

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

Organisation: Renew, Hunter region branch

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Parliament of NSW Legislative Council
PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE NO. 4 – REGIONAL NSW

Inquiry into the impact of Renewable Energy Zones (REZ)
on rural and regional communities and industries in New South Wales

31 January 2025

Submitted via email: portfoliocommittee4@parliament.nsw.gov.au

About Us

Renew is a national not-for-profit (NFP) organisation with 14 branches and thousands of members across Australia. We were previously known as the Alternative Technology Association, established in 1980 when living sustainably and using resources wisely was considered 'alternative.' In some cases and places, it unfortunately still is.

The Hunter Region Branch is one of the volunteer-run community groups of Renew. We provide expert, independent advice and sustainable solutions to households, government and industry. Working with a diverse range of community and industry partners, Renew advocates for policies that promote renewable energy and cut emissions, make our homes healthier, more affordable and climate resilient.

We have over 200 members spread throughout the Hunter Region from the Upper Hunter LGA in the north down through to Newcastle and Lake Macquarie. Members and landholders we have spoken to who live in the REZ have been following aspects of the transition, including the Hunter Transmission Project (HTP) and the proposal for an offshore wind farm.

We thank the Legislative Council Committee for giving us the opportunity to respond to the terms of reference for the Inquiry, and submit comments. Based on our knowledge and experience, we have limited our response to the item numbers indicated below. The timing of the submission period, over the summer holidays, was not ideal for our members to prepare a more substantial response.

Our responses are as follows:

(a) current and projected socioeconomic, cultural, agricultural and environmental impacts of projects within renewable energy zones in New South Wales including the cumulative impacts.

There are a number of reasons why the urgent rollout of renewable energy development is not going smoothly. It is a huge and complex process that should have started a decade or more ago when it was highlighted that coal-fired power stations don't last for ever, and that Australia's electricity supply needed to stop its reliance on fossil fuels. There continue to be many hurdles including the inadequacy of the National Energy Market run by the Australian Energy Market Operator. There is also a lack of bi-partisan support with political agendas stifling progress and avoiding constructive discussions and informed decisions.

The key positive impact of renewable energy projects in the Hunter is that clean energy sources, such as wind, solar and wave energy, are readily available here and in Australia. This is an advantage we have over other parts of the world which may need to rely on polluting energy sources for longer.

The transition to renewables is well underway with over 40% of the grid already powered by renewables and this is set to increase rapidly over the coming years. Australia and the world are undergoing the biggest and fastest economic transformation since the industrial revolution. Action to reduce emissions will help reduce the worst impacts of climate change, but will also create a boom in new jobs and new industries. With the huge Port of Newcastle, and traditionally a leading power source for the state, the Hunter is ideally situated as a REZ. There are already 16 major wind farms and 24 large-scale solar farms, and we have the capacity and need for many more.

Jobs in the industry and ancillary services are being created through the massive investment opportunities for both Australian and international companies in renewables' infrastructure, innovation and supply. On the other hand, nuclear is likely to require significant public/taxpayer investment.

There are opportunities to utilise old mine sites to locate renewables such as pumped hydro, with plenty of other degraded land which can be used for large battery storage facilities or solar farms.

Landowners and their local communities need to see a personal or community benefit economically, socially and ecologically - but they also need to be included and work closely alongside developers and government from the start. By hosting a wind or solar array on their property, many farmers will have an additional source of income during droughts and other natural disasters which are increasing in severity and frequency due to human-induced climate change. There are positive impacts cited by sheep farmers who have benefitted from hosting solar arrays alongside their sheep.

Another main concern about the impacts is that the urgency of the transition is not being addressed. There are delays in rollout of new energy projects due to slow approval process and other factors. The longer that decisions, approvals and construction takes, the greater the toll on people who are living in a state of flux and planning blight due to the insecurity and volatility of the situation.

There has been discussion around the green vs green dilemma. Further disturbance or clearing of natural areas is unacceptable. The government needs to work with local knowledge and incoming developers in the REZ and take the natural environment into account in the planning of transmission lines, solar farms and other land-intensive infrastructure. Ideally find infrastructure sites that avoid environmentally-sensitive areas. However without urgent action on climate change, there will be no nature left to protect.

(h) suitable alternatives to traditional renewable energy sources such as large-scale wind and solar.

Quite simply there is no time or money to be researching and waiting for alternatives that may never happen when we have the solutions in front of us right now. It is no more than a distraction and time-wasting by looking at alternative energy sources when Australia is endowed with sun, wind and water and is best-placed for solar, wind, and wave power.

For instance, there is no need for a technology such as nuclear that is too slow, too expensive and not compatible with rooftop solar.

(i) adequacy of community consultation and engagement in the development of Renewable Energy Zones, and associated projects.

We have concerns about the current and future impact on communities, especially those inland. There needs to be vastly improved and detailed consultation with rural communities right from the conceptual stages of a project. The proponent will find it very difficult to reverse opinions of landowners and their neighbours if they are not brought on the journey from the very start. The opinions of the entire local community needs to be taken into account not just the vocal ones.

There is confusion in the communication of climate issues and understanding by the general community about new technologies and the transition is poor. (Ipsos Climate Change Report on Social License for the Energy Transition). We have seen that such communication gaps are quickly filled with misinformation, and opportunistically through disinformation. Remarkably, or perhaps not, there may be some agreement between those in support of renewable energy projects, and those against them when it comes to the lack of consultation and community engagement.

Whether you live in a REZ or not, there needs to be a much higher level of engagement with communities, with access to independent advice, accurate information and ongoing opportunities to participate in decisions that impact them. The Climate Change Authority Chair said that "developers of renewables projects need to engage with regional communities about infrastructure's role in the energy transition, and better explain the sharing of benefits from the rollout."

A concept that could help address this gap was proposed last year by Re-Alliance and partners. They are looking for government support for the establishment of regional centres called Local Energy Hubs in

Renewable Energy Zones like the Hunter. These would take the form of physical bricks and mortar service centres with a capacity for staff to undertake outreach remotely, providing support to communities in understanding and participating in the shift to renewable energy. For instance, hubs could provide advice on:

- clear plans and sound information about large-scale renewable energy development in the Hunter REZ
- negotiations with large-scale developers to get the best outcomes for local communities and nature
- develop electrification strategies for agricultural businesses
- agricultural businesses looking to electrify and decarbonise
- getting off expensive diesel in remote areas
- grants and subsidies to electrify regional homes, schools and workplaces.
- energy efficiency so everyone can enjoy the benefits of renewable energy
- setting up a community-owned renewable energy project.

Currently the Local Energy Hubs proposal is with the Australian Government, however we believe that it would make sense if state governments, supported by federal funding, were to operate these hubs on a similar basis as Service NSW.

(l) any other related matters.

As residents, ratepayers, tax payers, we request that politicians encourage and support scientists, economists and energy industry experts to advance the best integrated set of technologies to manage what has already developed into a regularly occurring energy supply crisis.

The community needs to trust the decisions that are made on their behalf. We therefore support the rollout of large-scale renewable energy projects in the Hunter REZ, including offshore wind, as long as the highest standards are set and enforced by government for developers in regard to social, cultural and environmental impacts.

The Hunter Transmission Project consultation will hopefully improve with the establishment of a Reference Group and address some of the main concerns including the route, community benefits and communication. The community wants their members of parliament to work together, no matter which side of politics, to deal with these challenges and achieve the best outcomes for their communities.

*Submitted by:
Hunter Region Branch of Renew, Newcastle.*

31 January 2025.