



**NSW Enquiry into the Impact of Renewable Energy Zones on Communities
Hills of Gold Preservation Inc supporting document**

17th July 2025

Hills of Gold Preservation Inc members are surrounded in three directions by Renewable Energy Zones - the New England, Central West, and Hunter - but Engie owned Hills of Gold Wind Farm is not in a Renewable Energy Zone.

What relevance do Renewable Energy Zones have if new renewables projects are being approved outside of the REZs?

The creation of REZs was aimed at establishing a coordinated approach to the roll out of the projects, managing the cumulative impacts and distributing financial compensation to local governments.

Within the REZs, the developers compete for a slice of allocated capacity. The developers are rated based on their past performance, their engagement with the community and Council, and the quality of their project.

In reality within and outside of the REZs it's the wild west.

The Hills of Gold Preservation Inc members experience relates to Hills of Gold Wind Farm and past and current developers Wind Energy Partners, Someva Renewables, and Engie.

Our concerns are well documented in our communication published on the Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure, and Independent Planning Commission Hills of Gold Wind Farm website case pages.

The proposed site for Hills of Gold Wind Farm is so flawed that it required four public exhibition periods, and more than six years of state and federal government assessment.

In our experience the NSW Department of Planning literally changed the rule book, cherry picking from the 2016 and draft 2023 wind energy guidelines, and did whatever it took to recommend approving the project.

The not-so-Independent Planning Commission rubber stamped the approval, announcing its decision when Tamworth Regional Council was in caretaker mode during the 2024 statewide Local Government elections.

Similarly, a newly created Independent Expert Advisory Panel for Energy Transition that commented on the economic viability of Hills of Gold Wind Farm, was not-so-independent.

Former federal environment Minister Tanya Plibersek announced approval of Hills of Gold Wind Farm under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act a week before the last federal election was called.

When a renewable energy project arrives on the door step of a rural community, it is a battle between experienced developers backed by lawyers and consultants, pro-renewables aligned governments, and an inexperienced rural community. The learning curve for the community is very steep and time is limited.

The impact of the wind farm does not stop at the boundary of the hosting land owner. The visual, noise, biodiversity, traffic impacts continue onto the adjoining properties. These impacts are generally mitigated by neighbour agreements which effectively turn signed up neighbours into project supporters, who are silenced by those agreements.

If the impacts are later discovered to be greater than those anticipated, the signed up neighbour has no way out.

Several families that are direct neighbours of Hills of Gold Wind Farm and among the most impacted landowners received legal advice not to sign neighbour agreement contracts because they left their farm businesses and families too exposed to risk.

The thousands pages long EIS documents result in many hours of unpaid work endured by the community members to read, research and write submissions. Hills of Gold Preservation Inc members spent countless hours attending meetings, writing emails, and preparing presentations. On several occasions our members were up until 2am completing submissions within state government public exhibition periods. Community's four week deadlines were non-negotiable, while the developer Engie's deadlines were extended time after time.

We attended multiple briefings from the Department of Planning and EnergyCo at Armidale, Uralla and Walcha, and a few at Tamworth and Dungowan.

We met with former Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner Andrew Dyer twice and contributed to his office's review of community consultation. We would like to see his office's recommendations actioned by state and federal governments. Specifically the license to prospect, developer rating scheme, and decommissioning fund should be compulsory.

A HOGPI member was among landowners who met with Prime Minister Albanese, and our members travelled to Parliament House to meet advisers for Ministers Bowen and Plibersek, and to Sydney to meet advisers for Ministers Sharpe. We have also met with state and federal Greens and Nationals senators.

Our members spent about \$100,000 on ecology, noise, and soil consultants and legal proceedings. That's about the equivalent of one year of the proposed community benefit fund

from the Hills of Gold Wind Farm. Will landowners ever get that time and money back? Of course not.

Developers are already required to pay the legal expenses of impacted landowners in reviewing lease or neighbour agreements. This should be extended to cover the costs of community groups paying consultancy fees to assist landowners to fully understand the proposed impacts.

Hills of Gold Wind Farm was approved with the following shortcomings:

- Criticism by Indigenous groups for inadequate cultural heritage assessment.
- No worker accommodation strategy, which could significantly impact the tourism oriented towns of Nundle, Hanging Rock and Tamworth.
- No legal or physical access to the project site.
- No flood study for the major access route across a floodplain.
- No agreement with the Council.
- No agreements with several key impacted neighbours.
- No published current Capital Investment Value.
- Recommendation for voluntary land acquisition as mitigation for an immediate neighbour.

The Department of Planning went as far as to disregard the advice of their own visual consultant who documented non-compliance with the visual guidelines in the EIS.

Tamworth Regional Council is the only level of government that heard our concerns. It repeatedly submitted objections, and continues to appeal the Independent Planning Commission approval of Hills of Gold Wind Farm in the NSW Land and Environment Court.

What have we learnt from this traumatic experience?

That our local knowledge and opinions don't matter to the consent authorities. Expert opinion that we commissioned was ignored. Local landowners identified mistakes, omissions and inconsistencies in Engie's EIS and the state government disregarded our submissions. Crucial engineering data relating to site access and site stability on a basalt escarpment was either not done or not published.

The assessment process for renewables is about managing community outrage. Let communities have their say, again and again and again, and then approve projects. The entire approval process appears to be an extension of the DAD consultation methodology: Decide - Announce - Defend.

Any expectation that a bad or incomplete project may be rejected is a lie.

Nothing will stand in a renewables proposal's way...not water quality, risk of land slips, critically endangered ecosystems, national parks, steep road gradients, or proximity to neighbours.

If there is an obstacle, it will be overcome - minimised, mitigated, or offset.

Representatives from the charity RE-Alliance told us this in March 2019.

Only a proponent withdrawing will save a regional community from a renewables proposal on its doorstep.

We have experienced serious division between neighbours, families and the community. Volunteering has declined and a committee could not be formed to organise a major community festival that contributed economic benefit to the region.

Our community is in limbo. Will the law recognise Tamworth Regional Council's serious concerns about Engie's Hills of Gold Wind Farm's environmental legacy issues? Will the economic market support construction of what must be one of the most expensive wind farms in Australia?

Or will our community, that is located outside of any REZ, be left with a zombie wind farm, continuing to cause social, economic and environmental stress for years to come?

Many impacted communities across NSW are well aware of the issues we describe. We are disillusioned and have lost faith in NSW and federal government planning and environmental legislation, politicians, and public servants.