

28 September 2023

Andrew Dyer
Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner

Submitted via online portal at consult.dccew.gov.au

Dear Mr Dyer

Hydro Tasmania's submission to the Review of community engagement practices

Hydro Tasmania welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner on community engagement practices. We understand the objectives of the review are to enhance community support and ensure that electricity transmission and renewable energy developments deliver for communities, landholders and traditional owners. Hydro Tasmania supports the intent of the consultation, as we strive for learning and continuous improvement in this space.

Hydro Tasmania is Australia's largest generator of renewable energy. For more than a century, Tasmanians have relied on hydropower to grow the economy and support communities to thrive. Hydro Tasmania continually invests in the upkeep and modernisation of Tasmania's extensive renewable resources. We are also progressing the *Battery of the Nation* (BotN) initiative, which can help deliver increased capacity and energy storage to the National Electricity Market (NEM). This includes:

- the potential redevelopment of the Tarraleah hydropower scheme to significantly increase its capacity and make it more flexible and responsive to changes in demand;
- the potential future development of a 750 MW 20-hour pumped storage hydropower project at Lake Cethana; and
- capacity upgrades of around 70 MW across Hydro Tasmania's five West Coast hydropower stations.

We have staff dedicated to community engagement on each of these projects in addition to our business-as-usual engagement activities. Hydro Tasmania is committed to engaging with all our stakeholders in a transparent, respectful and timely manner. Our [Stakeholder Engagement Charter](#) guides our engagement principles, setting out how we aim to work together with our stakeholders.

Hydro Tasmania has been a part of the Tasmanian community for over 100 years, which results in a unique landscape for engaging with stakeholders on our day-to-day operations and proposed new projects. We are also a Government Business Enterprise owned by the Tasmanian Government, which adds an additional layer of interaction with the Tasmanian community. This experience is potentially distinct in the energy industry in Australia. It is also an asset for engagement activities as we can communicate the continued benefits we provide such as renewable energy, employment, economic activity and recreational opportunities (e.g. lakes, waterways and land) to Tasmanians. It also means there is the potential that stakeholders may have had previous poor experiences or feel a level of complacency about our business that must be overcome to engage meaningfully with them.

The remainder of this submission describes:

1. How Hydro Tasmania engages with communities;
2. What challenges Hydro Tasmania and the energy industry are facing in engaging with stakeholders;
3. What community engagement practices have worked well based on our experiences; and
4. How the energy industry can improve engagement activities and ensure best practice engagement is achieved in the future.

1. How Hydro Tasmania engages with communities and stakeholders

For each of our major infrastructure initiatives, we develop stakeholder engagement plans designed to engage diverse communities and stakeholders in ways that are accessible and meaningful to them. Each of these set out the purpose, timing and methodologies appropriate to the stage of work, the information we need and the information the community/stakeholders need for them to feel informed and able to contribute in a meaningful way to projects. The resultant 'engagement activities' are diverse and fit-for-purpose. Examples include:

- Community information sessions held at various times of the day/days of the week in local halls and other neutral spaces. A variety of information is provided in diverse forms (audio-visual, graphic, written), brief presentations, Q&A sessions are provided as well as having Hydro Tasmania staff on hand to answer questions and explain the project and its components, issues, mitigation options, etc.
- 'Car boot pop-ups', where we park in prominent locations near the project sites and provide an opportunity for people to learn about the project, ask questions and find out how they can be involved.
- Project websites to present project information in a number of forms, allow people to ask questions, participate in surveys, values mapping and other information-collection tools.
- Face-to-face meetings with landholders and key stakeholders.
- Face-to-face briefings and presentations to interest groups and key stakeholders.
- A variety of digital/social media communications to provide updates and direct community engagement opportunities.
- Project updates/newsletters posted to directly impacted landholders/businesses and others who have expressed interest in project(s).

2. Challenges Hydro Tasmania and the energy industry are facing when engaging with communities and stakeholders

Challenges that we face in engaging with stakeholders include:

- A lack of energy literacy (general understanding) around energy production, transmission and energy pricing. There is significant conflation of issues around electricity generation (from different sources), transmission, energy market regulation, energy security and retail pricing.
- A lack of interest in, and lack of capacity to create interest in, new renewable energy projects at the community level. The difficulty in generating interest in renewable energy projects *per se* means it is then more difficult to engage in the deeper issues such as long-term benefits, potential impacts and how the community can engage and collaborate to achieve shared outcomes.
- Consultation fatigue and lack of time and resources to engage (particularly for Aboriginal groups and First Nations people). This is exacerbated through the cumulative impacts of having several concurrent developments in a region and a lack of coordination between proponents in their engagement activities.
- A lack of capacity among key stakeholders and community generally to engage. Cost-of-living, time and other pressures mean that only a sub-set of the community (often those with higher capacity) engage, leading to potential bias in our understanding of social impacts and mitigation options.
- A lack of coordination among proponents to capture cumulative impacts and opportunities for collaboration (e.g. in areas such as workforce accommodation, traffic impacts, local benefits sharing, convening reference e.g. groups).
 - We believe there is opportunity for coordination of community engagement activities by proponents to make it simpler for communities. It is acknowledged that it can be easy for proponents to consider their own timeline without deep consideration for the customer perspective and the breadth of information they might be looking for in this complex energy transition.

3. What community engagement practices have worked well based on our experiences

Community engagement is more successful in gaining interest and support if it is conducted in the early stage of projects and is multi-faceted in both the mode of engagement (e.g. face-to-face, digital, letters, phone calls, events etc.) and the audience targeted (e.g. residents and local community, local officials, students/schools, governments, local businesses, broadscale media, etc.).

Approaches which involve bringing the engagement to the people and helping them understand why it is worth their while to engage (whether through community benefits or other incentives such as learning opportunities, indirect economic growth etc.) have been found to be more successful. Engagement is more effective if the ‘what’s in it for me’ questions can be identified and reflected in early communications. This requires an adaptive, ‘person-centred’ approach to engagement and a dedication to continuous improvement to ensure that the perspectives, capacities and needs of each community are understood and engagement methods are adapted and refined accordingly.

Specific engagement success has been achieved through:

- Early engagement with the ability for community members to provide feedback into social impact assessment studies and before decisions are made.

- Free general education programs to assist vulnerable communities and access to STEM education.
- Engaging, activity-based presence at large community events such as Agfest (large annual agricultural event held in Northern Tasmania each year).
- Engagement websites where community members can directly interact with project and engagement staff, find out more information and talk with their peers.
- Internal support and appropriate resource allocation (i.e. budget and staff) to undertake well-planned and considered engagement.

4. How the energy industry can improve engagement activities and ensure best practice engagement is achieved in the future

Hydro Tasmania conducts evaluations of engagement activities as part of its engagement plans to identify what did not work well and actions/opportunities to improve in the future. Engagement is a continuous, reflective process.

Best practice engagement involves timely, consistent engagement with communities. It involves listening and responding to stakeholders and being clear with them where they can influence projects (e.g. location, timing, impacts, etc.) and where they cannot, as well as benefits they may gain.

An example of a possible model for greater coordination is the recently announced West Coast Strategic Partnership in Tasmania. It demonstrates the role for local and state government with industry, and is potentially a powerful way to collectively solve difficult community challenges, such as workforce issues, that could not be solved by one proponent alone.

Consultation processes run by government in renewable energy zones (REZs) will assist with discussion on potential cumulative impacts and the coordination of engagement activities and ensure early-stage community feedback can inform planning processes.

We encourage the Commissioner to consider other bodies, such as Regional Development Australia, and the role they can play in community engagement around energy projects.

We are providing this submission in addition to our responses to the Project Developer Survey. Hydro Tasmania would welcome the opportunity to further discuss and engage with the Review. If you have any questions or require further information, please contact Georgia Prenter (georgia.prenter@hydro.com.au or (03) 6240 2269).

Yours sincerely,



Ruth Groom
Executive General Manager People, Culture and Engagement