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13 June 2025

Frances Arguelles
Principal Council Officer
Committee Office
NSW Legislative Council

PortfolioCommittee4@parliament.nsw.gov.au

Dear Ms Arguelles

Inquiry into the Impact of Renewable Energy Zones in Rural and Regional Communities and Industries in New South Wales – Warrumbungle Shire Council Post Hearing Responses

This correspondence addresses the supplementary questions addressed to Warrumbungle Shire Council (WSC) during the Hearing held in Dubbo on 16 May 2025.

Community Engagement and Consultation

1) *You mention inconsistent consultation and limited community input, could you expand on this?*

Limited community input - Yes, on the basis that the input comes late in the piece when the project location and scope is already decided by the developer. By then the dye is cast and at best the community might be able to change are things around the edges. But unlikely to change anything material.

Fair dinkum, meaningful, community consultation requires, in effect, an equal sharing of power. But the developers hold the power and will never relinquish it.

2) *Has Council raised these engagement concerns directly with EnergyCo or the project proponents?*

Yes, ad nauseam.. And with DPHI. But the Environmental Planning & Assessment Act processes strongly favour the developers.

3) *What standards for consultation would you like to see made mandatory across all REZ developments?*

Before Scoping Report is tabled with DPHI, Developer must hold a 2-day workshop with Council and community (at developer's expense) to thrash out what a suitable project might entail – including scope of project, likely key issues, likely impacts, compensation, etc.

4) Have residents been given any clear, accessible overview of how many projects are proposed or approved within the LGA?

No. It seems nobody knows the answer to this question, except maybe EnergyCo. Two major extensions of the Transmission Line are proposed in mid 2030's. Potentially another 50% of projects may appear. We suspect that CWO REZ will be the major REZ in NSW as is the closest to the main population. SW REZ has major transmission line capacity constraints and NE REZ has political and social licence constraints.

Road Infrastructure and Transport

5) Did you have a gauge on the damage to rural roads already caused by REZ-related transport activity?

No idea yet. Transmission Line project is the first cab off the rank and it is only in very early stages of building its accommodation camps.

What's the estimated long-term cost?

It could be 10's of millions of dollars over say the next 50 years. There are two components:

- a) Has the developer upgraded the local roads being used by heavy and OSOM vehicles to a standard acceptable to Council? And;
- b) Is the developer paying for ongoing maintenance post the heavy vehicle usage stages, namely project construction, repowering (i.e. upgrading, replacing the wind turbines, solar panels and batteries) and decommissioning.

6) Have developers offered to contribute to infrastructure upgrades, or is Council bearing the burden?

We see infrastructure provision as the responsibility of the NSW Government.

EnergyCo (i.e. Government project with special powers over Local Government) is refusing to upgrade roads that WSC deems as necessary due to the predicted heavy and oversize traffic demands.

In contrast, the private developers must upgrade our local roads as we specify, relevant to their heavy vehicle/OSOM vehicle usage.

The State Government must do more to ensure emergency and social service provisions e.g. police, fire, ambulance, hospital beds, doctors and nurses, mental health, etc are provided to cater for some 10,000 extra workers over the next 10 years.

7) How is Council managing or enforcing restrictions on unauthorised heavy vehicle routes?

Too early to tell as only the Transmission Line is the first project to commence, and they are just building their main construction camp of 1,200 beds.

We suspect however that it will be a huge challenge to keep REZ traffic on the project-specific roads. And what measures would one use to check? And how do you hold developers accountable? Would need GPS tracking of all vehicles and then a regulator checking same. Is a huge risk – the biggest of any in a REZ - to local Councils and local ratepayers. It would be reprehensible if local ratepayers are left to pay for costs generated by the developers – public or private.

Strain on Local Services

- 8) Has Council been forced to redirect funds or resources from other community services to respond to the pressures created by REZ?**

Yes. Being a small Shire Council, our staff have been overloaded with REZ matters, plus their normal tasks. However, please note EnergyCo has provided some funds for Council to engage other personnel.

- 9) What support, has been offered by the NSW Government to help Council manage these additional service burdens?**

See answer above to Question 8.

Land Use and Agricultural Impacts

- 10) Has Council mapped how much productive farmland is projected to be lost or interrupted by REZ infrastructure?**

No, haven't got the resources to map this i.e. staff resources.

- 11) Are you seeing examples where farming operations have become unviable due to transmission corridors or access issues?**

No.

- 12) Do you believe the current planning framework adequately protects strategic agricultural land from encroachment by energy infrastructure?**

No. State Significant Development (SSD) overrides any provisions Council may have in its Local Environmental Plan (LEP). The zoning for Rural land is meaningless when SSD projects are approved by DPHI.

Visual Impact and Community Identity

- 13) Residents have raised concerns about rural character loss, has Council conducted any community surveys or modelling on the impact?**

No.

- 14) Would you support zoning controls or visual buffer requirements around townships or heritage areas?**

Yes, however as per above Question 12, LEP zonings mean nothing in relation to SSD approvals.

Decommissioning and Long-Term Accountability

- 15) What safeguards are in place to ensure developers restore the land at the end of a project's life?**

The Conditions of Consent address this matter. At this point in time, we think they are satisfactory, but the truth will only surface when projects are actually decommissioned.

- 16) Should decommissioning bonds be mandatory and held in trust by government? What would a fair bond amount look like in your view?**

Unsure.

- 17) Has Council reviewed international best practice on decommissioning and land rehabilitation for renewable projects?**

No.

Local Economic Benefits and Procurement

- 18) You've raised concerns about economic leakage, how many local businesses have actually secured supply contracts or subcontracts for REZ projects?**

Unsure, Council is not provided that information from EnergyCo or REZ developers.

- 19) Would you support a mandated local procurement threshold for REZ developers operating in your area?**

Yes, but would depend on the capacity and expertise of the relevant service providers and the type of procurement being sought.

- 20) Has Council attempted to create a central registry or capability directory for local businesses to support REZ tendering?**

No, have not had the staff resources to do so.

- 21) You raised the need for earlier cumulative impact studies. Are there specific impacts you've already observed that could have been avoided with more proactive strategic planning?**

The only impact to date that has commenced would be EnergyCo/ACERREZ traffic on local roads associated with the Transmission Line construction; no other projects have commenced yet. We do not know what the specific impacts are that could have been avoided, and neither does TfNSW or DPHI with any level of confidence. Nobody knows what the cumulative impact of heavy and oversize vehicles will be on local roads. Thus, we could be specifying an upgrade to a certain road to standard 'X' when in actual fact, with the aggregated, cumulative impact taken into account, higher standard 'Y' should be adopted.

- 22) With regard to emergency services, what practical steps — such as additional equipment or co-ordinated evacuation planning — would you like to see included as standard in REZ project approvals?**

Ensure all sites have trailer mounted firefighting equipment; ensure fire storm evacuation procedures are in place and practiced; ensure there are strict rules for no 'hot work' on fire danger days. Ensure temporary workers camps have more than one access/egress in case usual exit route is closed or blocked as a result of bushfire.

- 23) The issue of developers "flipping" projects was raised. Would you support the introduction of criteria or due diligence requirements to help ensure developers have long-term intent and capacity?**

No. It is a free market environment.

- 24) In your view, is there a threshold — legislative or otherwise — that should trigger a pause or review of approvals until comprehensive cumulative impact assessments (CIA) are completed?**

Unequivocally yes, project approvals should be on hold until CIA are complete, and meaningful actions to address these impacts are funded and implemented on the ground.

WSC asserts that there is a material and significant procedural error in the assessment process conducted to date by the DPHI, namely that the strategic level, REZ-wide CIA has not been conducted for the CWO REZ, as is required by the NSW Government's stated policies and procedures (*CIA Guidelines for State Significant Projects*, dated October 2022).

Yet, the DPHI continues to process the assessment and determination of numerous CWO REZ projects, including referring them to the IPC for decisions.

To summarise, whilst the strategic-level (i.e. whole-of-government) CIA required to support planning and development decisions in the CWO REZ is currently being undertaken, it has not been completed. Furthermore, the critical mitigative on-the-ground, definitive actions have not been identified nor implemented.

Only after such strategic level work is done should the local scale, project-level CIA be undertaken.

It is worth noting there are 40+ generation and transmission projects within or just outside the CWO REZ, a region that has been rural for 200 years. So, there are potentially very significant REZ-wide impacts.

We also note that the NSW Government obviously considers strategic CIA studies are important, because such studies have been announced to be conducted for the NE REZ and the SW REZ, however their development is several years behind the CWO REZ.

In summary, WSC submits that given the State Government's CIA Guidelines have not been followed for the CWO REZ projects, with strategic-level CIA missing, that constitutes a material procedural error and thus WSC calls on both DPHI and the IPC to postpone further consideration of development proposals until such time as the findings and actions arising from the Strategic, whole-of-Government CIA report have been identified and implemented.

25) *From your experience with projects like Squadron and ACERREZ, what improvements would you suggest to ensure councils are engaged earlier and more meaningfully in the planning process?*

Prior to the Scoping Report, the Developer should hold a 2-day workshop with Council and community (at developer's expense) to explore what a suitable project might entail – scope, key issues, impacts, compensation, etc.

26) *Do you feel the consultation processes to date have reflected the needs and aspirations of your community?*

No. The planning, assessment and determination process for SSD heavily favours the granting of approval of same.

The 'community consultation process' is misleading and simply raises false hope for those who have little or no power in influencing the outcome. Locals often spend enormous amounts of time on matters they are unskilled in and the physical and mental health costs can be very significant.

27) *What mechanisms would help bridge any gaps?*

Re-write the Environmental Planning & Assessment Act to enable Local Government and the general public to have just as much power as the Dept of Planning and the developers.

28) *Are there ways the NSW Government could better coordinate with councils to ensure information-sharing and planning transparency across all levels of government?*

Yes. State Government bureaucrats hold the power and are very reluctant to share that with Local Government. So balance that power for starters. At present Local Government is treated as the poor country cousin. Monthly meetings of the Council General Managers + State Government executives + relevant Ministers, where the three parties get to frame the agenda, would be a good start.

29) *What positive outcomes — such as local jobs, infrastructure or community benefits — have flowed from these projects? How could these be enhanced or better communicated to the broader public?*

Too early to tell.

30) *Would you support the establishment of a standardised local engagement framework, co-designed with councils, to ensure consistency across REZ projects?*

See answers to Questions 25-27 above.

31) *Which local or regional roads in your area should become state roads as a consequence of increased usage because of renewable energy projects?*

Regional Roads to be classified as State Roads are Vinegaroy Road and Black Stump Way.

If the Inquiry has any queries about the information tabled herein please don't hesitate to contact the undersigned on

Yours sincerely

**LINDSĀY MASON
GENERAL MANAGER**