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Comments on Staff Assessment Section 8 Alternatives

Please See Attached Comment Letter

Additional submitted attachment is included below.

COMMENTS ON STAFF ASSESSMENT SECTION 8 ALTERNATIVES

CORBY BATTERY ENERGY STORAGE SYSTEM PROJECT (24-OPT-05)

California Energy Commission

Docket No. 24-OPT-05

Commissioners:

I submit these comments on Section 8, Alternatives, of the Staff Assessment for the proposed Corby Battery Energy Storage System. Staff has now given full consideration to the Lambie Industrial Park Alternative and to a Central Overhead Gen-Tie Route Alternative. That is a meaningful improvement over screening Lambie out at the outset. However, Staff's analysis still does not fairly answer the central siting question: whether the State can obtain substantially the same 300 MW / 1,200 MWh storage and reliability benefits at an industrial location while avoiding or materially reducing the site-specific conflicts created by the proposed Kilkenny Road location.

The Staff Assessment itself confirms several facts that make Lambie a serious alternative. Solano County identified Lambie Industrial Park as suitable for a BESS; the property is zoned for industrial use; a 25-acre BESS footprint would satisfy the applicant's minimum size requirement; the BESS footprint would not convert Important Farmland; and Staff identifies fewer nearby sensitive receptors and reduced offsite toxic-gas exposure compared with the proposed site. Yet most of Staff's adverse conclusions about Lambie are driven by one assumption: that a Lambie BESS must connect approximately 14 miles back to the Vaca-Dixon Substation.

That assumption is outcome-determinative. Before relying on it to reject Lambie as environmentally superior, the Commission should establish why a 14-mile Vaca-Dixon connection is technically necessary for an alternative site, rather than a consequence of preserving an applicant-selected interconnection arrangement and project objective.

I. STAFF'S OWN FINDINGS ESTABLISH LAMBIE AS A SERIOUS, FEASIBLE INDUSTRIAL SITE ALTERNATIVE

Staff reports that the Solano County Board of Supervisors identified Lambie Industrial Park as a suitable site for a BESS during its August 12, 2025 hearing and that public comments also identified Lambie as a possible alternative. Staff further finds that Lambie is a large industrial property zoned Manufacturing General and that a 25-acre BESS facility would be consistent with County zoning.

Staff also concludes that Lambie satisfies the applicant's minimum 25-acre site requirement and can support a 300-MW project. Most importantly, Staff expressly states that the applicant's preference for a site no more than one to two miles from the interconnection substation is 'the most desirable constraint to reduce environmental impacts, but not necessary to meet the project objectives.' That admission matters. It means proximity to Vaca-Dixon cannot be treated as an absolute feasibility screen.

The environmental advantages of the BESS site itself are also substantial. Staff states that construction of the 25-acre BESS facility at Lambie would be consistent with County zoning and would not convert Important Farmland to non-agricultural use. Staff identifies no schools, hospitals, daycare facilities, or long-term care facilities within one mile of the Lambie site. It also concludes that the increased distance from residences would reduce potential exposure to toxic air contaminants from a BESS fire or thermal-runaway event.

These are not minor differences. They go directly to several of the recurring conflicts associated with the proposed Kilkenny Road location: agricultural conversion, land-use compatibility, residential interface, public-health exposure, and emergency-response consequences.

II. THE 14-MILE VACA-DIXON GEN-TIE ASSUMPTION DRIVES STAFF'S LAMBIE CONCLUSIONS

Staff assumes that a Lambie BESS would require an approximately 14-mile gen-tie to the Vaca-Dixon Substation. Staff then attributes to that route increased construction duration, additional grading and ground disturbance, greater construction air emissions and greenhouse-gas emissions, more biological and cultural-resource exposure, additional agricultural crossings, more transportation activity, and broader visual effects.

In other words, much of Staff's conclusion that Lambie would have impacts similar to or greater than the proposed project does not arise from the Lambie BESS site. It arises from the assumed 14-mile transmission route.

That distinction should be made explicit throughout the alternatives comparison. The BESS siting question and the interconnection-routing question are related, but they are not the same question. A 25-acre industrial BESS footprint at Lambie has materially different land-use and receptor characteristics from the 40.3-acre agricultural Kilkenny Road site. Staff should not allow the impacts of one assumed gen-tie configuration to obscure those site-level differences.

The Commission should therefore require a clear technical explanation, supported by PG&E and CAISO information where appropriate, of why an alternative BESS at Lambie must interconnect at Vaca-Dixon rather than at another technically feasible point on the transmission system. If the answer is that the applicant's existing Large Generator Interconnection Agreement or commercial commitments are tied to Vaca-Dixon, the Commission should say so expressly and distinguish that commercial constraint from a physical inability to interconnect an alternative project elsewhere.

III. PROJECT OBJECTIVES SHOULD NOT MAKE THE ALTERNATIVES ANALYSIS SELF-DEFEATING

Staff lists as a basic project objective construction and operation of a 300-MW BESS 'close to' PG&E's Vaca-Dixon Substation to meet contractual obligations. The applicant also identifies connection to Vaca-Dixon as a basic objective because of its interconnection agreement.

Those facts are relevant to feasibility. But if the objective is applied so rigidly that any industrial site farther from Vaca-Dixon is burdened with a mandatory long transmission line back to Vaca-Dixon, the alternatives analysis risks becoming circular: the proposed location is favored because the project objective is defined around the proposed location's existing interconnection arrangement.

Staff's own statement that a one-to-two-mile interconnection distance is desirable but not necessary shows that the objective has flexibility. The Commission should use that flexibility to determine whether an alternative interconnection arrangement could preserve most project objectives while substantially reducing the proposed site's environmental conflicts.

A reasonable alternatives analysis need not guarantee the applicant identical economics or contractual convenience. It should determine whether a potentially feasible alternative can attain most of the basic project objectives while avoiding or substantially lessening significant effects. The Commission should not allow an applicant-created commercial arrangement to foreclose that inquiry without a transparent feasibility analysis.

IV. STAFF'S 'SIMILAR' LABELS MASK IMPORTANT REDUCTIONS IN ACTUAL EXPOSURE AND LAND-USE CONFLICT

Staff frequently classifies Lambie impacts as 'Similar' because both the proposed project and Lambie would ultimately fall within the same CEQA significance category after mitigation. That categorical comparison can conceal meaningful differences in the magnitude, location, and distribution of impacts.

For example, Staff concludes that the increased distance from residences at Lambie would reduce potential exposure to toxic air contaminants from a BESS fire or thermal-runaway event, but still labels the overall Public Health impact similar because both alternatives would be less than significant with mitigation. Likewise, the BESS footprint at Lambie would avoid converting Important Farmland, even though agricultural effects associated with the assumed 14-mile gen-tie cause Staff to place the alternative in a similar overall category.

An alternative can be environmentally preferable even where both choices ultimately receive the same significance label. The Commission should compare actual acres converted, numbers and distances of sensitive receptors, length of new transmission construction, offsite exposure potential, and other measurable differences rather than relying primarily on categorical 'similar' findings.

V. THE CENTRAL OVERHEAD GEN-TIE ROUTE DOES NOT ADDRESS THE FUNDAMENTAL SITING PROBLEM

The Central Overhead Gen-Tie Route Alternative is not a relocation alternative. Staff states that it would leave the proposed BESS facility in the same location and change only the gen-tie construction method and alignment. The approximately 1.1-mile route would be constructed overhead rather than using the proposed underground segment and would require approximately three new overhead transmission poles.

Staff traces this route to the applicant's Opt-In application, which included multiple alternative gen-tie routes. It was not developed in response to the County's or community's request for an industrial BESS location. That distinction should be made clear because Staff selected this route as one of only two action alternatives for full comparison.

The Central Overhead option does not avoid the principal impacts of locating the BESS on Kilkenny Road. It does not avoid conversion of agricultural land, proximity to rural residences, BESS fire and toxic-plume concerns, emergency-response demands, or the significant visual intrusion of the BESS facility itself. Its principal environmental advantage is avoidance of some temporary underground construction disturbance.

But that advantage is obtained by placing additional permanent transmission infrastructure above ground along the same rural corridor. Staff itself recognizes that the overhead segment would adversely affect views from the California Register-eligible historic Kilkenny residence and would require additional mitigation. A temporary trenching impact should not be treated as categorically preferable to a permanent visual and historic-setting impact without a careful comparison of duration, severity, and reversibility.

For the residence directly facing the proposed underground segment, moving that segment overhead would replace a temporary construction disturbance with a permanent change to the setting. More broadly, the alternative illustrates why a route-only modification is a poor substitute for a genuine siting alternative: it makes construction easier while leaving the underlying land-use conflict intact.

VI. STAFF CONSIDERED MORE OVERHEAD TRANSMISSION BUT DID NOT EVALUATE THE CORRESPONDING EXTENDED-UNDERGROUND ALTERNATIVE

Staff's decision to carry the Central Overhead Gen-Tie Route forward for detailed analysis demonstrates that alternative transmission configurations can constitute reasonable alternatives even when the BESS remains at the proposed site. Yet Staff does not appear to have evaluated the converse configuration contemplated here: eliminate the overhead poles on the project site; keep the gen-tie underground from the project site along Kilkenny Road; turn the underground line north toward the Vaca-Dixon Substation; and transition to overhead only at the pole needed to span Interstate 80 on the final approach to the substation.

Such a configuration could materially reduce the permanent visual intrusion of the gen-tie along the rural Kilkenny Road corridor and reduce effects on the setting of the California Register-eligible Kilkenny residence, while still connecting the project to Vaca-Dixon and meeting the same basic project objectives.

This alternative would have tradeoffs. Additional underground construction could increase trenching, ground disturbance, cost, construction duration, and potential interaction with shallow groundwater. Those concerns should not be minimized. But those are precisely the tradeoffs an alternatives analysis is intended to compare against permanent overhead visual and historic-setting impacts.

The asymmetry is important. Staff evaluated an applicant-originated alternative that reduces underground construction by placing more transmission infrastructure overhead, even though Staff recognizes additional visual impacts from doing so. Staff does not explain why it failed to evaluate increased underground construction as a means of reducing those permanent impacts. At minimum, the Commission should evaluate an extended-underground configuration or identify the engineering, environmental, regulatory, or economic reason it was screened from detailed consideration.

Extended undergrounding would not resolve the more fundamental objections to locating the BESS itself on agricultural land at Kilkenny Road, and it is not a substitute for fair consideration of Lambie or another industrial site. But once Staff chose to evaluate route-only alternatives at the proposed site, the alternatives analysis should not be limited to a configuration that makes more of the line overhead while omitting the obvious converse configuration that could lessen an acknowledged significant visual effect.

VII. STAFF'S ENVIRONMENTALLY SUPERIOR ALTERNATIVE CONCLUSION SHOULD BE RECONSIDERED

Staff identifies the No Project Alternative as having the least environmental effects. It then concludes that neither Lambie nor the Central Overhead Gen-Tie Route would avoid or substantially lessen the proposed project's significant effects and therefore does not identify an environmentally superior action alternative.

That conclusion depends heavily on the analytical choices discussed above. Lambie's assumed 14-mile Vaca-Dixon gen-tie adds most of the impacts Staff uses to offset the industrial site's advantages. The Central Overhead route, by contrast, is not a site alternative at all and leaves nearly all of the proposed BESS siting impacts in place.

Before concluding that no action alternative is environmentally superior, the Commission should determine whether there is a technically feasible industrial interconnection strategy for Lambie - or a comparable industrial site - that does not simply replicate the applicant's Vaca-Dixon interconnection constraint. If such an option exists, it could materially change the comparative analysis.

VIII. THE ALTERNATIVES ANALYSIS SHOULD ALSO REFLECT FINDINGS DEVELOPED ELSEWHERE IN THE STAFF ASSESSMENT

The final alternatives comparison should account for the significance of the site-specific findings developed in the technical sections. At the proposed location, Staff has analyzed Important Farmland conversion, residential public-health receptors, BESS fire and emergency-response requirements, shallow groundwater and contaminated-water pathways, rural traffic constraints, historic-setting effects, and significant visual impacts. Those are not abstract concerns; they are characteristics of this particular location.

An industrial alternative should be evaluated on the extent to which it reduces those particular conflicts, not simply on whether each technical topic retains the same final CEQA significance label after mitigation. The goal should be to preserve the public benefits of storage while reducing the public costs of the chosen location.

IX. REQUESTED COMMISSION ACTION

1. Explain, with supporting transmission-system information, why a Lambie BESS must interconnect approximately 14 miles away at Vaca-Dixon rather than at another technically feasible point.
2. Separate the environmental effects of the Lambie BESS site itself from the effects of the assumed 14-mile gen-tie so that the industrial-site advantages are not obscured.
3. Identify which Lambie feasibility constraints are physical or regulatory and which arise from the applicant's existing contractual or interconnection arrangements.
4. Compare alternatives using measurable differences - including acres of Important Farmland converted, sensitive-receptor distances, gen-tie length, right-of-way requirements, construction duration, and offsite exposure potential - rather than relying primarily on identical significance categories.
5. Reevaluate whether the Central Overhead Gen-Tie Route meaningfully contributes to the required range of alternatives when it leaves the BESS at the proposed agricultural site and principally substitutes permanent overhead infrastructure for temporary underground construction.
6. Evaluate a gen-tie configuration that eliminates the overhead poles on the project site, remains underground from the project site along Kilkenny Road, turns north toward the Vaca-Dixon Substation, and transitions to overhead only at the pole needed to span Interstate 80 on the final approach to the substation; or explain specifically why that configuration was screened out. Compare its additional trenching, groundwater, construction, and cost effects against the permanent visual and historic-setting effects of the proposed overhead transmission structures.
7. Fully account for the Central Overhead route's permanent visual and historic-setting effects on the Kilkenny Road corridor and the California Register-eligible Kilkenny residence.
8. Reconsider the environmentally superior action-alternative conclusion after evaluating a technically feasible industrial-site interconnection strategy that is not predetermined by the proposed project's Vaca-Dixon arrangement.
9. If Lambie cannot feasibly interconnect without the assumed 14-mile route, provide the technical record supporting that conclusion and evaluate a comparable industrial alternative that can preserve the storage and reliability benefits with fewer site-specific conflicts.

X. CONCLUSION

The Staff Assessment confirms that Lambie Industrial Park is not a speculative concept. It is an industrially zoned site identified by Solano County as suitable for BESS development; it can accommodate the required facility footprint; it avoids Important Farmland conversion at the BESS site; and it increases separation from sensitive residential receptors. Those advantages deserve greater weight than Staff's present comparison gives them.

The principal reason Lambie loses those advantages in Staff's analysis is the assumed 14-mile connection back to Vaca-Dixon. The Commission should establish whether that is an unavoidable engineering requirement or simply the consequence of preserving the applicant's existing interconnection arrangement. That question should be answered before the Commission concludes that no industrial action alternative is environmentally superior.

The Central Overhead Gen-Tie Route does not answer the siting question. It would leave the BESS on agricultural land next to rural residences while converting part of the proposed underground transmission segment into permanent overhead infrastructure. That may reduce construction difficulty, but it does not solve the fundamental land-use, public-health, emergency-response, agricultural, cultural, or visual conflicts created by the proposed site. Staff should also explain why, after choosing to analyze a route alternative that increases

overhead construction, it did not analyze the corresponding extended-underground configuration as a means of reducing permanent visual and historic-setting impacts.

California can obtain the public benefits of battery storage without assuming that the Kilkenny Road location is the only reasonable way to obtain them. The Commission should not approve the proposed site until the alternatives analysis fairly tests that proposition.

In addition to these comments, I formally incorporate by reference and fully support the technical comment letter submitted by Keep Vacaville Safe.

Respectfully submitted,

Michael Geller