Annabelle CLEELAND **MP**
The Nationals Member for Euroa
Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Health

28 January 2026

To the Australian Energy Regulator,

I am writing to make a formal submission in support of AusNet Services' proposed upgrades to the BN11 Benalla feeder line, also referred to as the BNI-1 transmission corridor.

The BN11 feeder line is one of the largest and most critical feeder lines in Victoria. It runs from Benalla through Longwood East and traverses the Strathbogie and Ruffy mountain ranges, supplying power to some of the most geographically challenging and power-disadvantaged communities in the state. For decades, residents and businesses along this corridor have experienced persistent and unacceptable levels of power unreliability, with serious social, economic, and safety consequences.

That situation has now deteriorated into a crisis.

Following consecutive days of temperatures exceeding 40 degrees, large parts of the region have experienced outages lasting more than six and a half days. People remain without power in extreme heat, reliant on generators, or without any backup supply at all. This is no longer an inconvenience or an economic debate. It is a human health and safety emergency.

Over the past 30 years, the BN11 feeder has recorded some of the poorest reliability outcomes in Victoria. This culminated in a breaking point during the summer of 2023–24, when outages were occurring every three to four days, often for extended periods. During these outages, telecommunications failed alongside electricity supply, emergency call-outs went unanswered, and people were unable to contact emergency services or receive emergency warnings.

Despite public claims by the Minister for Energy that ongoing outages are not related to supply, communities on the ground are acutely aware of the reality. The issue is not generation. It is the inability of ageing, fragile infrastructure to reliably deliver power to regional people. The network is failing at the point of delivery, with foreseeable and compounding consequences.

We have now received more than 2,000 direct accounts from residents describing how these outages are placing lives at risk. These include people with disabilities trapped in electric chairs, people unable to open electric garage doors to evacuate during emergencies,

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residents unable to refrigerate essential medications, and firefighters missing emergency warnings due to the simultaneous loss of power and telecommunications. These are not isolated incidents. They are systemic failures with human consequences.

For a region with an ageing demographic, this situation is particularly dangerous. Extended power outages during extreme heat significantly increase the risk of heat stress, medical emergencies, and preventable deaths. The continuation of the current standard of power delivery creates a foreseeable risk that lives will be lost.

The data provided by AusNet reinforces what communities have long known. Unplanned outage incidents on the BN11 feeder are dominated by vegetation impacts, animal interference, and asset failures, with a small number of major incidents accounting for the vast majority of customer minutes off supply. While AusNet has improved communications, warnings, and response protocols through sustained community advocacy, these measures cannot compensate for infrastructure that is no longer fit for purpose. A single, long, radial feeder line without loops or duplication will always remain vulnerable.

The recent Longwood bushfires have fundamentally changed the context in which this proposal must be assessed. It is estimated that more than 700 kilometres of feeder line and approximately 400 power poles have been damaged or destroyed. Large areas remain without grid power weeks after the fire. Recovery will be extraordinary in scale, complexity, and cost, both for AusNet and for consumers.

This devastation also presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity. As the network is rebuilt, the question must not be whether to restore what existed before, but whether to build infrastructure that is resilient to modern climate conditions. Extended heatwaves, catastrophic bushfire risk, and severe weather events are no longer exceptional. Rebuilding to outdated standards that have repeatedly failed this region would be a profound missed opportunity and an unacceptable risk.

While the AER's framework rightly considers economic efficiency and net present value, these metrics alone do not capture the full cost of inaction in regions such as mine. This has gone well beyond an economic evaluation. It is now a question of whether it is safe to live in this region under the current standard of power delivery.

There is a clear responsibility on both state and federal governments, and on the regulator, to ensure that essential energy infrastructure does not place communities at risk. If the AER chooses not to support investment in the BN11 feeder upgrades, there must be clear and transparent communication to the thousands of residents who rely on this line as to why their safety, health, and wellbeing are not considered sufficient grounds for action in this day and age.

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I strongly urge AER assessors to support AusNet Services' proposed upgrades to the BN11 Benalla feeder line and to recognise the extraordinary post-bushfire and extreme heat context in which this decision is being made. I also formally request an extension to the submission deadline to allow affected communities, councils, and stakeholders the opportunity to engage meaningfully once immediate recovery and safety pressures ease.

This decision will shape the resilience, safety, and liveability of north-east Victoria for decades. I ask that the AER consider not only financial metrics, but the real, foreseeable, and potentially fatal consequences for communities if this investment is not supported.

Sincerely,
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