

Inquiry into the Impact of Renewable Energy Zones (REZ) on rural and regional communities and industries in New South Wales – Tuesday 13 May 2025 hearing – Questions on Notice – Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure (DPHI)



The uncorrected transcript can be found [here](#).

Q#	Page #	Question (Transcript)	Answer
1	4	<p>Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Good morning to all of you. I will start with you, Mr Albury. Living on the Central Coast, I get a lot of questions about the Hunter offshore wind zone and how it will be connected into the Hunter-Central Coast REZ. Are you able to give us an update on where the planning is with that and particularly where the best place would be to connect between an eventual offshore wind project and the rest of the energy infrastructure?</p> <p>ASH ALBURY: Ms Boyd, I'd have to take that question on notice because that particular offshore wind project is something that's being run through the Federal Government and I'm not a technical expert in that area. I'd be happy to take that on notice and come back to you with the answer.</p> <p>Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: That would be very useful. I guess the impact for us in the State, though, is where exactly those transmission lines would go.</p> <p>ASH ALBURY: Ah, yes.</p>	DCCEEW will respond to this question.
2	4	<p>Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: When you look at the geography of the Central Coast and the Hunter, it does get a little tricky. Has thought been given to some planning ahead of time?</p> <p>ASH ALBURY: Yes. What I will say is that the Hunter-Central Coast Renewable Energy Zone is more of a brownfield renewable energy zone. Rather than creating massive transmission lines and upgrading the transmission lines, we're trying to upgrade the network in certain locations. The benefit of that is that we're really piggybacking off that existing infrastructure and moving forward. As I said, in terms of the Hunter-Central Coast offshore wind farm process, I'll have to get back to you with an answer for that. But I'm sure our technical experts have been looking at that process.</p>	DCCEEW will respond to this question.
3	4	<p>Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: You may need to take this on notice. When you look at the likely plan for where that transmission line would go from the offshore wind project into the</p>	DCCEEW will respond to this question.

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		<p>REZ, it does seem to cut across the Hunter Gas Pipeline project. Has it been considered from that perspective within your remit?</p> <p>ASH ALBURY: Once again, I'll take that on notice. But I do recognise what you're saying.</p>	
4	5	<p>The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Thank you all for being here. It's nice to see you all again. I wanted to ask some questions specifically about the Central-West Orana REZ, so I might direct them to you, Mr Albury. But if they're better answered by someone on the panel, I'm happy for you to refer to your colleagues. I wanted to get some understanding about the network capacity of that particular REZ. I think it went from three to six. Now on the website it talks about 7.7 gigawatts, but only 4.5 in terms of the network capacity, and obviously not all projects will be running at the same time. How many projects, in terms of gigawatt capacity, are there in planning? I understand it's much bigger than 7.7, and that's what's causing a bit of community concern. Can you talk us through that, please?</p> <p>ASH ALBURY: What I will do is in terms of the numbers of projects. Other than the six that are approved and the 10 that we're working through on the access—some of those still need planning approvals— I think there are another 36 or something within the renewable energy zone.</p> <p>The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: So there are more than 50 in planning. Is that correct?</p> <p>ASH ALBURY: Yes, but I will get the planning guys to give you a figure on that.</p> <p>CLAY PRESCHAW: Look, I don't have that number straight off the top of my head.</p> <p>ASH ALBURY: You're in the right range.</p> <p>CLAY PRESCHAW: It's in that vicinity.</p> <p>The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Can you take on notice the specific and provide it back to me?</p> <p>CLAY PRESCHAW: Yes, I'll take that on notice.</p>	<p>In the Central West Orana (CWO) Renewable Energy Zone (REZ), there are currently (as of 10 June 2025) 31 renewable energy generation projects DPHI is aware of. DPHI is currently assessing, or has approved, 7.4 GW of generation capacity in the REZ.</p>

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5	6-7	<p>The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: The other question that comes a lot is about the decommissioning. I know that's an interesting thing to talk about at the beginning, but it's actually important in terms of any kind of consistency around what that will look like and who's responsible for the decommissioning of these projects when they eventually reach their end of life. Is that part of the discussion and the agreement? Is there an update you can give us on that?</p> <p>ASH ALBURY: In terms of decommissioning, that's usually done through the planning process and through conditions of consent, so I'll hand over to the Planning team.</p> <p>CLAY PRESRAW: I'm happy to talk to that. Just maybe to return to your question before in terms of the number of projects at CWO. I just did a quick count, and we can confirm this later, but I think within the CWO REZ there are 12 wind projects, four of which are approved and the others are in the system somewhere, and about 33 solar projects, of which I think 22 have been approved. That's about a total of 45, of which about 26 are approved, I think. We can firm that number up and come back to you if you like, but I think that confirms what Mr Albury was saying—about 50 projects. There are also a number of projects that are not yet in the system but which we know about, so the pre-SEARs phase, so there will be even more projects in the coming years, we'd expect. It's a bit hard to count those until they formally enter the planning system.</p>	As above
6	8	<p>The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Would you be able to take on notice to provide to the Committee the information from EnergyCo or from government more broadly that was available at the time that the REZs were legislated for, and before December 2023, what was in the public domain about the prospect of the capacity being increased for the Central-West REZ?</p> <p>LIAM RYAN: I'm happy to take that on notice. I'm also happy to give a brief outline of some of the background of what was in the public domain. Just for the Committee to understand, the concept of renewable energy zones came from the Finkel review, which was an independent review of the National Electricity Market settings in the wake of the system black event in South Australia in 2016. That review found that the lowest cost mix for meeting consumer demand in the future would be a mixture of wind, solar, gas and batteries. It recommended that the market operator produce an</p>	DCCEEW will respond to this question.

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		integrated grid plan, which has since become the Integrated System Plan that you may have heard of, to identify renewable energy zones across the NEM. That process started in 2018. The New South Wales Government at the time put in a submission to that process, calling out the potential priority energy zones in the Central West, the South West and New England. Later that year it released a Transmission Infrastructure Strategy, that identified those zones in a geographic boundary, which aren't the exact same as what's been declared but are very similar. I've got some notes in front of me: They had contemplated up to 4.9 gigawatts in South West; 7.3 gigawatts in Central-West; and New England, 5.5 gigawatts. That's generation, not network capacity. I guess that first public statement about the renewable energy zones of 7.3 gigawatts is similar to what has actually happened with the access rights in that first round, but obviously didn't contemplate that future expansion. Then in 2019 the Government released an Electricity Strategy that called for a three gigawatt pilot renewable energy zone in the Central-West Orana, so that's where that three gigawatt figure has come from and that's what then informed the Act in the Electricity Infrastructure Investment Act. I'll need to go back and do what you asked about taking on notice what was available at the actual time in 2023, but I wanted to give you that background. I guess the numbers have shifted a number of times since the concept was first raised in 2018.	
7	9	<p>The Hon. EMMA HURST: Thank you. I will have a question for Mr Riley about the Biodiversity Conservation Act as well. Before I move on to that, I wanted to ask about some of the submissions that we received that also suggested that the developers of renewable energy zones should be required to follow the regenerative techniques outlined in the Building Better Biodiversity on Solar Farms guide, which highlights those four design tools. It talks about wildlife corridors, connectivity, native grasses, ground cover, protection of creeks and habitat clusters. Is that something that the department is also addressing within the department of planning, or is that just relying again on the Biodiversity Conservation Act in regard to all of those areas?</p> <p>CLAY PRESHAW: I'd have to take on notice that specific policy reference. But again, in general, the way that we assess biodiversity impacts is under the Biodiversity Conservation Act, with the expert advice of the relevant part of government. Unfortunately, looking at the people in the room, there's no-one from that part of</p>	<p>DCCEEW will also respond to this question.</p> <p><u>DPHI's response:</u></p> <p>DPHI is not aware of the Building Better Biodiversity on Solar Farms Guide at the time of the inquiry. DPHI can consider this during the next review of the solar energy guidelines which could be undertaken by the end of 2026.</p>

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		<p>government here today. But if we needed to provide details on how a specific biodiversity impact was to be assessed, we could certainly do that. Perhaps just to explain the process of how a project is assessed at the State significant level, it is an integrated development assessment process. When we receive the first part of a project, being the SEARs, and every stage of the project at the department of planning, we then refer it to all of the expert agencies across government for which there might be a relevant area of expertise. When it comes to wind and solar farms, particularly where there's vegetation clearing, and for any wind farm in relation to bird and bat strike, we rely quite heavily on the advice of the biodiversity arm of DCCEEW. But we also refer the projects to a number of other agencies—we're talking 10 or 15 different agencies for each project—and we need to take into account their advice in determining the merits of a project, but also in drafting up the recommended conditions. Even before we make a final decision, or before we refer to the Independent Planning Commission for a decision, we often will refer the draft conditions to the agency to ensure that those conditions are appropriately addressing the legislative requirements under that agency's expertise and all the relevant policies. In relation to the better building guideline you referred to, I'd probably have to take that on notice and seek some advice from DCCEEW as to how that's applied at the State significant level or whether there's some other guideline that's more relevant to the assessment of State significant wind and solar projects.</p>	
8	9-10	<p>The Hon. EMMA HURST: Thank you. We also received a significant number of submissions that did raise the Biodiversity Conservation Act, and I'm hoping that Mr Liam Ryan might be able to answer a couple of questions in regard to that Act. We know that the 2023 review of the Act by Ken Henry identified some quite major shortcomings and recommended a suite of reforms to ensure that we have nature positive development in New South Wales that does actually protect animals and the environment. Do you have any information you can provide the Committee as an update on where we're up to in reforming the Biodiversity Conservation Act? Obviously we have many developments in the pipeline, and there's a lot of public concern in regards to the issues with that Act not actually going far enough to be able to protect wildlife. Do we have any updates on the next tranches of the review of that Act?</p>	DCCEEW will respond to this question.

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		<p>LIAM RYAN: Ms Hurst, sorry, I'm not able to give you that update. I'm from a different area of the department and unfortunately I didn't prepare for that question. What I would say is that we are working closely with the conservation side of our department on renewable energy zones. They are developing conservation investment strategies for each of the renewable energy zones to guide investments in conservation in each of those five REZs. In addition to that, they are planning to enter into strategic offset delivery agreements with each of the proponents in those zones, to make the offset process more efficient and lead to better biodiversity outcomes at lower cost. I apologise that I can't answer your question, though. I'll take that on notice.</p> <p>The Hon. EMMA HURST: Thank you. I did wonder if you'd be able to, but I thought I'd put it out there anyway, so I appreciate that.</p>	
9	13	<p>The CHAIR: I might take over here. We've only got 10 minutes left. Mr Albury, in your opening statement, you talked about the number of complaints that EWON has received since it has been established. I want to go back in time. Can you tell me, perhaps on notice, the number of complaints EnergyCo has received regarding its engagement with landholders over projects? Whether you do it via a REZ basis or a project basis, I'll leave that up to you in terms of what data you have available.</p> <p>ASH ALBURY: I'll have to take that on notice, but I am happy to do that.</p>	DCCEEW will respond to this question.
10	14	<p>The CHAIR: I'm not too sure how you accidentally trespass on someone's property, but anyway. Mr Preshaw, you talked about the number of projects in the REZ. You gave a figure of 22 solar approved and I can't remember how many wind. I think it was 11, or something like that. Can you give us a sense of what that equates to in terms of number of panels and number of turbines across the Central-West REZ? I'd be happy for you to take that on notice.</p> <p>CLAY PRESRAW: I would have to take that one on notice, I'm afraid.</p>	There are approximately 6.3 million solar panels and 428 wind turbines approved in the CWO REZ.
11	14	<p>The CHAIR: What assessments have been done on the long-term socio-economic impacts of the REZs and their associated projects on local communities, particularly in</p>	DCCEEW will respond to this question.

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		<p>terms of job displacement versus job creation? Do we have an assessment on that? Can you table it for the Committee?</p> <p>LIAM RYAN: In terms of each renewable energy zone, when the Electricity Infrastructure Roadmap was first released, we had estimates of the jobs that would be required in the construction and then operation and maintenance of the transmission and wind and solar projects. Since then, a couple of times University of Technology Sydney has released its forecasts of those employment figures, although they're not broken down by each renewable energy zone. The department and EnergyCo are completing an update, because we haven't done that analysis and now we have more information about the number of projects in each renewable energy zone. We're in the process of updating our estimates from the year 2020. The CHAIR: Does that study include things like cultural impacts in terms of changes of land use, job dispersal versus job replacement and the impact on farming communities?</p> <p>LIAM RYAN: No. The figures I just referred to are about the jobs involved in the construction. I think they include some induced employment as well, but it's not a broader socio-economic impact assessment. It doesn't contemplate cultural impacts.</p> <p>The CHAIR: Is the Government planning on doing a broader socio-economic impact assessment or are we not going to worry about that? What's the policy of the Government?</p> <p>LIAM RYAN: I might need to take that question on notice.</p> <p>The CHAIR: Sure.</p> <p>LIAM RYAN: I'm not aware of a study being commissioned like what you've described, but I'll have to get back to you on that.</p>	