

Presentation to NSW IPC

Thunderbolt Wind Farm proposal by Neoen

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Introduction

- Good morning, Chair and Commissioners.
- My name is Karen Zirkler and I'm a 7th generation farmer. This is my husband Craig, and we operate a regenerative grazing enterprise adjoining the proposal. We are presenting on behalf of our family and farm business.
- I have a passionate interest in nature positive agriculture.
- In the late 1980s, I completed a cutting-edge Environmental Science Degree with First Class Honours from Griffith University, where I became aware of the science of climate change.
- In the 1990's, I worked across the native pasture landscapes of Queensland developing, farmer-friendly, pasture and soils monitoring programs, and I conducted focus groups with hundreds of farmers in every State, researching barriers to agroforestry extension.
- I've worked for Southern New England Landcare for the last 26 years, and I'm now CEO of this NFP, which supports communities across three local government areas.
- My experience is a key reason I was appointed to the board of the NSW Biodiversity Conservation Trust in 2020.
- My belief in the need to transition away from coal fired power generation is also a reason I participated in a climate rally in 2018, where I rode my horse through the main streets of Sydney. I share this because it shows that ...
- I believe in climate change. I believe in renewable energy. **But not like this.**

I'd like to cover five key issues impacting our family, our lifestyle, and our farming business. Recommendations for each section are outlined on the butcher's paper.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you.

Our property 'Bimbivale'

Is located across the New England Highway in an easterly direction from the proposed development. We consider ourselves immediate neighbours of the project.

We've spent the last 18 years implementing regenerative agriculture projects on farm, to build natural capital and be 'nature positive', while producing high quality super fine merino wool, fat lambs and beef cattle.

Our natural capital contributes to the marketability of our products and Bimbivale has been the focus of many regenerative agriculture projects and events demonstrating ideas and outcomes to other landholders.

Because of our solar and battery system, we don't notice blackouts and we share spare electricity to the grid.

1. Project layout negotiations

In January 2021, we wrote to the proponent giving ten reasons for withdrawing our expression of interest in hosting a turbine, and suggesting a range of ameliorating and compensatory actions should the project proceed. We have never received written acknowledgement of that letter, nor any negotiation opportunities.

Mapping by the proponent and the Department has been obtuse and unhelpful. There has been NO opportunity for us to discuss and negotiate turbine layout with the proponent, to ameliorate our concerns. The maps of the turbine layout (p 22 of the Development Consent) cover much of our property with an inset diagram, preventing us from reviewing exactly how we might see turbines from various parts of our property.

Neoen has failed to negotiate any kind of neighbour agreement with us. These processes should be considered necessary best practice. For them not to occur is procedurally unfair, and unacceptable.

Recommendations x 3

The IPC should reject this procedurally unfair proposal until the proponent:

1. Provides clear and detailed maps for neighbours of the project.
2. Engages with neighbours to discuss and negotiate location of individual turbines and compensatory actions.

3. Negotiates meaningful neighbour agreements in a way that considers and provides for neighbour's needs. Neighbour agreements should not in any way gag neighbours from making complaints in the future.

2. Biodiversity

Our farm's natural capital includes endangered raptors such as Little Eagles and Square-tailed Kites (Steve Debus, pers comm, 2024). We have a breeding pair of Wedge Tailed Eagles nesting behind our woolshed. We have endangered Bell's Turtles in our stretch of Looanga Creek and we sight endangered koalas regularly. We've recorded rare native grasses such as Silky Brown Top, Wallaby Grass and Kangaroo Grass, long thought to be grazed out of the landscape. We have a myriad of small, threatened woodland birds and our farm dams are stocked with Yellow Belly, Silver Perch, and Murray Cod.

These are all part of the Critically Endangered Box Gum Grassy Woodland we call home. This ecological community is protected from harm under the Federal Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act (1999).

It's always been part of our long-term business plan to attract eco-tourists to the property. In the last year, we started with 'HipCamp', and plans include a tiny home or cabin.

We have deliberately built up our natural capital and see it as an integral part of our farm enterprise, contributing real value. However, the potential impacts of the wind farm on our farm enterprise were NOT considered by Neoen in their Environmental Impact Statement, nor by the Department of Planning in their assessment of the proposal: no one asked us, no one surveyed our property, or offered to consider it for any biodiversity offsets required for the project. This is a failure of process and procedural fairness.

Recommendations x 2

1. Before approval, the IPC should require the proponent to measure the biodiversity values on our property, and consider the likely social and economic losses caused by reduced biodiversity if the development were to proceed.
2. During the consent period, the IPC should require the proponent to monitor the biodiversity values on our property, modify wind farm operations accordingly, and provide a mechanism for just compensation should any decline in value occur.

3. Wildfire Risk

Prevailing winds are from the west, southwest and northwest, blowing from the project site directly towards our property and residence.

Fires from this direction will most likely be caused by lightning or a turbine malfunction.

If this project proceeds, Bimbivale stands directly in harm's way because firefighting in the project area will be impeded in two ways:

1. Aerial support will not be possible due to a 3 km no-fly zone around turbines.
2. Local ground crews are likely to be prevented from suppressing fire within the project site because the current Chinese owners discourage entry – last year they refused helicopter access by Local Land Services for the annual feral pig shoot.

A wildfire that crosses the highway into Bimbivale would be devastating for our family and farm business. Fanned by westerly winds, it would take minutes to reach the more densely populated areas of Kentucky, which are just off the edge of all Neoen's maps.

The devastation would be unacceptable and have insurance premium implications for the whole district. But it is totally avoidable if the project were located at a more suitable site.

Recommendations x 2

1. The IPC should reject the proposal and suggest the developer relocate to a more suitable site.
2. The IPC require the proponent to cover our public liability insurance premiums that result from increased risk associated with being in a no-fly zone, and adjacent to an industrial factory.

4. Noise

Recent research is raising concerns that animals including sheep, dogs, horses, koalas, and whales become distressed, and experience reproductive issues as an impact of constant exposure to infrasound.

For a 5MW turbine there is a detectable signal at 20 km away – potentially impacting Uralla, Bendemeer, and Walcha.

References in my submission (German research video, Acoustics Report on the Rural Sheep Farm in Scotland, December 2023. Document Number: IARO24-3. Full Report available at iaro.org.nz)

Notably, Neoen's noise mapping curved the noise level contours around neighbour houses, placing neighbour residences *just* outside the predicted noise limit.

Neither Neoen's Response to Submissions nor the Department's Assessment Report address infrasound and neither address non-compliance issues identified by Les Huson in his independent review commissioned by Friends of Kentucky Action Group.

The Government has a duty of care to protect citizens from harm.

If a non-compliant project is approved, our family's health could be jeopardized by non-compliant noise pollution, along with the health of our farm animals, and our wildlife, which are pivotal to our business.

If these impacts are possible, they are simply not acceptable.

Recommendations x 3

1. The IPC should reject the development until the proponent complies with current noise legislation and regulations in their EIS.
2. The proponent should be required to remove turbines numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 21 to avoid impacting our family, livestock, wildlife, home, property, and business with noise pollution.
3. The proponent should be required to reduce the height and MW power of all turbines in the project to a safe level for noise and infrasound compliance.

5. Poor community 'consultation'

Neoen completely flabbergasted me several times during the community consultation:

1. They refused to conduct professionally facilitated community forums at all, despite numerous requests.
2. They insisted on Drop-in Sessions in Uralla, 20-60 km from all neighbours of the project, during Covid restrictions. We know that only a handful of community members attended, mainly turbine hosts.
3. They muted us during an online community consultation meeting when we asked questions like, why didn't their consultants conduct aquatic biodiversity surveys. This was our one and only opportunity to ask questions of technical experts.

This poor consultation and engagement process had the impact of:

1. Completely erasing our trust in this developer.
2. Causing us significant uncertainty about information we needed to make family, farming, and business decisions.
3. Creating significant frustration, anxiety and worry that impacted our mental health. I required medical advice and counselling. I already have 'solastalgia'.

In my 30+ years as a 'change agent' working in extension and community engagement in my field, I have never seen such poor, shoddy community engagement processes.

Consequently, not all members of our community have been afforded their right to know relevant details of the project, ask questions and have input.

In a further example of poor conduct in the broader industry, Fiends of Kentucky Action Group conducted a public meeting to share information. Days before the meeting, the guest speaker from another region was bullied into not speaking by an employee of the wind farm in their local area. This demonstrates the lengths to which wind farm developers are prepared to go, in order to prevent sharing of lived experiences.

Given their track record on community engagement, we question Neoen's commitment to Environment, Social and Governance principles.

The French Corporate Duty of Vigilance Law (2017) requires large French companies to establish and implement measures to identify and prevent human rights abuses and environmental damage throughout their supply chains. It aims to ensure companies respect human rights and the environment in their business operations globally.

If this project is approved, are we certain our governments are not complicit in any breach of this law by French Company Neoen?

Some in our local community have raised the question of whether Uighur labour has been used in Neoen's supply chain. It's important to find out because our local and state governments have a Duty of Care under the NSW Modern Slavery Act (2022).

Recommendations x 2

1. The IPC should reject the proposal based on a lack of appropriate best practice community engagement which has been procedurally unfair, leading to a lack of social licence.
2. The IPC should reject or suspend the proposal until Local and State Governments have adequately investigated potentially significant strategic and reputational risks associated with developer behaviours and supply chains under the NSW Modern Slavery Act (2022) and French Corporate Duty of Vigilance Law (2017).

Conclusion

With groups like Z-Net and businesses like Morelly Solar in Uralla, our community is poised for a renewables transition on *our* terms: without harm to agriculture, the environment, or our social fabric.

These proposed monstrosities have so much embodied carbon, they will never offset themselves.

The IPC has the power to stop this approach and allow our community to determine a better, safer renewables transition.

Recommendation

3. We ask the IPC to reject the proposal, and recommend the State Government facilitate our community to determine a much safer, more sustainable renewables transition.

Thank you.

