Submission No 181

SUSTAINABILITY OF ENERGY SUPPLY AND RESOURCES IN NSW

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Submission to Committee on Environment and Planning

Sustainability of energy supply and resources in NSW

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To the members of the committee,

I am writing in regards to the above inquiry being undertaken by the Parliament of NSW.

I am a PhD candidate at the University of Technology Sydney. My research focuses on socio-economic and socio-ecological relations and impacts of different models of energy transitions in rural NSW. Prior to this, I have researched the social impacts of coal mining in NSW, including consideration of social movements against the coal industry. I grew up in Singleton, a coal-mining town in the Hunter Valley NSW. It is with these three factors in consideration that I make this submission.

Transitions to renewable energy will need to navigate land-use conflicts, labour practices, extraction of raw materials, biodiversity and conservation concerns, pollution and waste, ownership and energy use models - much of which renewable energy holds in common with fossil energy systems.

Recently the NSW government "allocated" three regions in the state as 'renewable energy hubs'. Other than this allocation, there does not appear to be much in the way of a plan for these regions. These regions could become the Hunter Valley of renewables. Large swathes of land and water will be utilised for wind farms, solar arrays and pumped hydro. These proposed projects will likely have a multitude of impacts on the land and people. Yet from my research thus far, it does not appear that local communities have been genuinely engaged about their regions becoming renewable energy hubs. I have been spending time in New England, where multiple large-scale corporate renewable energy projects are already causing discord in the local community.

Through my research, I have discerned that there are two key areas the NSW government should consider when planning and implementing the necessary transitions from our current fossil-fuel energy system to an emerging renewable energy system. These two broad areas are hard infrastructures and soft infrastructures.

Hard infrastructure

Hard infrastructure relates to the physical technologies, machines, buildings etc. that will be required in transitions to renewable energy.

Investment in infrastructure

My current research in the NSW regions of New England and the Northern Rivers indicates that local communities are concerned with proposed placement of solar arrays, wind farms and stored hydro. Many of these concerns stem from local understanding that site locations are being chosen due to their proximity to existing infrastructure. This is resulting in land-use conflicts between agriculture, tourism and renewable energy.

Related to this, I understand from engineers and renewable energy organisations that our current grid and broader energy infrastructure is wholly unsuited to renewable energy and

that updated, modern infrastructure is required to appropriately manage transitions to renewable energy.

It is apparent that significant investment in energy infrastructure is required of the NSW state. This would have the added benefit of job creation, in a period of significant unemployment and underemployment.

Investment in manufacturing

Of significant concern to workers in the fossil fuel industry is the question of employment in a post-fossil-fuel era. Renewable energy sites create a significant number of jobs in the construction phase, but fewer ongoing jobs. Fossil-fuel job losses could be mitigated through the establishment of a renewable energy manufacturing industry, in combination with jobs in mine-site rehabilitation.

Australia once had a robust manufacturing industry, one that could be revived to foster transitions to renewable energy.

Soft infrastructure

Soft infrastructure refers to the social and political relations of energy. For example relationships, policies, values etc. My research indicates that changes in soft infrastructure are integral to successful transitions from fossil fuel energy systems to renewable energy systems.

Genuine engagement and decision-making

Many in the NSW community regard the current planning system, where state-significant infrastructure and energy are concerned, as a “tick-box” process. Common to both fossil fuel projects and large-scale renewable energy projects have been significant objections by impacted local communities who feel that they are not genuinely involved in the decision-making. I would recommend that for energy transitions in NSW, the government changes planning policies to devolve some power to local communities and to establish a planning approval process that allows communities deep and genuine engagement.

Re-nationalise the energy system

Across NSW people are rightly concerned with the cost of energy, which has risen significantly due in part to the privatisation of different aspects of the NSW energy system. A for-profit energy system has resulted in expensive power and the priority of economic considerations over social and ecological. Bringing the energy system back into the public sector would fundamentally shift the purpose of our energy sector from making profit to providing energy. A shift back to public ownership would also bring job-creation in energy systems back into the hands of government, which would undoubtedly create more jobs than a for-profit system would seek to create.

Community-owned energy

Frustrated with the current failure of the NSW government to transition to renewable energy, and concerned with increasing power bills, many communities across NSW have begun their own transitions through the establishment of community energy initiatives. These communities should be commended, and further supported by the government through grants and clear policies. Whilst there are some grants, and some policies, these are rather

unclear and confusing for many people and communities I have come in contact with through my research.

Ecological considerations

We need to transition to 100% renewable energy predominantly to contribute towards addressing the climate crisis, which has well and truly arrived. Our current fossil fuel energy system is one built on extraction and destruction of the natural environment – something that cannot continue in future renewable energy systems. When establishing our renewable energy industry, we must be considerate of water tables, flood plains, biodiversity, habitats – to name a few examples.

I implore the committee to learn from the mistakes of the coal industry. Go and speak to residents of Bulga, of Maules Creek, of Muswellbrook and hear how the coal industry damaged their wellbeing. I would like to see NSW build a new energy system where sacrifice zones like the Hunter Valley are not required and communities are given real access to decision-making and genuine engagement.

I am available to discuss any of this in detail if required.

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