

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

(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.

Answer:

The nature of signing land hosts or leases for developments is destructive to the relationships of neighbours when they view the project differently, many of which consider each other close friends and often they are also family. Forcing land-owners to sign non-disclosure agreements and preventing them from talking openly and honestly with family, friends and neighbours about the proposed projects and associated offers builds distrust and often severs all normal interactions and communications. This practice is only in the best interests of the developer and never in the best interest of the landowner and what can be generational family friends and neighbours. It is not only the current landowner that pays the price of broken down relationships, it potentially could be their children and their grandchildren and any associated social networks ie. preschool, school, PandC and sports etc

Volunteer community organisations are fracturing, where the committee's become groups of like-minded people and those with differing views on a project fall by the wayside or stop volunteering. Local funding is being withdrawn where organisations are also accepting funding from a developer (bribe or "shut-up" money as described by many).

The foundation of the renewable energy transition by its top-down nature, is predominantly a policy-response to a problem not necessarily accepted by the majority of the population. While climate change may be more widely accepted, an existential climate crisis and associated urgency is not. By placing "top-down" developments of such magnitude as a REZ on small rural communities, with no involvement, decision-making or ownership by the communities themselves it unfortunately leaves communities divided by proposed developments, divided politically and in relation to policy and leaves little room for maintaining or strengthening community character and cohesion.

(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?

Answer:

I believe so, yes. In a number of ways already, and I believe further impacts will be seen and felt once construction starts and the projects are operational.

- Properties adjacent to or nearby a wind project development proposal, often have interested buyers pull out once they learn of the proximity and size of the project. Reducing the number of interested buyers must contribute to lowering the final sale price and therefore contributing to an overall lower land value for the area.
- Smaller lifestyle type properties, by their very nature, have been noticeably on the market for a much longer time-frame and some may find it very hard to sell at all. Having hundreds of wind turbines planned for construction on surrounding hilltops is not conducive to a "quiet and peaceful tree-change" after all, is it?
- At what point will a loss of value translate to a drop in equity and see a move by financial institutions to either restrict further lending for capital purposes or call in any debt above

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the necessary LVR? This will ultimately impact long-term agri-business viability, but I am unsure of our ability to measure and evidence this? I would recommend that the NSW Gov implement a state-wide approach be taken to monitor and measure these impacts in detail, particularly in REZ areas and those areas adjacent to or under large-scale developments.

(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?

Answer:

I know of numerous families, including at least two young families who are seriously considering selling up and leaving the district before construction starts. The decision alone is causing them angst and distress because of being forced to give up on their vision for the future of their family farm. Give up on both their business as it is today (very much tied to the local community) and their home.

Any family leaving, including these two examples would present the following likely or potential socioeconomic impacts to our community.

- Decreased numbers in children accessing children's activities and preschool facilities
- Decrease in numbers in primary school (potential flow on effect of school budget cuts due to student numbers)
- Loss of unique local agribusiness and associated produce and services eg. Farm gate produce and supply of livestock
- Loss of local support and sponsorship to local events (no doubt this would be seen to be replaced by developer \$)
- Loss of active volunteers on numerous local committees and events (maybe the developer's will fill this void too?), it is widely accepted that an active volunteer more than likely wears numerous hats
- No guarantee that the land will remain agricultural and this could present a further flow on effect of loss of business to the local economy in way of loss of agri-business supplies and services
- Less likely that the farm will remain a generational family farm, where it would have otherwise been more than likely to stay in the family

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

Answer:

Yes, absolutely. This is even more prominent in a REZ area where the number of projects adjacent or nearby some landowners is numerous. The resources, skill, time and money it takes a landowner to respond to 1 project is costly and a significant burden, imagine facing that process for 3 or more? And for some, at the same time as having their land compulsorily acquired. The power imbalance is nauseating. The drain on families, the impacts on time available to spend with children, time available in the business, or the cost of paying someone else to complete tasks is huge, unfair and unjust. The fatigue felt by those who try to keep up is real. Sleepless nights, worry, stress, increase in stress-alleviating behaviours such as drinking and then flow on effects of family break-down in communication and connection.

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The planning process is called an “approval process” not even an “assessment process”, the expectation that the projects being assessed are going through an “approval process”, goes to demonstrate the significant power imbalance. This process is certainly not a fair or just process and goes to no length to protect the people of NSW and their property rights.

The number of objections or the reasons for objections to any given project, never seems to be adequate to stop an approval, only ever promising possible implementation of “conditions of approval” which ironically only then become accountable by members of the public who wish to monitor the conditions and ongoing activities for instances of non-compliance and report as required. Another significant imbalance.

The tactics practiced by Developers and EnergyCo can be described as coercion. These coercive practices and tactics are often verbal in nature and a request to have it put in writing met with indifference or disdain. Is there any legal comeback or retribution from those who have succumbed to this coercion? Or only from those with the energy and legal fund to seek justice themselves?

(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?

Answer:

Concerns regarding local road impacts are mostly going unheard. Local knowledge and thoughts are not being sought or valued as a matter of process. Most often the planning and design of both impact mitigation and road upgrades is being done without any consultation with adjacent landowners and local communities and stakeholders. While the NSW Government seems to believe that including Council operations (senior level staff) at certain planning forums e.g. REZ Working Group – the very exclusion of community representatives and/or elected Councillors and community stakeholder groups does not allow meaningful community involvement in decision-making and active public participation in the developments. Therefore, the concerns of those most directly impacted remain unheard and their mitigation ideas constantly ignored.

The consistent failure to utilise the IAP2 framework for Public Participation in the way it was designed and the reasons why it was internationally recognised and accepted, will only see a growing level of distrust, lack of cooperation and ultimately a failed project delivery in cost, time-line and in function. I sincerely hope the ultimate cost is not born by the local communities in a direct loss of life. This is a very real probability if local communities continue to be excluded from the decision-making process and without agency to influence the mitigation of these local road impacts (among the many other direct and cumulative impacts).

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

Answer:

No, I don't believe proper consideration has been given to safety concerns around local school bus routes. I don't believe proper consideration has been given to the overall safety on local roads and to local road users. The *silos* nature of the REZ planning and coordination has prevented these safety concerns from being comprehensively identified and considered. The fact that REZ-wide

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cumulative impact studies and plans remain unavailable and incomplete is testament to this. At this stage of the project, this is a considerable risk to the NSW government as the planning authority for the REZ.

AI Generated definition: refers to **a state of being isolated or separated in a way that hinders communication and cooperation with others.⁸ This concept is often used to describe situations where individuals or groups operate in isolation, much like the physical structure of a silo, which is a tall cylinder used for storing bulk materials such as grain, coal, or cement.⁹ In a business context, a silo mentality can lead to departments or teams working independently without sharing information, which can reduce organizational efficiency and create a negative corporate culture.⁴ The term can also be applied metaphorically to describe any situation where information or resources are kept isolated, preventing effective collaboration.*

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

- (7) **ROLE OF NATURAL GAS** In response to a statement given by Mr Steven Jennings, recorded on Page 3, paragraph 2 of the transcript. He refers to a “Hydrogen project here in Dubbo”. I would like to clarify that this isn’t simply a “Hydrogen project”. It is the Dubbo Firming Power Station and as explained in the EIS of the project is a **dual fuel firming power station**. **Page 17 of Squadron’s EIS states:** “The turbines would operate on **natural gas** (with hydrogen blends of up to 25%) as the **primary fuel source** in the short term. However, the generation units would be **biofuel and hydrogen fuel capable**, meaning they would be able to be supplied by biofuels or natural gas (with low hydrogen blends) in the short term, and high hydrogen blends or biofuels into the future. Consent is expressly sought for each of these fuel sources. The power generation facility would be monitored and controlled from the Proponent’s control room in Canberra with local control also able to be taken as required. Local staff would be in attendance at the Project site during business hours and would respond to callouts as required. **Note:** Reciprocating engines for the power station as contemplated in the Project’s Scoping Report are least preferred following concept studies and technology vendor engagement and are not assessed in the EIS. These engines did not offer the ability to transition to the targeted hydrogen blends or offer biofuel compatibility in the short term.”

Link to document:

<https://majorprojects.planningportal.nsw.gov.au/prweb/PRRestService/mp/01/getContent?AttachRef=SSD-28088034%2120230726T013033.047%20GMT>

This choice of language by Mr Jennings is misleading and does little to educate the panel, the local community and the NSW Public of the fact that a Power Station being built in Dubbo to firm the power generated by Renewables will be PRIMARILY run on Natural Gas and depended upon for power security and reliability. The role of Natural Gas in firming power generated by Renewables is being under-played and is not widely understood. The predictions of gas requirements aren’t transparent and the impacts to electricity costs will be directly affected. Could the panel investigate the entire role and level of dependency on

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the firming stations being planned and built in NSW? The NSW Public need to understand the integral part they will play in the future of the electricity grid.

(8) **LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES** I wondered if the Panel expressly sought and invited the elected representatives from the directly impacted Council's, as the panel in Dubbo consisted of Senior Council staff and a consultant? Could this invitation to participate still be extended to the elected representatives of the Council's within the CWO REZ?

(9) **INSURANCE** In November 2023 I received some verbal advice from my insurance broker regarding potential impacts for landowners neighbouring RE Projects. The dot-points I recorded to **assist landowners** were:

- a. First recommendation is to use a broker and an insurance provider that has some backing, ie has the resources to go in and bat for you in court, if needed.
- b. Gallagher are looking at max \$50m P/L policies for **some** landholders
- c. The real nitty gritty of this potential liability situation of Renewable Energy Projects neighbouring farmers and farmers being "liable" for the loss of substantial infrastructure etc, won't be realised until the "first case"...
- d. In regards to fire, it was suggested that good record keeping is your best option, on top of what P/L cover you can obtain. Record your own fire mitigation practices, photos, diary entries etc of any and all activities that you conduct on farm. Take photos of any of your neighbouring lands when fuel loads are excessive or present a risk, keep a file
- e. If and when the first case goes to court, if the farmer can demonstrate their own mitigation practices, they may present a case that shows they are only liable for a certain portion of losses eg. first two rows of panels, vs the entire solar factory etc. Then, the P/L may sufficiently cover them etc. This is all hypothetical, but def worth considering
- f. Talk to your broker and insurance provider, preparation may be key here until there is a precedent set. Understand in full what the P/L pays out, it is my understanding that it pays for the losses and that all the court and legal fees are not taken out of this amount. Please confirm this with your broker/provider.

It is very disconcerting to be advised to rely on a precedent being set in Court. Given the scope of the REZ rollout and the fact that this is both a Federal and State Policy Response, one would think it completely fair for directly impacted landowners and associated contractors to be indemnified to a reasonable extent.

(10) **RESEARCH and DEVELOPMENT** - In the absence of adequate research and development on the long-term health effects on both livestock, meat produced and human health from contamination, it is even more prudent to conduct base-line studies and compile a significant database of the current status quo. That is the current level of toxins, heavy metals, contaminants etc in soil, water, air and meat products within the Project and REZ farming areas.

(11) **CAPACITY OF LOCAL COUNCIL** to assess impacts and risks to local community. Please see additional attachment a report commission by Mid-Western Regional Council. **Managing the impacts of State Significant Development**. The scope of this report would be valuable to

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other Councils eg. Warrumbungle Shire Council. Could the panel recommend that a study of this nature be State funded and commissioned by all impacted Councils to allow them to better prepare and mitigate? This likely could be reviewed every 2 years, given the rate of project development in the REZ.

- (12) **REQUEST FOR RECOMMENDATION** – Could the panel please request that a maximum generation capacity for each REZ be determined and legislated – with community consultation and involvement! Note: not the capacity that actually reaches the grid, but a maximum “built” capacity. The ineffectiveness of solar and wind is highlighted by the significant difference between the built capacity and the capacity that reaches the grid. The ambiguous use of industry terminology around “capacity” continues to present a challenge for the public to understand. E.g. Headroom assessment.
- (13) **THE TRUE COST OF RENEWABLES** Please accept the following link to a discussion as the final part of my additional information. I ask that you listen to this with the intent to uncover truth and then act with integrity. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fJScXVTZNBU> This interview is not about debating politics, this is about all sides seeking truth and acting with integrity once that truth is uncovered.

The REZ rollout starts in NSW, and is part of a National transition to Renewables and a giant step towards emissions targets and ultimately Net Zero. Portfolio Committee 4 has an incredibly important opportunity to directly influence and create change for Australia’s Energy Future. I urge you to demand truth and integrity from the NSW Government in your recommendations and final report to the government. Our country’s future absolutely depends on it.

Thank you for your willingness to listen, your diligence to truly understand and may your bravery to act with courage and integrity as you make your recommendations outweigh both. Thank you.