Submission No 25

INQUIRY INTO PROPOSED ENERGY FROM WASTE FACILITIES

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My name is **Ben Stead**. I hold a **Business degree** and have lived in Parkes my entire life. I am the **President of the Parkes Clean Future Alliance**, a community group formed to protect the health, environment, and future of our region.

I wish to make a submission focused on human health, specifically mental health, in response to the proposed Energy-from-Waste (EfW) facility at Parkes. The Committee's Terms of Reference include consideration of impacts on human health, I believe it is essential to address the mental toll these proposals have on communities. This is an area where there has been no meaningful recognition or support from either local or state government, despite the profound and long-term effects on the wellbeing of affected populations.

EfW projects carry both actual risks from emissions and potential contamination, and perceived risks from the fear of unknown long-term health effects. The uncertainty itself is corrosive to mental health. For people with underlying health conditions, parents raising children, and those already living with anxiety or depression, the uncertainty is devastating and for some this has the potential to be unbearable.

A 5-year longitudinal study published in the Journal of Environmental Psychology Portugal examining communities living near a waste incinerator found a clear link between perceived risk and negative mental health outcomes, including increased anxiety, depression, and stress. Those living closer to the facility consistently reported higher levels of concern and less favourable attitudes, with risk perception amplifying the psychological impact of environmental annoyances such as noise and odour. Importantly, these effects occurred regardless of whether actual health impacts from emissions could be proven, showing that the uncertainty and involuntary nature of exposure itself can cause significant mental distress. The study concluded that simply living under the perceived threat of an incinerator can diminish quality of life and cause lasting psychological harm, even in the absence of measurable physical health effects.

Parkes Clean Future Alliance conducted a community survey and when asked, "Would the construction of an EfW facility in Parkes make you consider moving away from the area?" 78.5% of respondents answered yes. People are not willing to put their health and the health of their families at risk. While some residents have the means to proactively address this by relocating, others may not have the financial or situational means to move away, leaving them feeling trapped, powerless, and forced to live under a cloud of doubt about their family's future. No one deserves to live under such conditions, to have the fear hanging over their heads their entire lives, the uncertainty, and the blame if something does happen that they "caused" this, simply because they were not in a position to relocate to protect themselves and their family. No one should have to live like this when there are proven safer alternatives. No community should be forced to make this decision, the toll that weighs on people already is considerable and I have personally spoken to many families who have indicated just that 'We just bought this house, what are we going to do', 'I wouldn't have built in Parkes if I knew,' and the quote I hear almost daily 'We won't be staying if this goes ahead' while the toll this will take on a family unit will be immense, it's the ones that don't have that choice I feel for mostly.

Upon becoming aware of the EFW proposal for the Parkes Special Activation Precinct, our committee reached out to numerous community groups both nationally and internationally who have faced similar proposals. The overwhelming consensus from these groups, many of whom have been fighting for years, is one of exhaustion, mental fatigue, and lasting harm to

their wellbeing. One group, after a decade of opposition, told us they no longer remember what a “normal” life feels like and live in constant fear of another proposal emerging. In another precinct now facing a second EFW proposal, community members are unable to rally again, as the first battle left them too drained physically, mentally, and emotionally to endure the fight. In yet another community, where opposition has stretched over five years, many committee members have walked away entirely, choosing to leave the town they once called home rather than live with the relentless uncertainty and mental toll. Why should communities be placed in this situation? Why aren’t all safer alternatives explored before resorting to EFW? Why are we not properly consulted from the outset? And most importantly, why is the mental health of affected communities not identified and addressed as a significant risk factor in the decision-making process?

This region’s farmers are the backbone of New South Wales’ food production. NSW agriculture generates more than $12 billion worth of food and fibre each year, with a significant share coming from regional communities like ours. Farmers already face enormous pressures, some within their control, such as financial pressures, and many beyond it, such as drought, floods, pests, and volatile markets. These challenges already compound the well-documented mental health struggles in rural areas. The National Rural Health Alliance reports that suicide rates among farming populations are almost twice the national average, with men in agriculture particularly at risk.

By imposing an Energy-from-Waste facility in a major agricultural zone, the state government is adding yet another burden, one that farmers cannot control, and one that cannot be trusted. Whether the threat is real or perceived, it directly undermines farmers’ livelihoods. Fears of contamination, stigma, or actual pollution could tarnish the reputation of our produce and collapse farm businesses overnight. For some, the loss of livelihood, property value, and generational legacy would be an unbearable blow.

Farmers face a harsher dilemma than townspeople. To walk away is not just to sell land; it is to sell their homes, their businesses, their machinery, their livestock, and, in many cases, their family’s history. Generations of stewardship risk being erased. Forcing farmers into the position of having to consider such a decision. Simply to protect themselves and their families from the possibility that their life’s work could be rendered worthless is unconscionable. The mental health toll of such uncertainty cannot be overstated, and it would weigh heavily across the entire community.

This region’s farmers are the backbone of the state’s food production. NSW agriculture produces more than $12 billion worth of food and fibre annually, with a significant share coming from regional communities like ours. Farmers already face enormous pressures, some which they can control like financial pressure and some of which are out of their control like environmental conditions drought, floods, pests and even volatile markets compounding on their mental health struggles. The National Rural Health Alliance reports that suicide rates in farming populations are almost twice the national average, and men in agriculture are particularly at risk. By imposing an EfW facility in a major agricultural zone, the state government is adding yet another potential threat, one that cannot be trusted and again another that is out of their control. Whether the threat is real or perceived it directly threatens their livelihoods which are already under strain. If contamination fears, stigma, or actual pollution damage market reputation, it could destroy a farm business overnight. For some, the loss of livelihood, property value, and generational legacy could be an unbearable blow.

I have suffered from depression and anxiety for decades. My family and I are building what we believed would be our forever home, just 3 kilometres from the proposed site. This project has been a three-year journey of sacrifice and planning, with my partner personally designing every detail. We have a four-year-old child. Now, with the finish line in sight, we are faced with an impossible choice: live in our dream home but risk our health and financial future, or sell before the project gains traction, likely at a loss, and walk away from years of work. My partner, once excited about our future, now breaks down almost daily. I have lost count of the times I have asked, "Are you OK?" She has even said she feels she doesn't want to be here anymore. This is not just about air quality or emissions reports. It is about the real human cost of uncertainty and fear, a cost that is being completely ignored.

The reality is that in regional NSW, if someone is in crisis, the wait time to see a GP can be three weeks or more, and even longer to access a qualified mental health professional. No government agency local or state has acknowledged or addressed the mental health impact of imposing an EfW project on a community. The absence of any proactive mental health support or even recognition of the issue is unacceptable.

Finally, there is the stark reality that EfW projects are prohibited in most of NSW, yet they are being forced onto regional communities like Parkes. The implicit message is that our health and wellbeing matter less than those in metropolitan areas. This is a question that weighs heavily on our minds every single day. We are not OK with this proposal. We are not OK with the disregard for our mental health. And we are not OK with being treated as if our lives matter less.

The fact that human health testing is not even a requirement of the NSW EPA only magnifies this uncertainty. It leaves families, farmers, and entire communities carrying the weight of fear for their futures, their children, and their livelihoods. That fear does not fade when the meeting ends or the news cycle moves on; it lingers in households, it fuels anxiety, and it drives people to breaking point.

Our community is already at higher risk of stress, depression, and suicide. To impose an additional, uncontrollable threat is not just poor planning, it is dangerous policy. The mental health consequences of this proposal are real, immediate, and devastating. No government that claims to care for its people should ever knowingly add to the risk of another farmer, another parent, or another young person becoming a statistic.