Submission
No 250

INQUIRY INTO PROPOSED ENERGY FROM WASTE FACILITIES

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<u>Submission to Select Committee Investigating Energy From Waste Facilities</u>

As both the chair of the Goulburn-Mulwaree Cross Party Working Group on Waste Incinerators and Senior Minister at St Nicholas Anglican Church Goulburn I am in touch with large sections of the community in the Southern Tablelands. There are grave community concerns regarding so called energy from waste facilities in the Southern Tablelands. This was reflected in over 600 objections to the proposal to build an energy from waste facility in Tarago. It is also reflected in the consistent and unanimous opposition of Goulburn Mulwaree Council to energy from waste facilities not to mention the opposition of Queanbeyan Palerang Regional Council, Communities Against the Tarago Incinerator, Longwater Agricultural Association and many more community organisations. Finally, it's reflected in the conversations I have each week with concerned citizens who are distressed at the thought of energy from waste facilities operating in the Southern Tablelands. I can safely assert that there is no social licence for the development of energy from waste facilities in the Southern Tablelands and nor is there ever likely to be a social licence for these types of developments.

Furthermore, this lack of social licence extends beyond the Southern Tablelands. Recently the Anglican Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn Synod in September 2025 (the yearly parliament of the church) passed a motion stating that the synod "is concerned that the proposed waste incinerator at Tarago presents a potential health risk to residents in Tarago, Braidwood, Bungendore, Queanbeyan, Yass, Collector, Gunning, Goulburn, Canberra and surrounding areas". The synod includes representatives from parishes from Holbrook, Wagga Wagga, Jindabyne, Eden and Bega in the south to Batemans Bay, Goulburn, Marulan and Binda in the north and also includes the entirety of the ACT. Thus, the lack of social licence for these type of facilities is widespread and stretches beyond the Southern Tablelands.

One might wonder why the government policy of building energy from waste facilities in the regions has so comprehensively failed to obtain a social licence both in the Southern Tablelands and further afield. I would suggest that there may be several reasons:

1) Concern about Risks to Human Health

There is great community concern about the risks to human health posed by energy from waste facilities. I have heard many people express these concerns and it is the primary reason why there is no social licence to build energy from waste facilities in the Southern Tablelands or anywhere. There are several reasons why people give me why they feel concerned about the risks to human health posed by energy from waste facilities:

i) Sydney NIMBYISM

It has not gone unnoticed that current NSW government policy allows energy from waste facilities only in the 4 regional areas of Goulburn, Parkes, Lithgow and Tomago. Many people have said to me that if energy from waste is safe for human health there is no reason to be building these facilities in the regions but not in greater Sydney. Therefore, this policy of avoiding energy from waste facilities in greater Sydney is a tacit admission by the NSW government that they are not completely safe and pose significant risks to human health.

Indeed, it is hard to sustain an argument that the extra cost of collating rubbish in Sydney, containerising it, shipping it by train to the region, transferring it at an intermodal, shipping it by truck to an energy from waste facility and then unpacking the rubbish from a container is cheaper than simply driving it to an energy from waste facility in Sydney. And that is only the extra *transportation* cost of moving rubbish to the regions to be burnt. Then there is the opportunity cost of this transportation. Railways and roads that could be carrying agricultural produce (Parkes) or passengers (Goulburn, Lithgow and Tomago) are instead carrying Sydney's rubbish to be burned. In particular, in our region of the Southern Tablelands the NSW government ought to be upgrading the railway and putting in faster trains to first Canberra and then Sydney. This would bring welcome relief in both these major cities with regard to their housing crises as better transport links would encourage decentralisation of population by increasing the feasibility of commuting from this region. Finally, there is the carbon footprint cost of the transportation of rubbish to the regions of Sydney's rubbish. The carbon required to be emitted by the proposed transportation of hundreds of thousands of tonnes of rubbish goes against NSW government attempts to reduce the carbon emissions of our state.

Because of these reasons many people are unconvinced that there is *any* valid reason to build energy from waste facilities in the regions and not in Sydney. Logic dictates that energy from waste facilities be located as close to the area producing the rubbish that is to be burnt as is possible and there are more than enough suitable sites in Sydney to host energy from waste facilities. Thus, most people I talk to are convinced that the current NSW government policy to restrict energy from waste facilities to 4 regional sites is a tacit admission that these facilities are not really viewed by the NSW government as being completely safe with regard to human health.

This reason alone will probably mean that there will *never* be a social licence to build energy from waste facilities in the Southern Tablelands or anywhere in regional NSW.

ii) Long-Term Continuous Exposure To Low Levels of Toxins

A second reason why residents are concerned about the potential health risks is the impact of long-term continuous exposure of residents to even low levels of toxins due to energy from waste facilities. It is generally understood that apart from brief periods of maintenance energy from waste facilities operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week for decades. Thus, even very low levels of toxins emitted by energy from waste facilities that are firmly within legal limits pose a potential health risk to human bodies due to the cumulative effect over time due to long-term exposure.

These concerns are amplified by the unknown elements in these risks due to both incomplete medical knowledge and unknown toxins. Our knowledge of the effect of human toxins is always developing and it is often the case that we understand more years later about what the safe level of exposure to toxins might be. This can lead to the declared safe level of exposure to toxins decreasing over time. However, in the case of long term continuous exposure to low levels of toxins this knowledge arrives too late. The exposure has already happened at a level that is now known to be too high and the health effects cannot be prevented.

Secondly, in recent history we have had the unpleasant experience of finding out that chemicals and substances that we thought were safe were actually toxic for humans or toxic in certain situations. Both asbestos and PFAS are good examples of this phenomena. Thus, residents are concerned that chemicals that we currently don't view as harmful (and perhaps are not even measuring) will be found to be harmful in the future. This exacerbates residents concerns regarding long term exposure to even low level emissions from energy from waste facilities of chemicals that we currently view as being safe to humans but might find out too late that are actually toxic or harmful.

Thus, it is important to recognise that energy from waste facilities by their long term nature present health risks due to long-term continuous exposure to even levels of toxins that are currently deemed safe and legal or chemicals that we don't even know are toxic or harmful yet.

iii) Risk of an Industrial Accident

A further risk to human health that concerns residents is the possibility of an industrial accident at an energy from waste facility. This could take the form of a substantial fire that burns the facility down at the extreme end of the spectrum or simply a long-term failure to control emissions due to failed filters that goes undetected for some reason at the other end of the spectrum. Although it is highly unlikely to have a 'Chernobyl' or 'Fukushima' style environmental catastrophe at an energy from waste facility it is still possible. Furthermore, the more minor industrial accidents are much more likely to happen. Even with the best intentions in the world things can go wrong. When they do, there is the potential for significant exposure to toxins for humans that will affect their health outcomes. Thus, residents are concerned about the risk to human health due to the possibility of an industrial accident. The history of industry in Australia does have its instances of industrial accidents and so the risk is not zero.

These 3 risks to human health are in my opinion the primary concern of residents of the Southern Tablelands.

However, there are other risks that concern them:

2) Economic Risks

Residents in the Southern Tablelands and elsewhere are also concerned about the risk to their economic wellbeing posed by potential energy from waste facilities. These concerns are varied but could be grouped in the following manner:

i) Devaluation of Property

Residents are concerned that any contamination of their properties (residential, businesses and farmland) would result in the devaluation of their properties. This has happened in recent times due to the contamination of land with PFAS around Williamtown airbase. Even a temporary devaluation could have severe economic consequences for landholders if they needed to sell during the period of devaluation. Thus, the risk of a land devaluation is a key concern for some residents. One might ask, what measures could the NSW government take to ensure that such an economic disaster would be properly compensated?

ii) Primary Production

Residents are also concerned with the risk of contamination to primary production. This is not just something that affects farmers. It also affects those who provide goods and services to farmers in a regional economy. Then through them others in the region are also affected economically. A regional economy is highly dependent on the economic wellbeing of primary producers.

If farming land is contaminated with toxins due to energy from waste facilities then it could affect primary producers in several ways.

The first way would be the potential loss of export markets due to failure to pass import tests in other countries caused by contamination. This would be devastating financially.

The second would be the downgrading of produce due to contamination which would result in lower prices. This would also have severe economic consequences for primary producers.

The third would be a declaration that produce was deemed not fit for human consumption due to contamination. This would be economically catastrophic for primary producers and is the worst-case scenario.

The fourth would be the devaluation of their properties caused by any of the above results. As the land is usually a farmer's primary asset this would cause genuine financial hardship for farmers through circumstances completely beyond their control.

As a pastor, I know that the emotional toll on the mental wellbeing of primary producers would in any of these situations be highly damaging and indeed potentially fatal. Farming is hard at the best of times and many farmers struggle with mental health as it is. I would be very alarmed about the mental wellbeing of farmers if contamination caused serious financial losses as a result of energy from waste facilities.

It should be noted that it doesn't need for there to be any malfeasance or failure on the part of the operators of energy from waste facilities for their to be contamination of soil, waterways and produce from farmland near an energy from waste facility. The long-term buildup of even legal levels of toxin emissions in the soil could over decades render land contaminated. Further, the washing of contaminants into waterways by rain could concentrate toxins in either drinking water for stock or irrigation water for crops. This could then cause produce to fail tests for toxins either locally or in export markets. Further, this process could be exacerbated by increasing regulatory standards over time where the thresholds for contamination of produce actually lowers.

Thus, there is great economic risks for primary producers and all who depend on them in a regional economy.

An Independent Review

Due to these risks, I would suggest that a thorough and independent review be conducted at arms-length from both government and the waste disposal industry. This thorough and independent review should take into consideration *at least* the following:

1. Short-term and long-term impact of the emissions and the buildup and concentration of toxins in the soil and waterways over time from this technology on:
    a. Human health
    b. Animal health
    c. Water supply
    d. Air quality
    e. Agricultural production
    f. This assessment of impact will consider evidence from other countries using this technology (including UK, Japan and EU)

2. Safety of the technology and its implementation, including an assessment of:
    a. Safety track record of the technology in other countries (including the UK, Japan and EU)
    b. The track record, safety compliance, trust and community perceptions of current waste to energy incineration proponents with other projects in Australia
    c. The safety standards currently applying in NSW

3. Comparison of this technology against other methods of rubbish disposal including burial, bio-reactors, recycling and reduction in packaging with the *sole criterion being the impact on human health*, including:
    a. Ranking of which method (or combination of methods) of rubbish disposal provides the *least* risk to human health in both the short and long-term
    b. Ranking of potential sites - including industrial sites in Sydney or any other site in NSW - as to the estimated *least amount of carbon emissions* caused by the transportation of Sydney's rubbish to the site

4. Lessons from Australian experience with technology and products with long-term effects on health and the environment, including but not limited to:
    a. Per-and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances (PFAS)
    b. Asbestos

I am confident that any thorough and independent review conducted at arms-length from the NSW government and the waste disposal industry would not recommend energy from waste facilities but rather a mix of other solutions to Sydney's rubbish needs.

An Engineered Crisis

Further, I would recommend that the NSW government ceases to view the situation regarding Sydney's rubbish disposal as a crisis or saying that Sydney's landfill will run out imminently. In my opinion this is fear mongering designed to push public policy to a predetermined outcome. It is quite simply an engineered crisis not a real crisis.

The reality is that Sydney's landfill is not in imminent danger of running out. Even on current disposal rates there are some years. But as the landfill reaches capacity then it's price will increase and it will be more expensive and therefore less competitive to recycling, composting and other methods of waste disposal other than landfill. Furthermore, before that happens there are a number of levers the NSW government could pull to both create time and solve Sydney's landfill problems before any *real* crisis appears (reduction in packaging, increased recycling, composting, emerging technologies) . Indeed, the NSW government has admitted that it could even create more landfill if required. That is, Sydney's landfill capacity is not a fixed capacity that is running out rapidly. So yes, Sydney has a rubbish problem but it's not a real crisis.

The NSW government should be working methodically and without panic on a range of measures to deal with Sydney's rubbish problem. The harmful myth of a waste crisis will not help this to happen and should be disregarded.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is my opinion that energy from waste facilities are neither needed nor beneficial to the state of NSW. We should not be doing this.

However, if the NSW government proceeds down this path then the following measures should be put in place to protect the citizens of NSW from any potential harm caused by energy from waste facilities. These measures are:

- Financial Assurance – Set at the market value of real estate (independently estimated) or estimate the cost of the removal and replacement of topsoil within a radius of 100km of the plant. These funds should be kept in trust by the state of NSW to provide compensation for any damage done by contamination.
- Breaches – Due to the catastrophic health and economic consequences of breaches the fines should be commensurate - $1billion per breach.
- Fit and Proper Persons – Have licences dependent on prior good environmental behaviour and continued good behaviour. That is, a record that contains no EPA licence breaches is required for the licence to be granted and once granted if there are 3 licence breaches then the licence is revoked permanently.
- Best Practice Requirement – Every 5 years the waste incineration technology is reviewed independently and the licensee is required to upgrade to the latest and best practice technology in the world within 2 years.
- No Multi Year Lock-In Contracts – Waste contracts with waste incineration are limited at 1 year duration. This prevents long term contracts that lock councils in to providing a waste and provides them with a perverse incentive to not recycle or reduce waste.

- No Importation of Feedstock - This has been a major problem in some European jurisdictions where good recycling efforts have resulted in the factories having to be fed with imported rubbish. Therefore, ban feedstock for waste incineration from other jurisdictions outside NSW including the ACT.

- Levy - A levy on waste incineration that goes to fund recycling initiatives by councils or companies of 100%. Similar to the levy on cigarettes this will encourage councils and companies to deal with waste in a way that lowers the risk to human health.

God bless,

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