Submission No 157

INQUIRY INTO PROPOSED ENERGY FROM WASTE FACILITIES

Name: Ms Michelle Hourigan

Date Received: 13 October 2025

13th October 2025

I am writing to express my strong objection to the proposed Parkes Energy from Waste incinerator. As a long-term resident, having grown up in the area, a mother of a young child, a health professional, and the only full-time Clinical Psychologist working in Parkes, my objections are both personal and professional. I believe this project represents a profound risk to the health, wellbeing, and future of our community.

The incinerator poses risks that are physical, psychological, economic, and social. Parkes is a small regional town already struggling with under-resourced health services, higher-than-average cancer rates, and challenges in attracting and retaining professionals. Locating a hazardous industrial facility here is not only dangerous but wholly inappropriate.

1. Health Risks from Emissions

i. Even with the most advanced filtration systems, incinerators release dioxins, furans, PFAS, heavy metals, and ultrafine particulates.

ii. There is **no safe threshold** for long-term exposure to many of these pollutants.

iii. Children, pregnant women, and people with chronic health conditions are at highest risk.

iv. Regulatory "safe limits" do not guarantee safety — micro-emissions and cumulative exposure slip through current frameworks.

v. Incinerators are an experiment. These "newer models" haven't been proven to not cause harm; they are still in an experimental phase. Older model incinerators have failed and polluted in ways that have been devastating for local communities.

2. <u>Proximity to</u> the Schools, particularly <u>Parkes Christian School</u>

i. The proposed site is in very close proximity to the Parkes Christian School

ii. There are already reports from members of that school that factory emissions from Pet Care Kitchen can be smelled at the school. Pet Care Kitchen is located in the same precinct.

iii. Children are the most vulnerable to toxic air pollutants due to their developing lungs and higher respiratory rates.

iv. Daily exposure risks include **respiratory illness, reduced cognitive performance, and long-term health impacts, including increased cancer risk**

v. Locating a hazardous industrial facility near a school contradicts the principle of protecting children's safety and education environments.

vi. I will not continue to send my child to the Parkes Christian School or any other school in Parkes.

3. Risk to Accessing Health Services in an <u>Under-Resourced Area</u>

i. Many local GPs, nurses, and health providers have expressed concern about the incinerator, with some indicating they would leave the region if it proceeds

ii. Parkes is a small town with limited reasons to attract new professionals. Unlike Perth, WA, which has an incinerator but many other draws, Parkes has far fewer — making the facility a significant deterrent.

iii. The loss of health professionals would have a disproportionate impact in a community that is already under-resourced in terms of health infrastructure.

iv. I myself am the only Clinical Psychologist working full-time hours in Parkes. I will not stay if the incinerator is built. I cannot risk my child's health being compromised, nor do I wish to

remain in a community defined by Sydney's waste crisis, which is threatening the lifestyle I would otherwise choose in regional NSW

4. Risks to Accessing Health Services in an Area with <u>Higher than Average Cancer Rates</u>

i. The incidence of all cancers combined is highest for people living in regional areas

ii. People living in rural Australia are more likely to die from cancer than their metropolitan counterparts, with poorer survival rates after a diagnosis

iii. A submission from the Cancer Council in 2020 stated "*Using Parkes as an example, people living here are 26% more likely to die within 5 years of a cancer diagnosis than the NSW average*". Their recommendation was to "Implement and embed the Optimal Care Pathways to ensure people with cancer in regional NSW have equitable access to high-quality treatment and care" [Submission to the Inquiry into health outcomes and access to health and hospital services in rural, regional and remote New South Wales; 2020]

iv. On the Australian Cancer Atlas, Parkes is listed as 11% above the national average for cancer rates in 2019 (atlas.cancer.org.au)

v. There are many members of the public already concerned about unusually high cancer rates in the Parkes / Forbes region. **A respected oncological nurse and a highly esteemed GP have expressed the opinion that there is a definite cancer cluster.** <u>Cancer rates in the region require further investigation, not the addition of new risk factors</u>

vi. The **precautionary principle** should apply: <u>in a region already facing excess cancer rates and limited health services, it would be reckless to introduce an incinerator that adds further potential health burdens.</u>

5. <u>Lack</u> of Community <u>Safety & Power</u>

i. Once constructed, **local communities lose power**

ii. Governments and investors become motivated to protect the billion-dollar asset.

iii. Monitoring and transparency are often inadequate, with breaches hidden or downplayed because investors and the government are motivated to defend and protect industry, rather than scrutinise the incinerator and protect community health

iv. Residents end up feeling **powerless, anxious, and unheard—which is a harm in itself.**

v. There is ample evidence of older model incinerators polluting local communities, with community efforts to shut down or even sufficiently monitor emissions being obstructed by local governments and investors. Communities have often been rendered powerless to defend themselves.

vi. Currently, **PFAS and other emerging contaminants are not routinely measured** at existing incinerators, because monitoring requirements were set before these risks were recognised. There is every reason to believe a similar gap will occur in Parkes. Without specific and up-to-date monitoring standards, many emissions — including micro-emissions and persistent toxins — will not be measured, and their impact on the community will not be adequately assessed.

vii. To date, there appear to be **no attempts to collect baseline data** on pollutants in Parkes' air, soil, or water prior to the project. This omission means that any future community concerns about health impacts could be dismissed for "lack of evidence." For residents, myself included, this feels both threatening and intentional, as it systematically undermines the community's ability to prove harm and hold the operator accountable.

6. <u>Significant mental health and psychosocial impacts</u>

As a Clinical Psychologist, I am particularly concerned about the **impacts of chronic stress, anxiety, anger, helplessness and depression on the community**

i. Residents living near heavy industrial projects experience ongoing uncertainty about long-term health outcomes, which itself becomes a source of stress

ii. The facility's close proximity to a school and residential area places a psychological burden on families. Even if emissions are claimed to be "within regulatory limits," parents face the distress of feeling unable to protect their children, leading to heightened anxiety and strained family wellbeing.

iii. Studies of communities living near incinerators and other large industrial waste sites have reported elevated levels of chronic anxiety, sleep disturbance, fatigue, and psychosomatic symptoms (such as headaches and respiratory complaints). Even where emissions are said to be within regulatory limits, the *perception of health risk* itself can create sustained psychological stress. Chronic stress and anxiety are well-established risk factors for poorer physical health outcomes, meaning the community may face compounded health vulnerabilities.

iv. This is compounded by a **pervasive sense of powerlessness and voicelessness**. Communities often feel ignored or overruled in the approval process. Residents of Parkes — myself included — are experiencing this right now. Once a billion-dollar project is built, people lose the ability to protect themselves.

v. For those with strong family ties to the region, myself included, there is a deep sense of anticipatory grief — a fear that our community, land, and children's future are being put at risk. Personally, I cannot bear the thought of driving from my family's farm past an incinerator into Parkes. It would no longer feel like home.

vi. Health professionals, teachers, and community leaders face moral distress at being asked to remain in or promote a region where they believe health risks are being ignored.

vii. There also risks a deep erosion of trust and confidence in government, environmental regulators, and industry when projects are pushed despite community objections. This fosters disillusionment, anger, cynicism, and hopelessness, weakening democratic engagement and undermining community cohesion.

viii. **The mental health of farming communities is already under severe strain from climate change** — with prolonged droughts, unpredictable weather, and rising costs driving higher rates of anxiety, depression, and suicide among farmers. Adding the threat of an incinerator, with its climate impacts, stigma, and health risks, compounds this burden. Instead of supporting resilience, **the project would intensify psychological distress in one of the most vulnerable groups in regional NSW.**

7. Concerns around Misconduct, Corruption, and Lack of Transparent Community Consultation

i. The erosion of trust, anger, and powerlessness in our community has been **exacerbated by the way this project has been advanced** — with minimal transparency and inadequate consultation, despite official statements suggesting otherwise.

ii. Many residents believe the language used by the local government and investors has been **deliberately misleading and vague**, shifting terminology away from "energy from waste" in original proposals in ways that appear designed to obscure the project's true nature from the community.

iii. There are **numerous community accounts of pressure being placed on residents to sell their homes**.

iv. Multiple accounts also suggest that land within the proposed precinct has been purchased and sold by individuals with prior knowledge of the project, raising serious questions about **conflicts of interest and profiteering**.

v. Personally, I only became aware of vague rumours of a "recycling facility" in 2024, and only this year learned that the proposal was for an Energy from Waste incinerator. The absence of open communication, proactive consultation, and honest disclosure has left many residents feeling deliberately excluded from decisions that profoundly affect our lives and our community.

8. Environmental & Agricultural Impact

i. Incinerators concentrate pollution in soil, water, and local food chains.

ii. Parkes is an agricultural hub—there's a risk to **crops, livestock, and food safety reputation**.

iii. Contamination could affect regional produce branding (grain, beef, dairy, fruit), which relies on perceptions of "clean" farming land.

9. Economic & Property Risks

i. Evidence shows property values decline near incinerators due to stigma and health concerns.

ii. Local families and businesses bear these costs while corporations profit. I personally will bear the financial impact of this in relation to my family's farm, and this cost will be much, much higher than whatever money is "saved" on energy production

iii. Once built, the facility locks the region into **decades of waste supply contracts**, making **alternative, safer recycling strategies economically sidelined**.

10. False Solution to Waste

i. Waste-to-energy incineration competes with recycling and circular economy approaches. Recycling has been shown to be lower in areas using incinerators

ii. It **locks in demand for waste**—the company must burn a guaranteed tonnage, creating a perverse incentive to generate more waste instead of reducing it. In places like Dublin, the incinerator has been given the green light to operate at an even higher capacity than what was originally proposed, despite community objections. This will definitely happen at the Parkes facility, as the investors are financially incentivised to do so.

iii. Materials like plastics burned in incinerators produce more toxic by-products, not "clean energy".

iv. This goes against my values and against my hopes for a cleaner future

v. I am also concerned that the term "energy from waste" is unsubstantial PR spin designed to mislead communities, as is the promise of cheaper electricity.

vi. I am deeply angered that local governments in Sydney, along with state and federal authorities, are pursuing **short-term, crisis-driven solutions to the waste problem** and shifting the burden onto small regional communities. Instead of addressing waste at its source through reduction, reuse, and effective recycling, this project offloads Sydney's crisis onto Parkes — a town with far fewer resources to resist or absorb the consequences.

11. Climate Concerns

i. Incinerators are **high emitters of greenhouse gases** compared to recycling.

ii. They undermine NSW and national climate goals by locking in fossil-based waste burning.

12. Loss of Community Identity and Place

i. **Parkes did not choose this identity**. Our community is known for agriculture, the radio telescope, and cultural events such as the Parkes Elvis Festival — not for being the dumping ground for Sydney's waste.

ii. An incinerator would **redefine how Parkes is seen by outsiders and potential new residents**. Instead of being a vibrant, family-friendly rural town, Parkes risks being known as "the town with the incinerator."

iii. This has profound flow-on effects:

   a) **Deterring new families and professionals** from moving here.

   b) **Stigmatising local businesses and produce**, which rely on perceptions of clean, safe, rural living.

   c) **Eroding pride in place**, especially among children who grow up hearing their town spoken of negatively.

iv. In regional communities, **identity is inseparable from mental health and resilience**. If people no longer feel proud of their town, if they feel it has been redefined by external industrial forces, this contributes to disconnection, disempowerment, and migration away from the area.

v. Simply put: **we did not choose to live next to an incinerator**, and it is unjust for a community's identity to be reshaped in this way without consent.

In closing, I object to this project not only as a resident of Parkes, but also as a mother, a community member, and the only full-time Clinical Psychologist in the region. I see every day how fragile mental health is in our community, and how heavily people already carry the burdens of isolation, drought, financial stress, and poor access to timely health care. The addition of an incinerator will deepen anxiety, anger, depression, helplessness, grief, and division.

This project threatens to compromise both our **physical health** and our **psychological wellbeing**, while undermining the very resilience that keeps regional communities like Parkes together. For these reasons, I urge Parliament to reject the proposed incinerator and instead pursue waste solutions that protect both the **mental health and future of our community**.