residents that are affected by these issues. We know of someone a bit north of us that has had a meeting with the shire and an RE company because he has tried to build a house within a kilometre – on his own land, mind you – of the proposed wind facility. We do not think that is how council wants their resources to be used, but that is what the future of the Northern Grampians shire will be if all of these projects come in as planned, unless it is contested – and we will speak to what we think that looks like – by Northern Grampians council with the assistance of the state. Another cost there is the increased bushfire risk. It is proven that transmission lines, powerlines, start fires and so do turbines.

Marcia McINTYRE: They also restrict firefighting ability once there is a fire. There are unclear SOPs in regard to fighting around these things. Once you cannot get to the other side to stop it, then these fires will

basically get away. And we are in an area where there are six months of fire restrictions. We are right near the Grampians. We do not have to tell you there were fires there this year. I spent that night of that Pomonal fire and thought to myself, 'If VNI West was there now with all that smoke and dust coming across from that fire' – and there are a lot of people in our area – 'we would have had to spend the night up on fire watch.' When there is the density and the smoke, that is what causes the arcing and the fires to occur. It is really frightening stuff for us, and it was relieving to know that VNI West was not built. Even though our partners went off and participated in fighting these fires, which is what happens – it is all the local CFA units that go to all these Grampians fires – it is really frightening and a real risk. Of course we do not have to talk about the cost to council of fires that escape and damage every sort of infrastructure and the cost that that has.

Alexandra MATTHEWS: Fires and flooding – you know, the clean-up, the mental health impact. The shire does not want to have to deal with any more –

Marcia McINTYRE: Rebuilding infrastructure.

Alexandra MATTHEWS: natural disasters, which all of this infrastructure directly causes and thwarts your attempts to put it out too.

Another really important point, we think, is the skills shortage. We have already got a massive skills shortage. Then the RE and transmission companies come along and they grab your mechanics and they grab your engineers and they end up working for the RE industry, or we have just got a fly-in fly-out situation. So the case with Murra Warra – Emma Kealy told us it was great at the time, lots of jobs, but long term there are only four jobs out there. It was between four and six jobs. And I know one of them just came from an engineering place in Horsham, so it was just a local job. It was filled, transferred across. The economic benefits and the jobs created are overstated – completely overstated. And we are just going to see local industries actually suffer, because locals will go and work for these companies and the fly-in fly-out workers will not contribute much financially. They will make their money and they will go and spend it elsewhere.

Marcia McINTYRE: So short term potentially is small short-term gains for very long-term pain. That story in terms of the job shifting is there is another wind farm further south where we know the town had a mechanic and they no longer do. They have moved. They get one of the two or three people that work on that wind facility. So the jobs that are slated and the economic input that we hear about all the time in reality is not there. In fact if you think that it is difficult for the local mechanic to run a business and he has been poached, the shire in terms of filling their staff is nearly impossible and so then you have got an understaffed shire as well as a community that is missing vital technical trades. It is serious. Of course then there is the loss of people that move out because they will not live near the transmission lines. They will not live near the wind turbines, and they cannot. Their houses have been compromised and so they leave. In small communities every person that leaves like that is an enormous financial loss but also an enormous contributing loss in the general –

Bev McARTHUR: The volunteer network.

Marcia McINTYRE: Yes, the volunteer network and the sustainability of that community. I know that is hard for maybe metro-based people to understand, but it is extremely serious in these smaller regional areas. This is where all of this stuff is being proposed to be rolled out. It is going to hurt our best and biggest industry and it is going to hit all of our staff and our people, and ultimately all of these costs will inevitably be borne by council in some form or another.

Alexandra MATTHEWS: Just to expand on the people who will leave due the proximity, that is a real thing, personally. Five kilometres from me will be 280-metre towers – hopefully not. I do not think I will have much of a choice but to leave, and where I will be going is where it is not a RES and that is most likely going to be cities. But I certainly will not be going to Echuca and places like that if all of those projects that are planned are there. Those of us who have fought for this and do not want to live with the health consequences of living near turbines and transmission lines will not have much of a choice. And what that does to the community – I am a secondary school teacher. I like to think that I am needed, and my skills and my money and my role in the farm will go elsewhere. That will go to a different shire if these plans ever come to fruition, which we certainly hope that they do not. Again, with the volunteer aspect, it has got to the point now where we meet with football clubs and things and we say, 'If you accept money from transmission companies or renewable energy companies, we will no longer participate.' That is happening on a really large scale. That all comes back to then

council needing to use their resources to deal with all these gaps in all the organisations. All the sporting clubs and community things that council put money into: what will the point be when there is no one left to run them anymore? We just see that for council all of their resources – money, time, staff – are going to have to be used to deal with the impacts of this. There will not be time for anything else.

Marcia McINTYRE: It probably goes further than that. I think it is important for people to understand the absolute bitterness, divide, hatred that comes out of these projects within these towns. At the moment we are quite lucky because they are on, I suppose, our outer edges – although Alex's is getting a bit close there – but there are towns just north of us where in the football club they will not get changed in the rooms together. If those people are in there, they are not. They will not work on the CFA together. So you are talking hall committees, you are talking cemetery committees and you are talking school committees. You are talking every possible committee – there is a division and a divide. There are people that are not getting it. These are people that are getting it, and because of the completely unregulated way that this is, the impact on their neighbours is so enormous that they either will not be able to live in their home – or as with this other guy, he cannot build a home that he had already put in a thing for – or the impact is going to be the damage from the water that comes off or the impact to their business in terms of the construction phase.

Then of course the devaluation of their land as a neighbour. You may not be aware, but the current planning situation in Victoria is that 1 k into your neighbour's land is a buffer for the windfarm company. They have planning approval over what you can build within 1 k of not the closest turbine but the closest boundary. An international in most cases company has control 1 k into private property. It is outrageous. Any kind of protections should be within their own boundary and not reducing the ability of a neighbour to do what they want to do on their own property.

The impacts are immense. The division is real, and it is really serious. Ultimately council will have to cover all of these things that volunteers no longer do. No matter how much money these companies throw at these towns, you cannot repair that; once that division is there, it is there. They can say, 'Oh, we're throwing hundreds of thousands of dollars and they've got a new little thing for their footy club,' – if the half the town is not playing footy, it does not matter. It is done. It will slowly spiral. This is happening. You can go to these communities, and you can ask. I am sure you are aware of this happening.

The CHAIR: I am very sorry to interrupt, but we have half an hour left and eight members to get through for questions.

Alexandra MATTHEWS: This is our last one; this one is really quick.

The CHAIR: A couple of more minutes, great. Thank you.

Alexandra MATTHEWS: So the recommendations: we have done a lot of lobbying of politicians, we have met with councils, we have met with boards like the CMA – catchment management authorities – and things like that. Pulling this all together, this is what we think that Northern Grampians council can do for us, and if they cannot do it, at least advocate for the state to make the changes.

Adequate resourcing to advocate for affected communities to deal with transmission lines and renewable infrastructure. Northern Grampians said they simply did not have the resources to advocate for us in the way we were asking. We were asking for submissions. We were asking them to come to community meetings. We were asking them to support hydrological studies. They said they did not have the time to do all those things. We said, 'Okay, well, can you get someone?' They are hiring someone. They are going to pay someone I think \$110,000, but that is not going to happen, if it happens at all, until the end of the year. And that is great that they are doing that, but it should have already been done, because this is affecting us now and we need advocacy now. We all know once these things get approved – it is great for the next project, but it is not going to be great for the ones that are in the pipeline right now. So we need more resourcing, and we need it now.

We want to be advocated for in our best interests, because we are the affected communities. If we are the ones that stand to be affected, Northern Grampians should be representing us, our interests, which is protecting farmland, protecting the environment. We are not interested in any advocacy associated with money.

Marcia McINTYRE: It is also in their best interests, which is worth pointing out.

Alexandra MATTHEWS: Yes. So this talk of leveraging community benefits and things, that does not represent our view, and we do not want to be represented in that way. Like what you said, it does not matter how much money they want to bring and say that they can bring to the shire – that is not in our interest for the council's interest, and we do not want to see that sort of advocacy.

Payments in lieu of rates schemes we think should be reviewed just to make sure that these renewable and transmission companies are not getting a free ride. It is not up to council and state to make regional Victoria a good investment for RE companies; they should be there to advocate for their communities. The fire services levy should not have been overcharged to us; again, that should go to the RE companies. It is not our responsibility to make it easy for them to set up shop, essentially.

Marcia McINTYRE: Basically the amount that they have been charged has been significantly reduced while it has been put up on the farmers, who are actually already the volunteers doing the work. It is a ridiculous situation considering the fire risk involved both by starting and also fighting around these renewable energy transmission lines.

Alexandra MATTHEWS: An 80 per cent increase that we have to wear as –

Marcia McINTYRE: And we already do the work for free. It is crazy stuff.

Alexandra MATTHEWS: Do you want to read the last point? And then we are done.

Marcia McINTYRE: Yes. So basically all these projects, particularly VNI West – this is not going to be if we go with this crazy way it is going at the moment. They must show the true cost of the imposition. The irreplaceable destruction of farms and farming families must be recognised. It must be somehow costed properly, evaluated properly. It is a direct cost shift from the state in this case – I suppose it is federal, sort of AEMO, who are imposing the project onto our council – and it is income-producing ratepayers that must deal with the real cost of these projects. It is lifelong costs that we the ratepayers will have for the entire life of the project. Ultimately the impact of that will be passed on to council.

Alexandra MATTHEWS: Northern Grampians can say that they cannot do anything about that, but that is not true. They can advocate.

David DAVIS: Correct.

Alexandra MATTHEWS: They can get state to press federal. There are things they can do, and we want them done. We want to be represented. In our view the best way forward for our grid is not set in stone. Thousands of us have alternative views. The idea that the renewables are just going ahead because they are the best thing, that is really contested. We do not agree with that, and we do not think that local councils should be an agency for the state and federal governments in terms of energy policy. We think that that is up for debate. We will close there. Thank you for listening to us.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Thank you so much for your presentation and for appearing before us today. Members, we have rather limited time based on how many of us there are, so if you could ask one question, and then we will go around again if there is time. I will start with you, Mr Berger.

John BERGER: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for your presentation today. I know it cannot be easy talking about some of the issues that you are talking about here, given your own personal experiences on your own properties. I am not going to go into that part of it, because I get that side of it. I am interested to understand a little bit about the skills gaps that do appear in both of your operations, given that you have talked about some of the skills being taken away by other entities if these things get up and running. Put aside for a minute that that did not happen and that is not in the equation, how do you deal with the skill shortages that are present there now and have been for some years in terms of machine operators and things like that?

Marcia McINTYRE: Alex is probably better to talk to than me, because they do hire a substantial amount of people.

John BERGER: The broadacre stuff.

Alexandra MATTHEWS: Yes. We do a lot of recruitment. We pay recruitment agencies to advertise for us – that is locally. We have some Australian and Victorian recruitment agencies, and then after that we go and look for overseas backpackers. We have gotten pretty good at that. We do manage to find people, and people want to come out. We have sort of built a good reputation. People go back and tell their friends about it. We have had people move to the shire to work for us specifically. Online has been really good for that. We still sort of struggle with local mechanics and things like that, but we have got quite a good network now. We are well established with that, but –

John BERGER: Sorry to cut in, so the hardest thing would be the specialised trades, like a diesel mechanic or something like that?

Alexandra MATTHEWS: Yes. The concern is that people working for us now, especially the foreign ones that have already seen this happen where they come from, they have said, ‘Oh, we’ll just go and work for one of the wind companies,’ rather than come out and farm. Potentially a lot of the mechanics we rely on – we do not have anyone in the family that is a mechanic, we pay a hell of a lot of money to have mechanics on site – we see some of them going down the path of working for these wind and transmission companies in the future. That will be very difficult for us. We have a lot of land, a lot of leased land. To pay down debt and things we need a lot of staff.

John BERGER: Okay. Thanks.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Mr Berger. Mr Davis.

David DAVIS: Can I first begin thanking Alexandra and Marcia for your presentation. It has taken a lot of courage in standing up to the juggernaut of TCV and VicGrid. I do not in any way underestimate the emotional and significant impact on the community. In the short time I have got, I am going to try and summarise. Tell me whether I have missed anything. Effectively what you are saying is that, with respect to our terms of reference but more generally too, there is a shifting of responsibility that is occurring between the state and the local governments. They are pushing more pressure, more problems onto local government and onto communities – farmers but broad communities as well.

Marcia McINTYRE: Yes.

David DAVIS: As part of that the local councils ought to be undertaking an advocacy role, although there is a cost to them for that, which is being imposed on them too – I am summarising here.

Marcia McINTYRE: Sorry, just very quickly, I do not even think they have the ability to actually do the studies to show themselves what the impact is going to be, the cost to themselves.

David DAVIS: Because you need specialist knowledge and finance.

Marcia McINTYRE: Yes, they need to properly cost this – how much is this going to actually cost us long term?

David DAVIS: So they should be supported in some way to make these submissions to the EES process and so forth.

Marcia McINTYRE: Yes.

David DAVIS: There is a significant cost impact on agriculture, which you have outlined is a huge and important export industry.

Marcia McINTYRE: Enormous.

David DAVIS: The cost impact will make the agricultural land less productive, returning less rates and having a cost impact directly onto the local communities but also the council. The split-up of rates will be altered by this. Currently agriculture bears a big burden, and this will make it less productive. There is sort of a consequent reduction in rate capacity that is involved there. Finally, you are also saying – and I am summarising this because there is a lot of material there; I am just trying to get it into a distilled form and see whether I have missed anything – that at the local community level this is causing division and trouble that is

being picked up again almost in a cost shift to councils because they are having to backfill a lot of volunteer work. The other point is the councils I think have got a role with things like the biodiversity in the area and protecting a whole series of important –

Marcia McINTYRE: Well, they should be.

David DAVIS: They should be, but they are not in that role at the moment because they cannot afford it.

Marcia McINTYRE: Yes. I do not even think they understand the cost of that either. This stuff is not costed at all anywhere.

David DAVIS: Yes. Do you think also there is a significant biosecurity risk for some of these impositions?

Marcia McINTYRE: Yes. There is no way you can have that amount of traffic coming in and out of land. As part of some of the programs that us farmers have to be in to sell our canola or whatever, you actually need to have a very specific and very controlled biosecurity program in place. How you can maintain that when you are having infrastructure imposed on you by organisations you have no say on or management of is completely unattainable.

David DAVIS: I am sure I have missed things, but I just want to return finally to the agricultural thing. It seems to me very important that we cost the impact to agriculture of these lines, and that does not appear in the material I have seen; I might have missed something. In the material I have seen it does not seem that the state government or the agencies are counting the cost to agriculture in their figurings.

Marcia McINTYRE: No, it is not costed. They like to mention it. Recently VicGrid as part of their rolling out of these renewable energy zones had another completely farcical consultation session, which we have been engaged in from day dot in extremely good faith. We very specifically said that we do not want to participate in a renewable energy zone, only to find that we are in the tier 1 and tier 2 zones – renewable energy proposed for the entire western part of the state. I am sorry, I have lost my thoughts there. I will go back to the original question.

Alexandra MATTHEWS: Agriculture is not factored into that mapping.

David DAVIS: Yes, agriculture.

Marcia McINTYRE: Yes, it is not factored in at all. Although they have started talking about it, when you actually go back and read the documentation and give the actual –

David DAVIS: It is not thoroughly and properly costed.

Marcia McINTYRE: It is not costed. The rating of it is not even there in terms of what is important, in terms of the determination.

Alexandra MATTHEWS: Agriculture and social sentiment are not considered constraints. Cultural heritage is and economics. Farmers and the community are not represented in any of it.

Marcia McINTYRE: Food security should be the number one issue for all of Australia.

David DAVIS: The presentation – we have got that, have we?

Marcia McINTYRE: I think you will.

The CHAIR: We can get a copy of it out to members, if that is okay with you.

David DAVIS: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Great. Thanks, Mr Davis. Dr Mansfield.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. And thank you for appearing today. I think you have raised a lot of issues that those of us who live in regional Victoria hear about quite a bit. I am curious about, given the focus of this is around local governments, you made some points in your submission around the rates that are applied to the

agricultural sector, and you put a proposal that there is a fixed amount that they should be capped at. Can you explain that a bit more?

Alexandra MATTHEWS: Yes. With the rates, we think that we are sharing a fair bit of the burden of the rate paying and –

Marcia McINTYRE: We do not get very much for it.

Alexandra MATTHEWS: We are not getting advocated for.

Marcia McINTYRE: We do not get roads. All of the things that our rates pay for, the majority of people that live on the land, we do not get to see all the stuff in town, all the pretty things that happen in town. We do not get it. And we are paying a massive part of the rates for a minority of the services. And on top of that, when it comes to something that is really impacting this massive chunk of money, we cannot even get appropriate advocacy for it.

Alexandra MATTHEWS: I agree with that completely. And again, it comes down to: do you value agriculture's value in your shire? We are paying thousands of dollars in rates. Meanwhile with this PILOR system with renewables and the fire services levy, it just feels like we are always having to pay but nobody else is, and we are the affected communities. Does that sort of answer the question, Sarah?

Sarah MANSFIELD: Yes, I think so. I guess it is getting that understanding of, like you were saying, there is an unfair rate burden for people in the agricultural sector. What could be done? Is it a matter of just reducing your rates or is there more that the council could be doing to take account of the value of the agricultural sector?

Alexandra MATTHEWS: And that is, I guess, what we are asking for: in place of a reduction in rates, just better advocacy for us and our industry.

Marcia McINTYRE: And protection of agriculture. Protection of their enormous rate base and protection of us as a community and as an industry. Productive – extremely productive and vital – but also of extreme importance in terms of food security. So yes, we think we should be getting all of that and it should be done at a high level.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Dr Mansfield. Mrs Deeming, did you have any questions?

Moira DEEMING: Yes, I do. Thank you so much, Marcia and Alexandra. That was an amazing presentation. We have been watching what has been happening to people like you all over Victoria for a long time now. It has been absolutely horrendous, and I am glad to see people are still fighting back. We have heard a lot about how there has been cost shifting and a lack of return on contributions and things like that. Our remit in this committee is focused on revenue structures and whether they can deliver services, but I could not help noticing the fact that rights have been shifted away from you.

Marcia McINTYRE: Yes.

Moira DEEMING: So the burden of cost is put on you, the reward for those costs for your contributions has been shifted away from you, but also in terms of property rights it sounds like things that we all thought were pretty standard when it comes to property rights have now disappeared. I was a councillor beforehand and I was pretty horrified to find out that that had even been taken away from council. Basically there is all this power for planning these big projects at the discretion of a very small group of people and you have very few rights of appeal. I was just wondering if you could talk at all about what you think could be done in that area, just in the law, I guess, in terms of your rights as property owners.

Marcia McINTYRE: I suppose the reinstatement of the ones that have been removed – the right to take things to VCAT. That should be a basic Victorian right. These companies, again, think that there is some magical idea. These are big international companies that are there to make money. They are not there to help communities. They are not there to look after the environment. They need to be managed more harshly. The prior commissioner put a report out saying it is a cowboy industry. For some reason in Victoria we are removing rights from Victorians to protect themselves from this cowboy industry –

David DAVIS: Overriding communities.

Marcia McINTYRE: Yes. There is the 1 kilometre into your own property boundary of someone's planning control; there is the removal of the VCAT rights. As Alex can attest, you cannot even get an answer. They cannot even see where proposed turbines are going to be. You know, they do not have to consult. We have got a property further over, and we are a direct neighbour to a proposed wind farm there. We were not even consulted. We found out about it by accident. I contacted the company and I said, 'Why weren't we consulted about this?'

Moira DEEMING: This is my view: I do not think that there can be any service delivery whatsoever, whether or not the revenue structures in place are correct, without you having your proper rights of appeal and your proper rights to prior consultation reinstated. Would you agree?

Marcia McINTYRE: Yes.

Moira DEEMING: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Mrs Deeming, Mrs McArthur.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Alexandra and Marcia, for a first-class presentation. I think you have raised such an extensive topic we should perhaps ask if you can be recalled to contribute further. I think it is so broad and it is so extensive and so important that we need more time to develop the arguments that you have been putting. And I am extremely disappointed that the Northern Grampians shire chose not to put in a submission or present to this inquiry. It does say something about their level of interest and representation of their ratepayers, so that is extremely disappointing.

I want to go to the issue of the cost to the environment of these sorts of proposals. I know in part of the area there is significant natural importance of forests, of reserves and of endangered species – flora and fauna. The ability of the wind farm companies or the transmission line companies to totally override the importance of the environment is also underestimated and will end up as a cost to ratepayers – although they are going to be, if this all goes ahead, a very diminishing number of people. Perhaps, Marcia, you might elaborate on the environmental impacts in certain areas of these proposals.

Marcia McINTYRE: That is very true. Of course ultimately it will impact council. But losing the biodiversity – that impacts all Victorians and all Australians, in fact. In our area we are very lucky. We have a large number of conservation reserves. There is Mount Bolangum, there is Morrl Morrl, there is Teddington and then we have got Kara Kara National Park and a number of other little ones that all kind of interconnect. They are so highly recognised for the level of biodiversity in them; they are actually internationally recognised, key biodiversity areas. And outrageously there is a wind farm, the Navarre green hub, which is proposed right in the middle of these zones, hard against Kara Kara National Park and hard against Mount Bolangum conservation reserve and Morrl Morrl and also Little Tottington State Forest. It is on these amazing hills which can be seen for absolute kilometres. Basically they are going to remove hectares of – I can probably look it up, but it is one of the most critically threatened woodland forests in Victoria. They are federally protected, critically threatened. And there are another two – there is Buloke Woodlands and I think the grey box as well, also all EPBC-listed woodlands. They are removing hectares off the tops of the hills. Down south we heard that they actually had to dynamite the tops of the hills, so this is what is coming. These are the biolinks between these conservation and national parks. It is the most –

Bev McARTHUR: Can you elaborate on some of the flora and fauna species that might be –

Marcia McINTYRE: Yes, I can probably. It is a well-known area for the swift parrot, powerful owl, barking owl, black falcons, bush stone-curlews, the white –

Alexandra MATTHEWS: Breasted?

Marcia McINTYRE: Yes. There is also another migratory bird, the white needle throat. There are brown treecreepers. The diamond – I have just had a complete blank –

Bev McARTHUR: And some of the eucalyptus species?

Marcia McINTYRE: Yes. I could read you the –

The CHAIR: We might get you to provide those on notice, if that is okay, just because we will need to move on to Ms Broad and wrap up, and I do not want her to miss out.

Marcia McINTYRE: Okay. All right.

Bev McARTHUR: A detailed list of the issues affecting flora and fauna in these –

Alexandra MATTHEWS: And just to quickly add to that, the council have spent a lot of resources developing these –

David DAVIS: Protecting.

Alexandra MATTHEWS: developing and protecting, why then would you, not allow but sort of –

Bev McARTHUR: Potentially destroy them.

David DAVIS: But stand by.

Alexandra MATTHEWS: Yes.

Marcia McINTYRE: The sun moth and a large range of really, really critically threatened orchids. It is an amazing place, let us just put it that way. And all the biolinks joining this up are going to be destroyed. And that is not talking about the issues with erosion and everything that comes with that as well. It is outrageous.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Broad, one question and we will need to finish up.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you very much for your contribution. It has been really insightful. I guess I just want to ask you – you talk about local council and the need for them to be equipped or resourced or empowered to handle some of these renewable energy things, but I would like to find out from you how would you like local councils to be empowered, and are you asking for that? Because I guess I see state government has a huge responsibility in this space. We do have a Minister for Agriculture. You know, they have a role in placing the renewable energy zones and removing, I guess, the rights of appeal, so is that advocacy needed because state government is failing? Or do you think local councils – how should they be –

Marcia McINTYRE: Unfortunately I think that state government, in its rush to get all this done because we have signed up to these things, is not doing it carefully. It is not doing due process. Like agriculture – unfortunately we have not been able to get hold of the state, and I have tried a number of times, because this is her bread and butter and it is a serious food security issue and industry wise, the whole thing.

A lot of this is being, I think, unfortunately imposed on us by state government even to the point where Lily D'Ambrosio has rolled out, I would say, undemocratic ministerial orders to roll VNI West out when the project does not comply. You do not have to roll out ministerial orders if you are complying with the normal process of how these things are done. Unfortunately I guess it puts council in a situation where – as we know, these rural councils are underfunded and they do not have the facilities. We need them to be fighting back, because ultimately we are not being looked after by the appropriate levels at state and federal at the moment.

Alexandra MATTHEWS: Can I jump in?

Marcia McINTYRE: Yes, please.

Alexandra MATTHEWS: So we have got a situation where we were actually asked to voluntarily brief the council every few weeks because they could not keep up with the developments in this space.

Marcia McINTYRE: And they say they do not know some of them. We are like, 'Have you heard about this one?' and they are like, 'No, we don't know.'

Alexandra MATTHEWS: The day the REZ draft community document came out, we told them. We are in a situation where they are ill-equipped to advocate for us, and we desperately need them to get staff. I am a teacher. I am working. I have got a two-year-old. I am spending 2 hours every day doing stuff that the council could be doing or writing emails to make them do stuff. You know, we have had to push so hard to get the smallest of actions. They need to show initiative. They need to spend time. If they do not have the resources,

they need to get them. And if they do not have them, they need to ask state for them. And state should realise that that is what we need. If state is giving us this, then they need to at least give us staff to deal with our concerns.

Marcia McINTYRE: I think if they had the appropriate way to actually look into this properly, they would realise the costs themselves and they would realise that it is worth them putting the time in to protect themselves.

Alexandra MATTHEWS: And we have asked Kilkenny and D'Ambrosio to meet with us time and time again, and nothing. We just cannot get through, so we need council to fight for us.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Thanks very much, Ms Broad. That is all we have time for today, but we really appreciate you coming along and presenting to us and putting so much effort into your presentation.

Alexandra MATTHEWS: Sorry, we did not know how long we should go for.

The CHAIR: No, that is totally fine. Members who did not get to ask all their questions might submit them to you on notice, if that is okay, to respond in writing, but for now that concludes the public hearing.

Witnesses withdrew.