

# **INQUIRY INTO IMPACT OF RENEWABLE ENERGY ZONES (REZ) ON RURAL AND REGIONAL COMMUNITIES AND INDUSTRIES IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

**Hearing: 16 May 2025**

## **SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTIONS**

**Mr Nigel Roberts**

**RESPONSE – 16<sup>th</sup> June 2025**

**1. Can you elaborate on the social/community impact of the Renewable Energy Zones and associated projects, particularly with regards to the relationships and connections with neighbouring farmers.**

As a mixed enterprise farmer, we rely heavily on the relationship with our direct neighbours, to borrow plant and equipment, assisting in times of emergency, we contract services to each other ie. Sowing, harvest, spraying etc, and most importantly the social and mental health benefits- for us and our children. An example of assisting each other is in January this year, our neighbour had a fire on his property next door to us, he and his family were away on holidays – we were able to go and help fight this as well as notifying the Bush Fire Brigade. Had we not been here, this could have been a disaster in the middle of January, in a dense scrub area that was also very hard to access. If these projects are to go ahead and families continue to leave the community who will fight the fires? (we are the CFA). Who will be here on a Sunday if a fire is started?

The REZ at present has already fractured many relationships between locals and the community. Absentee farmers have been some of the first landholders to be approached to host a project and this seems intentional. These absentee land holders will NEVER live with the impacts of the projects.

We have already seen members of the community leave the area. An example of this was our neighbouring property “Dapper”. This property was sold approx 3 years ago by the owner. Discussions with him clearly showed he did not want the risks associated with decreasing land values and the REZ once we was aware of the proposed Sandy Creek Solar to neighbour him, Lightsource BP. This property was purchased by Origin Energy to develop the proposed Dapper Solar Farm. Our own family will leave the area and the local community should these projects proceed. The impacts to our family, our business and our local community are too great to continue living here. The area we call our home will be an industrial area.

**2. Has the proliferation of energy developers in the area had an adverse impact on property values, and if so how has this impacted agri-business viability?**

Yes. In the short term this has increased, However is this our normal land value growth or is this to do with the influx of renewables. Approx 3 years ago we tried to purchase a neighbouring property, "Dapper", which was sold to Origin Energy, which is now the proposed site for Dapper Solar Farm. Since then we haven't tried to expand as I suppose the uncertainty is a big factor and also that we can't compete alongside the likes of these energy developers. It obviously takes a lot of time, money and property re-valuations ect to even be in a position to bid at auction. And the most disappointing factor was that the losing bidder was a young family from Mudgee, who would have moved out here. This means less children at the local schools, less

volunteers for community groups, plus the money lost from Agriculture and the associated businesses within the area.

Long term, the value of our land will likely decrease, who will want to live out here alongside an industrial site with potential toxins, increased feral animals, no community, no neighbours? Our valuers have indicated losses of 15-25% of our land assets. This is the only major asset our family owns.

**3. If landholders are forced to leave the area due to these zones and associated projects, what would be some of the socioeconomic impacts on the community from your perspective?**

Economically we spend approx. 90% of our approx. \$3M turnover between Dubbo and Dunedoo and nearly all of the people we do business with are also within this area.

In addition, we, along with many other farming families in the area, contribute a lot to the local communities. We volunteer our time to various committees including the local football club, preschool, swimming club, show committee, bush fire brigade. Our children attend the local preschool and school.

The social impacts of families leaving will be devastating. Without community, why would we encourage the next generation to pursue a life and career out here? What are we leaving behind for the next generation? In addition, what is the future of Australian Agriculture when the government is allowing and encouraging projects such as solar industrial sites to cover prime agricultural land?

It is concerning for anyone downstream of these solar projects that utilise water out of the Talbragar River and Macquarie River. There are widely known toxins released from solar projects over time, and given we are in one of the highest hail risk areas, these toxins will be washed directly into both of these rivers. This poses the question if the livestock and communities consuming this water will be affected. Will this be another case of "Toxic Town" in years to come?

Why is there now a new requirement in the National Vendor Declaration (NVD) to note if the livestock have been produced under solar panels? If the livestock has been produced under solar panels it begs the question is this animal safe to be consumed at all? Will these animals be classed as an inferior product? Which also begs the question can these sites be fully rehabilitated to its original state? Is this why the NVD now requires this noted? Is entire lamb and beef industry at risk from these projects?

**4. Do you believe there is a significant power imbalance with regards to landholders responding to renewable energy projects?**

The guidelines regarding renewable energy are outdated and obsolete. At no stage of these dealings with renewables have we as landowners had any security and protection for our family and business from a governing body. How is it fair that it's a landholder (Nigel and Emma) versus these multinational companies such as Lightsource BP, CIMIC Group and Energy Co ie. The Government etc. Each energy provider, including Energy Co, that has been to our property has each told us "these projects are going ahead regardless", its such a bully mentality as if to deflate our fight. We know that this is wrong however there is no other support or government

bodies helping us to protect our farming land, community and environment for the next generations.

These projects have had years of research, planning and management before any information or proposals have been provided to landholders proposed to be a part of, or affected by these projects.

**5. Can you elaborate on concerns regarding local road impacts from these developments outside of the concerns expressed regarding major highways like the Golden Highway?**

Concerns for the increased traffic and oversized vehicles along the Golden Highway include:

- Safe right of passage for our education purposes
- Affects on our own business eg grain to market, fertiliser deliveries, fuel, sheep to market in timely fashion. What delays will we encounter in the running of our own business
- Reduced visibility and increased congestion
- Load displacement and potential for road damage (our road infrastructure is already quite poor)
- Increased likelihood of road accidents.

**6. Do you believe proper consideration has been given to safety concerns around local school bus routes along many of these roads?**

No, for instance, The Cobbora Solar Farm is currently proposing to establish a construction lay down area along our bus route. Our 12km gravel bus route (44 km per day) is already very dangerous with severe “S” bends and often grass so long its hard to see the oncoming traffic. During winter it is extremely foggy along this road most mornings. The increased traffic is going to be a huge safety hazard for our family trying to access the school bus, this cannot be mitigated any other way apart from ensuring the construction traffic use an alternative route. After working in construction myself, I know that the subcontractors working for these projects will unlikely follow any rules around not using certain public roads to get to work. We are currently using our bus route anywhere from 7.30am to 8.30am, and again 3.30pm to 4.15pm.

**7. In your view, what have been the most significant benefits — if any — from hosting renewable infrastructure on your land or in your area?**

Monetary outcomes for those Hosting a project only. Possible some improvements to road infrastructure locally.

**8. What could be done to make the engagement process more collaborative and less transactional?**

A clear plan prior to any engagement with communication and honesty including a clear capacity that does not change ie. The capacity of the REZ has continued to increase to cater for projects.

Local communities and affected landholders should be notified and consulted as soon as there is development proposed for the area, the same as Mining Companies are required to do so.

Cumulative impact studies should be paramount. Recently the Department of Planning advised us that they can only assess one project at a time ie There is no cumulative assessment of projects

**9. Were you given enough information, in plain language and early enough, to make informed decisions about participation? How could this be improved?**

No. From the outset we have been provided NO information. Initial projects and transmission lines were discovered through “the grapevine” via conversations with neighbours that were largely under NDA’s. How can we make decisions when we haven’t been provided with any of the information? We also need to be a solicitor to decipher the majority of the documents that we have been provided with. All of this has been at the expense of our time, and in turn negatively affecting our family and business.

**10. Do you think the current compensation models reflect the long-term impact on your land use and lifestyle? If not, what would a fairer model look like?**

At present there is minimal compensation available for neighbours to industrial solar projects. At present under the solar guidelines there is no requirements for compensations. We are seeing developers offering minimal compensation to neighbours in an effort to buy social license. We have been offered a generic neighbour agreement from Lightsource BP for \$20k PA over 10 years.

In our situation here at our family property we have been advised by valuers that we may see a 10-25% reduction in land value from neighbouring industrial solar. At Coolah we have already heard of property sale contracts falling over due to renewable projects.

A model worth considering in the future may be the sale of neighbouring assets to the developers and the subsequent option to lease back to the owner for a period of time with a future first option to buy back after the completion of the project. In this situation the developer purchases the land for the current market value and holds all the risk as to the future value of the property whilst the project is being developed. If the property does indeed decrease in value that decrease in asset is held by the developer and not the previous landowner. Alternatively if the land value increases the developer gains the increased asset value.

The above model provided there is long term security for both parties reduces the requirements for compensation.

**11. What support — legal, technical or otherwise — would you have found helpful in navigating your involvement in these projects?**

A body that provides education and advice for those of us navigating this alone. Currently there is no support.

**12. How can the rollout of REZs be improved to strengthen, rather than divide, local communities?**

A clear plan from the start that clearly outlines REZ capacity, transmission lines, project numbers ect. These need to be taken to the community prior to any developers being involved within the REZ.

Consultation before the fact

**13. In the hearing, some landholders shared that they felt ‘kept in the dark’ or not fairly consulted. What would a model consultation process look like from your perspective — particularly with large-scale developers?**

Local communities and affected landholders should be notified and consulted as soon as there is development proposed for the area, the same as Mining Companies are required to do so. This could look like something that is made public via newspaper and social media.

**14. Have you experienced any direct benefits from hosting renewable infrastructure? If so, are there improvements you would suggest to the compensation or co-benefit models currently offered?**

Yes, as a proposed host for the Spicers Creek Windfarm we will receive a financial benefit. Once Origin Energy purchased “Dapper” and we became aware it was going to be another Solar Farm, we made the decision to host wind turbines on our property, we are now proposed to be surrounded by 3 solar projects (Sandy Creek Solar, Cobbora Solar and Dapper Solar), totalling over 10,000 acres. With our debt levels and the unknown of what might happen to our current land value, it was too large a risk to not be involved. Hosting turbines will give us the financial out, in order for us to leave.

It should be mentioned that these 3 solar farms are all neighbour each other, yet these are assessed individually – they will all host workers camps, be travelling along our school bus route, utilise our ground water – the cumulative impacts will be dire. Yet they are assessed as individual projects.

From our experience, its hard to say if there are any improvements to the compensation and co benefit models, as we are yet to go through the experience as a host.

**15. Do you believe current dispute resolution or feedback mechanisms are adequate when things go wrong or when there’s disagreement with a developer? What alternatives might be more effective?**

Its hard when your complaining to the government when they are essentially the body that’s pushing this along to progress. These developments and the CWO REZ should be paused until there are sufficient process in place to support the landholder and local community members.

We are commonly reminded by developers that the projects are only in this location because of the proposed transmission lines, whilst Energyco remind us that the transmission line is only in this location due to the numerous projects.

**16. Some landholders raised concerns about intergenerational impacts. How should long-term land use considerations — including farming viability and succession — be factored into the project planning process?**

Its hard to see a future for the next generation when the future is so uncertain. What is the plan for the future of Australian Agriculture? Will there be security moving forward? Currently the government is encouraging and approving prime agricultural land to be covered in solar industrial sites. Landholders and community members have never felt less supported.

At this point, with the proposed projects surrounding us, we would not encourage our children to return as they will be surrounding an industrial site with completed loss of visual amenity, no PL insurance to operate, no community, no farming neighbours to assist in times of need.

**17. Would you support the creation of a landholder advisory panel — similar to what was suggested in the hearing — to shape best practice guidelines for consultation and consent?**

Yes an advisory panel would be of benefit. Further government policy is required to access and manage the cumulative impacts of large scale renewable projects within the REZ and in concentrated areas. This will be essential in reforming the current issues experienced within the Orana CW REZ. At present there is systemic failure to consider community wide impacts. How can any project be assessed when there is no framework that protects existing businesses, communities, ecosystems and the like.

Already the CW Orana REZ and the community that is impacted by it feel like the REZ is overloaded by projects and that the community have been forgotten in the planning process.

**Recommendations**

I would recommend that an immediate halt to development be placed on the CW Orana REZ so that the proper government infrastructure and framework can be put in place to ensure the smooth transition to renewables across all Australia. This REZ can be rolled out smoothly and successfully. It would be negligent to suggest that this REZ is a “Write Off” and continue to progress. If we continue at present there will be no community left in these rural areas. It is owed to the local community and all those impacted, that the Orana REZ be rolled out in a successful and well thought manner. To continue at the current speed and with the lack of direction and control would be irresponsible and disastrous.