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Western Port Bay. *CANDY VAN ROOD*

SUBMISSION TO

Victorian Renewable Energy Terminal EES

Draft Scoping Requirements

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Draft Scoping Requirements
Victorian Renewable Energy Terminal
Environment Effects Statement

Submission from The Victorian National Parks Association, supported by the Australian Conservation Foundation

About VNPA

The Victorian National Parks Association (VNPA) is an independent member-based organisation, working to improve protection of Victoria's biodiversity and natural areas, across land and sea.

The VNPA has been actively working to protect Victoria's wildlife and biodiversity for over 70 years and has been involved in working in collaboration with local and state groups for the protection of Western Port for decades.

About ACF

The Australian Conservation Foundation is Australia's national environment organisation. It has worked to protect Australian nature, animals and habitat since 1965. ACF has achieved significant protections over this time including securing World Heritage listing for the Great Barrier Reef and Kakadu National Park, as well as returning precious water to the Murray-Darling rivers.

Comments on the EES in relation to marine ecology

VNPA commissioned a review of the adequacy of the draft Victorian Renewable Energy Terminal Environmental Effects Statement (VRET EES) scoping requirements by Australian Marine Ecology principal ecologist Dr Matt Edmunds. We refer to and attach to Dr Edmunds report.

The report and its recommendations include the strengthening of the scoping requirements to include:

- An independent audit of the EES for completeness against ministerial requirements prior to public release, with public disclosure of this audit.
- A due diligence role for the Independent Experts Group in assuring that the EES is not biased or misleading in preparation or presentation.
- Transparent governance of the Independent Experts Group and other peer reviews, with workings subject to public scrutiny.
- Additional scoping requirements to cover assessment of effects via large-scale linkages within Western Port rather than being constrained to effects within or near the proposed VRET.
- Advised methodology for adequately modelling and assessing ecological impacts and effects.
- Public disclosure of VRET environmental management processes and results, with monitoring results reported within six months.
- Transparent and fair processes for EES public review, submissions, and hearings, with public disclosure of all technical studies and underpinning data, assurance that ministerial requirements have been fulfilled prior to EES release, a public display phase longer than the traditional one month or staged releases and public review phases as technical studies are completed, and provision of government resources to assist community groups to access expert reviewers during EES public review, submissions, and hearing processes.

We also bring attention to the need for a revised impact assessment on marine ecology values:

- The impacts of dredging and the biological impact on marine life not only in the project area, but in the broader environment considering the interconnectivity of Western Port's ecosystems. We stress the need for adequate biological and ecosystem monitoring to inform impacts.
- The impact assessment should consider and evaluate the potential for effects to propagate through the ecosystem, including the potential for far-field or larger scale effects related to faunal movements and tidal current transport
- The impact assessment should include ecosystem-based, wholistic assessment in addition to any specific focus on species, biotopes or key ecosystem processes.

We request that Dr Edmunds' recommendations are incorporated into the VRET EES scoping requirements and process. Please see this document attached to our submission.

Alternatives project location and design

Alternative terminal designs: we understand eight options were considered, including some that had lower environmental impacts. To give the community confidence in the decision-making process, the department should release the assessment details that resulted in this design being chosen.

The rationale for the Port of Hastings as the chosen location compared to other project locations in Victoria should also be released to provide confidence and give community some reassurance that alternative sites were considered.

Specific wetland values to be measured as part of the EES

The proposed project is located within the Western Port Biosphere Reserve, one of only five in Australia and part of UNESCO's World Network of Biosphere Reserves. The reserve is noted for its geomorphological, historical, and biological significance. It also lies within a Ramsar wetland of international importance, designated in 1982 to protect critical waterfowl habitats.

Ramsar wetlands are recognized for their uniqueness, rarity, and contribution to biodiversity. Western Port's Ramsar wetland has a range of coastal habitats, including mangrove, saltmarsh, and seagrass. These are considered vital to the Ramsar site and we are concerned about the functional loss of seagrass and mudflats.

Recent government assessments showed a significant loss of seagrass between 1971 and 1985, though recovery has occurred since. Ongoing monitoring of seagrass health is crucial for evaluating the project's potential impacts.

The Draft Scoping Requirements require the proponent to develop criteria to assess potential impacts on the ecological character of the Western Port Ramsar site. We strongly recommend that the EES criteria must align with the national framework for Ramsar wetlands, describing the ecological character of Australian Ramsar wetlands (DCCEEW 2008) to ensure that critical Ramsar values are protected. Deviation from this could harm the site's ecological integrity.

Restoration opportunities

Deakin University's Blue Carbon Lab focuses on using freshwater and coastal wetlands for climate change mitigation and biodiversity benefits. Since 2014, it has concentrated on Western Port Bay due to its significant coastal wetland ecosystems, including mangroves, saltmarshes, and seagrass meadows.

A recent study highlighted the importance of these ecosystems for services like coastal hazard mitigation, nitrogen sequestration, carbon storage, fisheries enhancement, and water quality improvement (Costa et al. 2024). These wetlands also support

endangered species such as the Melbourne skate and flatback mangrove goby, which have been recorded in the proposed project area (ALA 2009).

Seagrass meadows, which have been collapsing since the 1960s, are recovering in some parts of Western Port, including the project area, offering potential for restoration (Dalby et al. 2022). Seed-based restoration trials began in 2020, including at Crib Point, but were unsuccessful, highlighting the need for further research. Other restoration efforts include saltmarsh and mangrove restoration at various sites (Blue Carbon Lab 2022, 2024). The project EES should consider these alternatives for the area.

The Blue Carbon Lab also works on defining and quantifying biodiversity values in wetlands and has developed a guide for environmental economic accounting of blue carbon ecosystems (Carnell et al. 2024). Given the complexity of defining "biodiversity values," the EES should use an established framework and not leave it open to interpretation. Relevant frameworks include those by the Asia-Pacific Network for Global Change Research (2015) and biodiversity indicators developed by Dr. Valerie Hagger.

Nature and renewables together – how can it be done right?

A fast transition from polluting fossil fuels to clean energy sources is necessary to avoid the extreme impacts of climate disruption and Victoria is well positioned to lead this transition for Australia. However, we need to make sure that all new energy infrastructure is sited appropriately to avoid biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation.

Nature's aquatic ecosystems (including Western Port) – our marine wildlife and habitats – are an integral part of the climate solution. If left unprotected and overlooked in the rapid energy transition, we risk creating as many problems as we solve. Coordinated, strategic planning that considers climate and nature goals by locating offshore wind developments in the right places is key to minimising risk and avoiding impacts on communities and nature later.

Limited in scope to individual projects, EES processes operate in isolation to any other project and do not measure the impacts on the marine environment together with other impacts and other projects. On their own, they also leave the door open for rejection which adds further delays to approvals.

It is crucial there is another step to complement the EES process, for responsibly planning for our marine environment and to give clarity and certainty for industry, as well as the other uses of the marine environment. We outline the importance of this next step of strategic planning below which is directly relevant to offshore wind (and other uses).

Western Port needs strategic planning (marine spatial plan)

Western Port, Victoria's second-largest bay, a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, outdoor recreation hub, and internationally significant Ramsar wetland has no bay-wide plan for its protection and management.

Its management is fragmented and siloed, without a cohesive framework that prioritizes water quality and the impacts of coastal land use across the entire bay.

Despite good intentions, Western Port has faced inconsistent planning, inadequate oversight, poor monitoring, and governance. A comprehensive strategic plan is needed to consolidate the various management and planning efforts.

Western Port Bay has the highest number of declining environmental health indicators in Victoria, as shown in the State of Marine and Coastal Environments Report, including decreasing populations of snapper and waterbirds.

The 2021 report highlights serious water quality issues, with five of the nine estuaries flowing into the bay rated as very poor. These alarming environmental health indicators emphasize the urgent need for action and collaborative management.

While existing plans may be well-intentioned, they cannot effectively protect and manage Western Port Bay without coordination. Now is the time to develop a more comprehensive and unified approach, with a focus on ecological priorities in planning and management.

The tool under the marine and coastal act that can be used to implement strategic planning is a marine spatial plan. Guidelines have already been developed under the marine and coastal policy to develop a marine spatial plan, and it is a requirement of the marine and coastal strategy that Victoria undertake this planning process.

An environmentally responsible offshore renewables sector requires marine spatial planning to organise and coordinate uses of marine space. Victoria's guidelines were created and are directly relevant to offshore wind and other uses.

Also refer to a discussion paper released by the VNPA called Winds of Change which has recommendations for bringing the renewables sector and nature together in a coordinated way.

We thank the department for the opportunity to make a submission. We would be happy to discuss in more detail any of the above.

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