



28 September 2023  
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## **Australian Energy Market Commission (AEMC)**

### **Solar Citizens' submission on Enhancing community engagement in transmission building - ERC0357**

Solar Citizens is grateful for the opportunity to make a submission to the Australian Energy Market Commission (AEMC)'s draft rule change: *Enhancing community engagement in transmission building*.

#### **About Solar Citizens**

Solar Citizens is an independent, community-based organisation working to grow renewable energy and clean electric transport in Australia. Since our launch in 2013, we have gathered support from over 180,000 Australians right across the country.

Many of our supporters across the country have installed rooftop solar to slash their electricity bills and do their bit to cut Australia's carbon emissions. Their personal investment in clean energy technology has helped lower the wholesale price of electricity, reduced network costs, and provided health benefits to the community by lowering pollution.

Over the years, thousands of Solar Citizens took action advocating for and winning on large-scale clean energy and manufacturing such as:

- A large-scale federal Renewable Energy Storage Target (the Capacity Investment Scheme),
- Bipartisan federal funding for turning Townsville into a renewable hydrogen hub
- The Queensland Government committing to build CopperString 2.0 transmission line to unlock new solar and wind potential in North Queensland
- Federal and Queensland Government state funding to progress the Landsdown Eco-Industrial Precinct,
- And Queensland Government funding for a new critical mineral processing facility.

## **Submission on Enhancing community engagement in transmission building - ERC0357**

Solar Citizens are writing to provide our input and recommendation on the topic of transmission building and community engagement. We are in strong support of the expansion of clean energy across the country, and understand the vital necessity of the expansion of transmission infrastructure to support the transition to a renewable energy future.

The accelerated implementation of the AEMC's draft determination underscores the urgency of the transition to a renewable energy economy and the government's appetite to ensure this is done right, which is welcome.

The shift towards clean energy requires a fundamental change in how we approach transmission building and community engagement. Actively involving communities in decision-making leverages local knowledge, enhancing project quality and trust among stakeholders. Clean energy expansion not only reduces emissions but also holds potential for economic revitalisation and job creation. Governments and Transmission Network Service Providers (TNSPs) must take the lead in adopting a community-centred approach, recognising communities as essential partners in this transition to clean energy.

We believe it is crucial to actively engage communities with opportunities for meaningful participation in how and where projects are rolled out, in the spirit of genuine co-design.

Many issues arise when communities feel like a project is happening *to them*, not *with them* – and this is amplified when the social and environmental impacts of the project are felt before any of the indirect benefits to the community are realised. A strong focus on how these projects will positively impact cost of living, housing, health care and job opportunities in the region, as well as the care taken to protect, preserve, and restore valued local natural environments are crucial to demonstrating the co-benefits that exist from a project.

Building a social licence among the communities in which the expansion of these projects impact is essential to success. It is important for governments to provide the opportunity for broad community input, and the government has a responsibility to tell a bigger story about the benefits that clean energy expansion brings to communities, bringing those communities along in the process. This piece of work cannot just be facilitated by TNSPs, as they are generally incentivised to pass the minimum threshold of consultation imposed on them, rather than viewing communities as a genuine stakeholder from whom their social licence is critically important.

This rule change to enhance community engagement in transmission building represents just a small part of the broader picture, but it is a welcome one. The AEMC and relevant governments should continue to evaluate their broader responsibilities to ensure rollouts of projects such as Renewable Energy Zones (REZs) are done sustainably. Without this crucial piece of community engagement, we will fail to empower and reassure communities to be a part of the story to shape a sustainable and cost-effective energy landscape for all Australians.

In summary - we support the requirement for TNSPs to engage more meaningfully with the community, particularly for projects sitting within a Renewable Energy Zone (REZ). However, as stated, TNSPs will remain incentivised to follow the minimum requirements set upon them and nothing more. Particularly in communities within REZs, there is a gap in building this social licence that cannot be bridged with this rule change, with a need for a broader strategy from governments on:

- Ensuring that communities have the opportunity to have input on identifying potential co-benefits for residents that come along with a REZ, not just the benefits of clean energy, including overlaying the chance for preserving and restoring our natural environment
- Embedding First Nations justice in the energy transition, following principles provided by the First Nations Clean Energy Network
- Introducing communities into the conversation of planning transmission routes at the earliest possible stage, rather than consulting plans that have already had significant planning investing into the by AEMO and the TNSP

Solar Citizens are broadly supportive of the intent behind the draft rule change, noting the aforementioned context and the following recommendations that could serve to strengthen the change:

- Clearly demonstrate that this rule change also applies to all projects that already underway or assessable, including projects that are offshore
- Community engagement stakeholder groups should be expanded to specifically include conservation, biodiversity, manufacturing and industry representatives
- Specifically highlight the need for broad consultation with First Nations communities
- Where gaps in the consultation process by the TNSP are preempted, identify a mechanism for the AEMC to otherwise ensure this consultation and community engagement is taking place
- Clarify where RIT-T funds can be used for, with consideration for where within the framework the following could be implemented:
  - Funds able to be used by impacted communities for their benefit as they see fit
  - Landholder and neighbour compensation within impacted communities
  - Identifying the social and environmental impacts on affected communities
  - Identifying other priorities in impacted communities that could be invested into

Thank you again for the opportunity to make this submission.



Heidi Lee Douglas, National Director