

Dr Andrew Growcock
Manager Planning and Evaluation
National Parks and Wildlife Service
By email to: npws.parkplanning@environment.nsw.gov.au

22 March 2021

Dear Andrew,

Proposed amendment to the Plan of Management for Kosciuszko National Park

The National Parks Association of NSW (NPA) was formed in 1957 and sixty-four years later we have 15 branches, 4,000 members and over 20,000 supporters. NPA's mission is to protect nature through community action. Our strengths include state-wide reach, deep local knowledge and evidence-based approach to conservation advocacy.

NPA **strenuously opposes** the proposed amendment to Section 12.6 of the Kosciuszko National Park (KNP) Plan of Management (POM), which would exempt the Snowy 2.0 Project from the requirement that 'all additional telecommunication and transmission lines (are) to be located underground'.

NPA disputes the accuracy of NPWS's claim (p2) that the proposed amendment 'is required to ensure that Snowy 2.0 construction and operations authorised under the *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979* (NPW Act) and issuing of tenure under the NPW Act can be undertaken in accordance with the plan' (p2).

This incorrect assertion appears to rest upon the *Snowy Hydro Corporatisation Amendment (Snowy 2.0) Act 2018* rendering the construction of Snowy 2.0 permissible regardless of any inconsistency with the POM. This exemption is limited to a period of three years.

It would appear that NPWS has mistakenly has taken this to mean that any construction works associated with Snowy 2 are permissible, regardless of the availability of construction techniques that are fully consistent with the POM.

TransGrid states in their Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) that 'TransGrid has consulted with NPWS who advised that the KNP POM would be amended in due course to reflect **the requirement to connect Snowy 2.0 to the grid via an overhead transmission connection**' (emphasis added). Similarly, your email announcing the exhibition of the amendment states 'A reference to above-ground transmission lines has been included in this amendment **to ensure consistency between the plan of management and previous Government decisions on this matter**' (emphasis added).

The suggestion that overhead transmission is a fixed requirement of the Snowy 2.0 project is deliberately misleading and manifestly incorrect. Transmission connection can be achieved through a range of underground options, involving the installation of cables in tunnels, trenches or by directional drilling (Attachment A). The fact that these underground options have significantly lower environmental impact than overhead transmission lines is precisely the reason why new overhead transmission is prohibited in the POM. Most importantly in terms of compliance with the *Snowy Hydro Corporatisation Amendment (Snowy 2.0) Act 2018*, the POM **does not prohibit new transmission connections**, only new overhead connections.

The preparation of the current POM involved an exhaustive analysis of existing and potential threats to the values of KNP by all stakeholders over the period 2001-2006. The construction of overhead lines and the management of vegetation under existing lines were identified as major threats to the

values of KNP. In approving the POM, the then Minister confirmed that it was not appropriate to inflict any further fragmentation or habitat loss through additional overhead lines. The POM went even further, requiring that, 'wherever possible, the Service [NPWS] will seek agreement on the rationalising, undergrounding or rerouting of high impact lines or sections of lines' (12.6.4).

The prohibition of overhead transmission lines in KNP was entirely consistent with current and best practice across the Protected Area Network. No major transmission lines have been constructed in a NSW national park in the last half century. It is notable that the POMs for the parks that were impacted by prior construction, including Royal, Heathcote, Blue Mountains and Wollemi, all prohibit new transmission lines. International practice is to use underground cables whenever traversing environmentally sensitive areas. The POM's prohibition on new overhead transmission connections is far from regulatory overreach, but instead reflects long-standing best practice for protected areas.

It is reprehensible that the exhibited amendment makes no attempt to address the reasons for the prohibition on additional overhead lines or to demonstrate how amending that prohibition would impact upon the landscape and conservation values of KNP. It is NPA's considered opinion that the amendment **does not meet the requirements of Section 72AA of the *National Parks and Wildlife Act*** and provides no basis for informed submissions or a valid decision by the Minister.

NPA rejects the suggestion that these issues are appropriately deferred to future assessment under the *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act*. This approach is inconsistent with the statutory role of the POM, the legislative instrument tasked with ensuring that parks are protected in perpetuity for the benefit of future generations. Environmental Impact Statements are notoriously poor tools for assessing the long term, cumulative impact of developments on the surrounding landscape or region. Responding to the impacts of multiple phases of overhead transmission line construction is a prime example where the 'whole of landscape' perspective of a POM is the appropriate regulatory mechanism. It is astounding that NPWS has so misunderstood this pivotal as to omit any consideration of the impacts of the transmission connection on KNP in the amendment.

The implications of NPWS's failure to appropriately address the impacts of the proposed overhead transmission lines upon the conservation objectives of the POM are deeply troubling. The Snowy 2.0 transmission connection project foreshadows a period of adjustment to the distribution network as coal fired stations retire and renewable generation expands. Public lands, including national parks, will inevitably be favoured for new lines. This amendment sets a clear precedent for the removal of any statutory protections against the construction of overhead transmission lines in national parks.

The consequences of the proposal on KNP are severe and permanent. The new overhead lines are far more intrusive than any previously constructed through an Australian national park. There will be two massive sets of 75 metre high towers traversing eight kilometres of KNP in a cleared swathe up to 200 metres wide. Vast areas of contiguous habitat will be fragmented and a hundred hectares of KNP will be permanently cleared. The visual impact of the towers and lines will extend over 25,000 hectares of KNP.

Minister Kean referenced the relative costs of overhead and underground transmission in recent Budget Estimates hearings. NPA strongly disputes the relevance of such considerations for the purposes of the proposed amendment. It is noteworthy that both Snowy Hydro and TransGrid were involved in the preparation of the current POM and fully aware of the need to plan for the increased cost of underground connection.

As an organisation that fought for the establishment of a Protected Area Network and a professional park management authority in NSW, we are appalled by this ill-advised and inappropriate

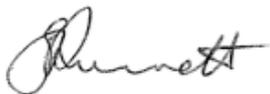
amendment. NPA can only conclude that it has the sole purpose of providing commercial benefit to Snowy Hydro Corporation. Existing legislation and well-founded policies for the protection of KNP are being set aside to serve the demands of a developer.

NPA strongly recommends that the amendment be withdrawn and the prohibition on the construction of overhead transmission lines be inserted as a standard form of prohibition on new overhead transmission connections in all relevant POMs in NSW.

TransGrid should be informed that the only acceptable means of transmission connection is as specified in the current KNP POM, that is, by underground cables rather than overhead lines.

I can be contacted at garyd@npansw.org.au or on 0432 757 059.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dunnett', written in a cursive style.

Gary Dunnett
Executive Officer
National Parks Association of NSW
protecting nature through community action