
From: Justin Page
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To: Portfolio Committee 4
Subject: Re: Inquiry into the Impact of Renewable Energy Zones (REZ) on rural and regional communities and industries in New South Wales - Hunter Jobs Alliance post-hearing response
Attachments: Transcript Justin Page edits- HIGHLIGHTED FOR QON - PC4 - Renewable Energy Zones (REZ) - 25 September 2025.pdf

Hi Margaret

Please find attached transcript with minor edits (using comments)

On Wed, Oct 1, 2025 at 11:46 AM Portfolio Committee 4

TOM EDWARDS: In terms of meeting the workforce challenges, I think it might be useful for the Committee to have a look into the Renewable Energy Sector Board's plan regarding gender equity. In August, the board published a new addendum for new targets for employment for women in the REZs—4 per cent of the trades workforce and 7 per cent of the project workforce in non-traditional roles. Unlocking that workforce would be very beneficial, but there are also things that need to be done to actually enable that, to make that work attractive for women workers. For example, adopt workplace entitlements and programs that support gender equity, like enforceable anti-harassment and discrimination clauses, access to flexible and secure jobs, and inclusivity and diversity training as well. In addition to that, I would refer to the recommendations of the Australian Workers' Union to this inquiry, which was to expand and protect long service leave to REZ workers. These are all strategies to try and make the work more attractive.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Back to Mr Page quickly—you highlight in your submission that there's been community opposition and that there's been recognised, significant barriers to the development of renewable energy across Australia. What do you think the New South Wales Government could be doing better to combat that opposition and actually address those community concerns?

JUSTIN PAGE: I think one of the main things we've seen was that there was no credible voice giving credible information around the renewable energy projects. If we look at offshore wind, for example, rightly or wrongly, the Federal Government basically said to the developers, "Don't go and engage with the community at this stage, until your water licence is set."

What that left was a massive communications gap. The misinformation was allowed to propagate and expand, and these Facebook groups grew. The proponents weren't able to give the credible information and the Government didn't give the credible information back. I think we need to give those proponents and those developers a voice early in these project stages to actually clarify what exactly they're going to do, what the project looks like, how they're going to address environmental concerns, how they're going to address local content. That needs to happen a lot quicker in these projects to have that credible information and the factual information come out. That's been the significant gap that we've seen in the rollouts so far.

The CHAIR: To the unions to begin with, there's a lot of conversations, obviously, around jobs. Obviously there's a difference between the short-term jobs in construction and then what happens to those jobs afterwards. Have any of your organisations done modelling in what the conversion rate would be? Obviously, the idea would be to try to keep some of these people in the regions, but they're not all going to turn out to be sole trader electricians; the market's not there for all of them to do that. Have your organisations done any modelling on what the conversion rate would be from the initial construction jobs to how many would be retained in the community in a permanent fashion?

JAMES MIRANDA: I'll take on notice a proper conversion rate because I'm sure we have that detail somewhere. There's going to be a lot more jobs in construction than operations and maintenance, to put it simply. We've been working a lot with some of the delivery agencies and departments to try to make sure that we're sequencing the construction phase so that you're able to have basically the same core group of construction workers going right the way from project to project and you're not having people constantly coming in and out, and all the disruption that comes with that. I think sequencing the construction projects—if you do that right, you're going to have a good five to 10 years, possibly even more, of constant construction phase, where you're keeping those workers in and it essentially becomes a long-term job. Moving forward, with operations and maintenance, I think you only get a handful of—five or 10—ongoing positions on a lot of the renewables, particularly solar. I know wind is generally more labour intensive in the ops and maintenance phase, and storage is actually one of the better ones for converting to permanent jobs.

MATTHEW MURRAY: In terms of our industry, we're a little bit unique, I guess. I don't have specific figures for you, Chair, right now, but what I would point to is the offshore oil and gas industry, particularly in WA and also in the Bass Strait. There's a requirement for vessels to be alongside oil and gas projects, so there's constantly platform-supply vessels. There's a lot of construction jobs, but we have ongoing jobs involved with anything offshore. We'll be the crews that take the workers out to maintain offshore wind, for example. There will always be waterside workers involved when we're importing components. A lot of vessels—again, we see it as a good opportunity. I think the concept that you'll put in some offshore wind turbines and leave them to just sit out there by themselves is definitely not something that will occur. There'll be a lot of maritime workers involved for the entire—there will be a lot of construction jobs but there'll be ongoing maritime worker jobs for the entire lifecycle of those projects.

The CHAIR: Given some of the comments from the State Government and their agencies—when EnergyCo came before us in the Sydney hearing, they seemed to distance themselves from offshore wind. They said, "No, that's a Federal issue. We're watching the technology. We don't think it's there at the moment." Then

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State Government Ministers came down to the Illawarra and all they wanted to talk about was rooftop solar, once again distancing themselves from offshore wind. We know that developers have walked away from the Illawarra. At the moment, there aren't any credible developers going forward. What would that mean in terms of your members if offshore wind didn't eventuate in one or two of those REZs?

MATTHEW MURRAY: For sure, it'd certainly be disappointing if it didn't come to fruition whatsoever. Sure, we're definitely disappointed that it's advancing as—I'd love to be sitting on one of those platforms/supply vessels right now myself. I wouldn't have to travel an entire day to go and join a ship in Dampier in Western Australia. I'd love nothing more than to join a ship in the Port of Newcastle that's 10 minutes from my house and sit in the Port of Newcastle until I retire. That would be fantastic. But I think we're also buoyed by the fact that it's not completely written off. The Federal Minister has said that it is disappointing from his perspective but now we'll use it as an opportunity to explore a little bit more in depth. It's not just unions that are advocating for it. I note that Business Hunter shared our very same sentiments; they were disappointed. But where there's disappointment, there's also opportunity. Like I said before, there are dozens of jobs, if not hundreds of jobs, for maritime workers.

The CHAIR: You talked about the problem of getting a fitter and turner on your ship. Do you see that same problem happening with these offshore wind facilities or factories where you'll struggle to get the skilled workers there to do the work? Obviously that would raise the question of where would they come from if you can't get them.

MATTHEW MURRAY: Definitely. That's our union's position. That's why we're advocating before the parliamentary Committee. That's why our officials and our members will talk till the cows come home about how important offshore wind is. Mr Page's evidence before spoke to those concerns. We do need coordination. People do need to know that there are these jobs out there. My brother's here today; he's a seafarer as well. We often have conversations with people in the community, or our friends, who don't even realise that Australian seafarers are still out there, let alone that we're doing all these sorts of cool jobs all across Australia and sailing internationally still.

I take your point. There does need to be coordination between the agencies. I really like Mr Miranda's idea. I've got a 17-year-old son at the moment. To hear that there's been a 30-year gap in electrical trades, it'd be a great opportunity to have some sort of body that my 17-year-old son could go to. I could say, "If you want to be an apprentice electrician, you go and see these people and they'll point you in the right direction." I'd love to be able to send my son Noah to somewhere like that. Likewise with our industry—it's a relatively small, niche industry, but there's so much opportunity. If we could coordinate it well and young kids can go, "I see off the Port of Newcastle a ship out there that looks pretty cool. It has a good, well-paying Australian job," that would be amazing.

JUSTIN PAGE: Chair, I will supplement that. There's been some really good work done around skills mapping for offshore wind in Victoria. It was a project between the Victorian State Government, TAFE and one of the proponents. They mapped all the skills that are required to build offshore wind and if you're in an existing industry—like I'm an electrician in a coalmine—it mapped the skills, down to a skill number at TAFE and the hours it would take you to get them transferred across. I think that would be really useful for the different types of industries that are emerging in New South Wales because we haven't done that. It's one of the things we've been advocating for.

A really good piece of work was done by the State Government on the issues paper of the Future Jobs and Investment Authority that mapped all the closure dates of the coal-fired power stations and the coalmines in the Hunter Valley. It basically said there are 15,900 direct jobs and 37,000 indirect jobs. It kind of gave a timeline of when those jobs were going to be lost in coal-fired power stations. But, again, what it doesn't have for those workers is a map to go, "How do I get into offshore wind? How do I get into solar? How do I get into renewables?" Is that a piece of work that should be done? Again, we've got agencies and TAFE and all that to do it as part of what needs to be done to give these workers a pathway and an understanding of what's coming, how to actually get them in them and the timing for when it's all happening.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: I have a couple quick questions, given the time. I've been asking for a couple of years of EnergyCo and the Government what exactly the plan is to connect the Hunter offshore wind zone with the grid and where the enabling infrastructure is going to be built and what the plan is for that. So far, I've had no answer. Are any of you aware of any planning that's been done to connect the offshore wind zone to the grid?

JUSTIN PAGE: Given that the connection to the grid is a State issue, it hasn't progressed as quickly as Federally, where they were declaring zones and offering licences. There were a number of connection points identified, and, again, in some of the proponents' applications, they outlined where they believed the connection

points could be. But it never progressed at a State level where it was agreed upon where those connections would be if the projects went ahead because the projects haven't been awarded, basically.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Would it make more sense for there to be some sort of scoping and planning done at a State Government level to make it more attractive for proponents and speed it up?

JUSTIN PAGE: Absolutely. One of our submissions was that the State Government should be developing and owning what we were calling the energy hubs where those connections and points would be, like within the Newcastle port and Newcastle Harbour. Absolutely, our view would be that it makes sense to have them identified, and government controlled would be our view.

JAMES MIRANDA: We've been working in hand with the MUA to push for the State Government to develop a comprehensive offshore wind industry strategy, like they have in Victoria, since the Minns Government came in. We were told that there was one that was developed under the previous Government that got shelved. I do not know whether or not that actually existed, because no-one could find it when we asked. But no such strategy has been developed. When you look at the fact that there was a proponent and then they pulled out at the last minute, that sort of clear guidance from government to provide certainty to potential proponents that this is something the Government is taking seriously, it's something they want to make happen and they're going to make sure that the projects happen and are connected and everything is there—the fact that there isn't that in place I think definitely played a role in the Hunter proponent not going ahead. It's not the sole reason: there are plenty of other factors. But it would've been great to have a bit more of a clear strategy from the State Government, for sure.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: The Premier has been out this week spruiking the Santos Narrabri project. Putting to one side how bananas I think that project is for lots of reasons, can you talk about the material impact on the renewables rollout, particularly when it comes to the gas pipeline going across high-voltage transmission lines and all of those issues and whether it would divert the workforce? Perhaps I will go to you, Mr Miranda. What's the tangible impact if that project goes ahead?

JAMES MIRANDA: We've been raising this for a while. The Narrabri gas project is within a two- or three-hour drive of three out of the five renewable energy zones, so you can't really deny that it was going to be pulling skilled workers who may have otherwise been working on renewable energy projects away from renewables. For our trades, we've already got massive skill shortages. With any additional strain that you're placing on the labour market and the skills market, we may see delays and costs go up on projects that are affected by that. I think you mentioned the pipeline as well. On the current construction timelines, it's looking like the Hunter Gas Pipeline is probably going to be getting built at around the same time as the New England transmission project. If you look at the corridors that have been earmarked for both of them, they intersect. We may actually get to a point where one project literally has to pause and make way for the other—a quite literal crossroads between gas and renewables. We need some clear guidance on what is going to take preference there. Our view, as the ETU, is that we just shouldn't be building the fracking operation in New South Wales.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: You mentioned before about the map with regard to when coal or power stations are closing and the jobs that would be transitioning. When they say that something is going to be extended, do you think that adds to the uncertainty of workers planning for their future?

JUSTIN PAGE: Yes, absolutely. I think what the State Government used were the licence expiry dates for coalmines. As we all know, coal is dependent on oil demand. One of the flaws with the model is that it uses the licence end date. That doesn't mean that coalmines are going to go to that length. What we've seen are recent announcements of coalmines laying workers off because of a number of demands. While it's good that it maps the actual numbers, the dates of when that actually happens, in reality, are all going to be brought forward. What it does for us is it gives the scale of the enormity of jobs that are currently within coal. The job we have to transition them into new industries is enormous. We need government policy settings and frameworks to actually make that happen.

The CHAIR: That takes us to our time with you. Thank you very much for coming and giving evidence. You may have taken a couple of questions on notice. The secretariat will be in touch with you in regard to that and any supplementary questions we may send you. Thank you for your time today.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Luncheon adjournment)