

**Submission  
No 102**

## **SUSTAINABILITY OF ENERGY SUPPLY AND RESOURCES IN NSW**

**Organisation:** Hills of Gold Preservation Inc

**Date Received:** 11 September 2019

Partially  
Confidential

Hills of Gold Preservation Inc is a resident and landholder group established following Wind Energy Partners Pty Ltd publicly announcing in February 2018 that it proposed up to 97 wind turbines on 24km of the east west watershed of the Great Dividing Range at the head of the Peel River in the Tamworth LGA.

Our Nundle and Hanging Rock communities of 500 people immediately became divided into those supporting the wind turbines and those who did not want their valued mountain landscape to be industrialised. Our community has had this proposal thrust on us and it is an unwelcome intrusion in our lives. By the time the project is assessed, we would have lived with the stress and anxiety of the prospect of our enjoyment of our homes and land being reduced for more than three years.

Our community, previously one of the smallest shires in NSW, is used to self-government and is proactive in mobilising and communicating.

We organised a community public meeting to discuss the pros and cons of the proposal. This was met unfavourably by the developer's community consultation representative who aggressively confronted several business people in the community.

The community meeting, attended by 110 people, was followed by proponent hosted public meetings at Nundle and Hanging Rock, attended by about 100 and 60 people respectively.

This experience created great anxiety in our community as we read everything we could find about the assessment process (alerting the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment that the proponent published an incorrect assessment process on its website).

We also read as much as possible about wind turbines and communities opposing and living with them. Our members visited wind farm locations at Glen Innes, Canberra, and Wellington. People who had been through the experience of a proponent entering a community made contact and helped with information as much as possible. They have been a godsend as we wade our way through this new territory.

The NSW Government's Wind Energy Guidelines and Visual Impact and Noise Bulletins were helpful in outlining standards for assessment. It is unfortunate that this information is primarily available online. We had to request hard copies for our local library because many in our community are elderly, and not computer literate. It is also difficult to read long documents on screen. Some existing information, such as research on real estate devaluation, is not relevant due to the small sample size and needs to be updated.

What was missing were Best Practice standards expected of proponents. Hills of Gold Preservation Inc members met National Wind Farm Commissioner Andrew Dyer in March 2019 and discussed his proposal for proponents to be licensed before prospecting for wind assets in a community. We support this suggestion. Our community has been sent to the wolves as we report errors by the proponent and bad behaviour of associated landholders, seemingly falling on deaf ears at the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment. The NWFC displayed empathy and suggestions for our community.

In our community, access to the proposed project area includes one of the highest gradient roads in the state. It has the potential to have impacts on tributaries of the Peel, Hunter and Manning River systems, neighbouring scientific reference Ben Halls Gap Nature Reserve and nearby Crawney Pass National Park.

Actions on the ridgeline at Hanging Rock, Head of Peel and Crawney, have the potential to have a great impact on biodiversity, the water cycle, soil, and communities downstream.

Hills of Gold Preservation Inc members believe wind turbines at the headwaters of the Peel River are not needed, this environmentally sensitive location is vital for the future water security of Tamworth, and should be preserved from industrial development.

Our members believe the proponent has overestimated 272 construction and 34 ongoing operational and maintenance jobs, misleading the community about potential benefits of the proposal. Similarly, the project value of \$600m does not stack up compared to larger projects in our region.

Where is the state arbitrator that can analyse proponent's documents and provide some guarantee that communities are not being misled by a proponent desperate to win over regional communities with promises of jobs and compensation funds.

Instead we have to read, compare and contrast proponents' documents from throughout Australia, research state and local government policy, and work out whether to believe what we're being told. It is a part time job and takes us away from our families, work, and community. In that respect it has a negative economic and social impact on our community. Social cohesion has been destroyed.

Community consultation has been appalling with numbers of residences within 3km of the proposed project area underestimated, broken promises to contact all residents neighbouring the proposed project area, residences left off maps, and properties wrongly included in the proposed project area. The guidelines do not require the proponent to communicate with absentee landholders. This is not appropriate for rural communities where landowners may live in town but work on their property every day and value their work environment the way it is. Other absentee landowners have purchased rural blocks with a view to retirement.

Our area is an established tourism destination, featuring semi-wild natural environments, an award winning wool manufacturing and retail outlet, and wedding, conferences and events venue. It is a place to retreat from civilisation and "get away from it all". It punches above its weight for attracting visitors, hosting events, boutique businesses and preserving heritage. Large scale wind and solar developments are not the answer to reduce carbon emissions and combat climate change in this location. Rather it is more important than ever to preserve the existing ecosystem, the trees and ground cover we have to sequester carbon in the ground, and protect the water cycle and soil. It is an opportunity for residents and visitors to connect with nature and earth, and realise humans are just a small part of it.

Why should a wind developer be allowed to prospect for wind energy in such a visually and environmentally sensitive area? It is irresponsible of the state government to expose our community to the stress and anxiety caused by this experience. Our members and supporters have lost sleep, suffered anxiety, and endured abuse and poor behaviour from associated landholders. It has placed pressure on marriages and family relationships. This is on top of the stresses of one of the worst droughts on record. It is unacceptable.

Wind Energy Partners Pty Ltd lodged a Preliminary Environmental Assessment in October last year and Secretary's Environmental Assessment Requirements (SEARs) have been issued by the Department of Planning and Environment. <https://www.planningportal.nsw.gov.au/major-projects/project/9701>

The proponent's Preliminary Environmental Assessment is full of errors, ignoring facts that demonstrate opposition to the proposal, and overstating support for the proposal. It has not been corrected despite the errors being highlighted to the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment.

Our members have pulled up the proponent and Department of Planning, Industry and Environment for using document language that couches the proposal as a "project" inferring it is going to happen. This is offensive, and causes anxiety and confusion in the community.

The proponent and even the Australian Wind Alliance asked our members to share our concerns about the project and then mocked our concerns in documents, or used them against us in the media. This is not community consultation.

The only positive that came out of the Australian Wind Alliance's visit to the area was removal of a toxic Facebook site established by the son of a potential associated landowner. This site was set up as a discussion page, but quickly became a place of abuse, conversation shut down, and threatening provocative posts disturbing many people in the community.

There is a lot of emphasis on the proponent disseminating information about its project when a wind developer enters a community. Yet many community members do not trust salesmen proponents. They want information directly from the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment. Our community was fortunate to attract the Department to host a public meeting in our community, which clarified misinformation. However, we were disappointed that a request to meet with Minister for Planning and Public Spaces, the Hon Robert Stokes MP was refused.

In our situation the proponent appears to be consulting as little as possible. Even the first Community Consultative Committee was a disappointing experience with the proponent refusing to answer several questions due to commercial in confidence, names and information being left out of the minutes, and words chosen to flatter the proponent. To our knowledge there has been minimal consultation with a community at Timor, south of the proposed project area, which has a greater affiliation with the Upper Hunter.

Establishing our resident and landholder group was the best thing we could have done. Residents opposing the proposal realised they were not alone and gained strength in numbers to research and understand wind turbines and their effects on communities. We have collectively communicated with the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment to clarify information and express our concerns without being belittled.

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Water is a major issue for our community and the wider north west region. Hills of Gold Preservation Inc members with four decades of grazing experience describe the mountain range from Hanging Rock to Crawney as a 'giant sponge,' absorbing water in times of good rainfall and slowly releasing it via springs even in drought years (although several springs have dried for the first time in living memory in the past 12 months).

Our members are concerned about the potential impact of construction for up to 97 foundations, requiring 300-400m<sup>3</sup> concrete and steel, 21m diameter and 3.5m deep, as well as 15-20m deep underground pylons. The potential impact is unknown at this stage and requires detailed and extensive hydrological examination to determine the level of risk this will pose, in particular impacts on direction of water flow, water quantity, and quality.

Vegetation clearing on the transport route and throughout the 24km proposed project area, road building, underground cabling between turbines, buildings, turbine and substation construction, and maintenance and operational activities have the potential to increase erosion and land slips in a usually high rainfall location, with an increase in the sediment runoff and erosion flowing into the Peel River and Chaffey Dam.

The proposal also poses potential increased demand for water, particularly during construction of concrete turbine foundations, and increased demand from proposed associated workforce and families (if housed locally). Bango Wind Farm assessment (75 turbines, 200m to blade tip) estimates that project would need 60ML of water during construction and 1ML annually.

In its Hills of Gold Preservation Inc Response to Wind Energy Partners Pty Ltd Preliminary Environmental Assessment (submitted to the Department of Planning and Environment) residents and landholders asked for the following:

“Hills of Gold Preservation Inc requests an independent peer-reviewed hydrological study to determine:

- a. The impact of wind tower foundation construction on the subterranean water flow and movements.
- b. The likelihood of foundation construction methods, which involve the filling of soil and underground fissures with grout to anchor the structure altering the natural movement of subterranean water.
- c. The potential drying impact of further vegetation clearing to enable wind tower construction and site access.
- d. The potential drying of soil, induced by the air flow resulting from blade rotation.
- e. The impact of the development on the water inflows into the Namoi, Hunter and Manning River systems.
- f. The potential impact of reduced long-term water inflows into Chaffey Dam.”

An independent peer reviewed meteorological study to determine:

- a. The potential impact on the long-term climate of the region of likely changes to wind and weather patterns resulting from the wind energy development.
- b. The likely impact in rainfall patterns resulting from the land clearing and wind tower construction in a location crucial to the future water supply for Tamworth City.”

A recent NSW Farmers’ Association and Department of Planning, Industry and Environment Forum at Armidale identified the New England as a renewable energy due to its proximity to 330kV transmission lines. A major concern at the Forum was transparency. The proponent in our area has not been open about its directors and shareholders, and when members wrote handwritten personal letters to the seven directors and shareholders there was not a single reply, Certainly not standard business etiquette or best practice community consultation.

The National Wind Farm Commissioner’s 2017 report says “Meeting the 2020 goals of the Australian Renewable Energy Target scheme would require approximately only one in three of prospective wind farm projects (on a capacity basis), based on data provided from the CEC and the Clean Energy Finance Corporation, to go ahead.

There is therefore an ability to select wind farm projects that meet other key parameters, including economic and regional development goals, while also optimal from a community impact site-selection criteria."

As of April 2019 there were 13 major operating wind farms in NSW with a total capacity of about 1400MW, two wind farms are under construction amounting to 250MW, and 11 wind farms have planning approval, almost 2,600MW.

Hills of Gold Preservation Inc members believe the headwaters of the Peel River should be preserved from industrial development due to its environmentally and visually sensitive location, and significance to the water security of Tamworth and the region.

Yours sincerely,  
John Krsulja  
President