### SUSTAINABILITY OF ENERGY SUPPLY AND RESOURCES IN NSW

Organisation: Vacy Village Action Group

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# Submission to the Committee inquiring into

## The Sustainability of Energy and Resources in NSW

From

The Vacy Village Action Group

We would like to thank the Committee for this opportunity to present our views on and concerns about certain aspects of solar farm developments in New South Wales.

I represent a small group of rural citizens in and around the equally small village of Vacy. Vacy is one of three historic villages in the Paterson River Valley which is located to the east of the Hunter Valley. Our valley is home to approximately two thousand residents, many of whom have built on two to five acre lifestyle blocks. The valley also houses many larger cattle and dairy properties as well as being home to Australia's foremost Agricultural College at Tocal.

Specifically we wish to address items 4 and 5 in your Inquiry's terms of reference, namely:

- (i) The effects of renewable energy developments on regional communities and
- (ii) The role of Government policies in setting boundaries for such developments.

Our Group is comprised of Vacy area residents who have no expertise in solar farms nor in the renewable energy sector, however we have been reluctantly thrust into the front line of the seemingly "wildcat" expansion of large-scale commercial solar farms within New South Wales.

As our local experience is centred on a commercial large scale solar farm we will restrict our comments to such developments. Our Group wishes to highlight two critical issues which we believe require urgent and immediate government action.

#### 1. The suitability of the location of solar farms.

In Vacy we are currently experiencing the deleterious effect on our small community of a proposal by a recently registered Chinese controlled corporation to construct a large solar farm (land marked in red on maps) on a hill adjacent to and directly overlooking our historic village's houses, district primary school, hotel, motel and sports oval.





The land to be leased by the solar farm developer is less than one kilometre from the village.

This same company is currently targeting solar farm developments in two other small and scenic NSW communities, namely at Nana Glen

near Coffs Harbour and at Bergalia near Moruya.

State Government Guidelines were issued in December 2018 for Large-Scale Solar Energy developments. These guidelines called for "effective stakeholder engagement (to be) undertaken that encourages community input on solar energy development", for the Department of Planning and Environment to "encourage" such engagement

and for developers "to carefully consider ... (solar farm) sites on ... high ground positions or in a valley with elevated nearby residences with views towards the site."

Whist these Guidelines are clearly well intentioned, we see them as lacking resoluteness and of being incapable of enforcement. In our situation in Vacy, the solar farm developer has disdainfully ignored each of these Government guidelines in the siting of its proposed development.

We believe that the New South Wales Government needs to be far more forceful in its directions to solar farm developers, not by merely issuing siting guidelines, but by specifically <u>quarantining</u> certain parts of the State from renewable energy development and by also specifically <u>encouraging</u> these developments in other parts of the State.

Lush coastal communities and historic towns and villages would be obvious contenders for such quarantining.

In our part of New South Wales there is an obvious candidate for encouraging development; and that is on the rehabilitated land around the coal mines of the Hunter Valley – see map below. This mined out land is near useless for agriculture but is near to power sub-stations, a prime constituent for site selection for renewables.



Other jurisdictions who have become concerned with the effects on communities of rapid solar farm expansion have already legislated for site quarantining and site encouragement. Some of the more progressive policies can be found in California, U.S.A.

As water supplies dry up in the arid areas of central California, particularly around the San Joaquin Valley, farmers are scaling back their agricultural activities and are being encouraged to install commercial solar farms on the unworkable land. The land in question is mainly flat and well suited to being shielded from views by the planting of indigenous barren-land shrubs and trees – very similar to the western part of New South Wales. More than 13,000 acres of solar farms have now been built in this valley without having any major impact on agricultural output or protected wildlife.

California is also conscious of the need to legislate the quarantining of certain of its lands from solar farm development. San Bernardino County, the largest in California, administers nearly 2 million acres of territory in the south east of the state. The County has legislated their Renewable Energy Policy 4.10, which will block new solar and wind farms on slightly more than 1 million acres out of their 2 million governed acres. The sole purpose of the legislation is to protect the quality of life of the residents of the County from being neighboured by

large industrial developments, whilst still giving recognition of the need for large-scale renewable energy in the future.

<u>Our first of two recommendations to the Committee</u> is to find in favour of New South Wales legislation that would promote commercial solar farms into certain desirable sites and to prohibit them, San Bernardino style, from despoiling areas of rural scenic and historical significance.

### 2. The Rehabilitation of Damaged or Obsolete Commercial Solar Farm Land.

We understand that New South Wales has robust legislation in place for mining companies to set aside funds for the rehabilitation of mined out land. Security deposits, in the form of cash or bank guarantees, are mandatory for all 450 or so mines operating in New South Wales. The latest information from the Audit Office of NSW shows that mining security deposits for rehabilitation exceed \$2.2 billion but are still considered underfunded.

The standard business model for commercial solar farms seems to involve the leasing of land for 30 years after which time, if the solar farm is still in working order, it will be "decommissioned".

During this 30 year period, there are some obvious risks to the State, local government, the land owner and surrounding communities. Although not generally understood, solar farms can be fragile casualties of damaging weather events as shown by the follows photos of actual occurrences:



#### Wind damage





Electrical or Bush Fire damage



There seems little question that the current rush to build commercial solar farms is attracting some "corporate cowboys", with no prior corporate experience in Australia, some of whom unashamedly describe themselves as "downstream developers" acting for solar panel manufacturers.

If, during the 30 year lease period, events of severe physical damage occur, in the absence of any regulation, it would be an easy task for the solar farm operator to simply walk away. This strategic exiting could be the result of inadequate insurance and / or inadequate retained earnings in the business. Other exacerbations such as changes in renewable technology or energy market economics could also prompt a premature departure by unscrupulous operators. The original land owner, the local government body or the State Government would then be obliged to step in, demolish and remove the solar panels and supports and rehabilitate the site by returning it to its original rural / agricultural condition.

In an unregulated environment the same situation could occur at the end of the 30 year lease period with New South Wales finding itself scattered with paddocks of disused and deteriorating solar panels.

We believe that future generations will not look back kindly on today's legislators if provision is not made now to regulate and provide for the eventual rehabilitation of commercial solar farms.

<u>Our second recommendation to the Committee</u> is to find in favour of urgent New South Wales legislation that would cause adequate security deposits to be paid by solar farms developers prior to the construction of any more solar farms in New South Wales.

We again thank the Committee for this opportunity to present our "front line" views on and concerns about certain aspects of solar farm developments in New South Wales.