

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

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It is far too premature to evaluate impacts in my (the Hay) region of the SW REZ as the construction of the Transgrid transmission line and some Solar farms are the only main components completed to date. There are several windfarms, solar farms and BESS installations approved and while construction is still underway or has not started, they are being marketed and promoted to the community as providing huge economic benefits from a number of sources. Some benefits are to occur as part of the development and construction process, such as local jobs, procurement, increased use of local services and businesses, provision of training services and new community services. There is little evidence to suggest that any more than a minimum of these benefits have come to fruition. Pressure on visitor accommodation is at a premium cost and availability is limited. There has been an increase to the number of local residential housing converted to Bed and Breakfasts reducing the amount of housing available for new or other potential homeowners. Many of these accommodation providers have had long term block bookings for visiting and shiftwork tradespeople regardless of the Transgrid camp set up.

The construction of the Transgrid transmission did provide employment to a small number of personnel but local feedback is that there is very limited opportunity for and other contractors and business to participate in the construction process. Local feedback from landholders in the transmission lines clearing areas reported that gates were left open, roads were accessed where they were not authorised and all was not as positive as the Minister Chris Minns reported in social and news media, where he thanked the land owners, neighbours, mayors and community leaders he claimed to have met; when the facts were established, his invitation only meeting at Boooroban was a very close knit group of supporters and hosts followed by another closed meeting at the Hay Shire Council with only staff and a few councillors in attendance. No transparency here, no community consultation or greetings and no public announcement that the Access rights to the Transmission line for the Pottinger Wind Project was reduced from 247 to 118.

There has been no measure of environmental impacts following the recent installation of the 900-kilometre Buronga to Wagga Wagga transmission line through the Hay district apart from the original environmental impact statements prior to 2020, and no suggestion to measure other cumulative impacts aside from the community grants within and around the Hay community.

Grants were available through Transgrid as one time only initiatives and once successful were not eligible for funding in future grant rounds. Other Energy companies offered multiple rounds of \$3- 5-thousand-dollar grants that were eagerly taken up by nonprofits and organisations. Small change, considering the proposed benefits to the

land hosts and neighbours. There is no doubt that this was a confetti of “tasters” of the big banquet to follow as they were eagerly taken up at every opportunity.

Consultation & communication

What is glaringly obvious, is the lack of community agency to voice our dissatisfaction on the process or query the rapidity of this transition roll out. At best we can trawl through hours of searching the Dept planning websites to identify which and where we still have time to object or scrutinise the Environment Impact Statements of new developments. Unfortunately, not many people have the time or opportunity to spend the amount of time required researching and writing submissions, knowing full well that it is an obligatory exercise to meet the criteria of the State Significant Development applications and many other development proposals. If our submissions progress to hearings we have to be diligent to ensure checking timelines and hearings on the Parliamentary websites in order to attend as notifications times are too short.

Hours of unpaid work, often belittled by other community members and disregarded anyway as the decisions are already well under way. Local Government community consultation invitations on new and updated plans and policies are not worth the time applied; it is purely a tick a box exercise and suggestions go unheeded. Planning development applications get published in local media, but they often clash with other commitments or more urgent timelines to lodge objections to support other small townships facing the same challenge against the growing swell of renewable developments.

There are many people in the Hay district and community that do object and do not support this transition that is being “done to us,” however, vocalising this is becoming more difficult with lack of media interest and Councils bland ignorance. Attempts by objectors like me to voice concerns in regional media and radio are downplayed and advised that they will seek a “right of reply” or response from the adversary before editing and limiting dialogue before it goes to air or print.

Local social media is dismissed as being provocative and not in line with council and other peer departments policies. Phone calls suggesting I “moderate” my tone and change my content at risk of offending 3rd parties while completely disregarding that I and other opponents have every right to voice our disapproval.

The populace and Councils of the SW REZ and in the Riverina are novices in the grand scale of renewable projects that is unfolding across Australia. Some have limited notion of the irreversible damage being done to our agricultural industry. Land clearing on small acreage is prohibited yet Government is raking through thousands of hectares under the licence of “Critical National Interest” removing hundreds of thousands of established trees, carbon storing trees, to replace them with Wind turbines.

There is a groundswell of justified objectors throughout Victoria and Western Australia, Queensland, New England and the Central West Orana REZ and an army of Agricultural landholders in Victoria and Scott River WA, all fighting to salvage their land and property rights from Renewable Energy development. Yet the Hay Shire Council believe they are the architects of the perfect model of negotiation with their “Fundamental Principles of Renewable Development” being proffered to the Renewable Energy companies, offering our agricultural land like fresh meat right into the international Energy Company Lions

mouths, and brushing off our concerns as “climate deniers”, NIMBYs and misinformed trouble makers.

For context, the capacity of the South-West REZ is currently proposed to be approximately half that of other REZs in NSW. From the industry’s perspective, there is far more interest and opportunity in the South-West REZ than current transmission capacity allows. There is no guarantee that the Government won’t announce further transmission projects in the future to increase the South-West REZ transmission capacity, as the limited capacity of the completed Buronga – Wagga line means many of the currently proposed wind and solar farms in the South-West REZ are unlikely to be built at this stage. If capacity was somehow increased or bolstered by a secondary line, or more batteries installed, there will be another influx of proposals and history demonstrates they will proceed under the “Critical State Infrastructure or Critical National Interest” banner with or without Shire Council approval, VPAs or any recommendation. In New South Wales, VPAs are governed by the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979. Under this legislation, a VPA must be voluntary, meaning that developers cannot be compelled to enter into such agreements.

Welcome to the Lion’s Den.

Negotiations are strictly private and change and continue to change at every step, and the Energy Companies can sell, move on, close down or even abandon and change their stripes at will. It is a minefield for new players, despite the initial assurance and supply of script from organisations like Re Alliance and Climate 200 that are continuing to peddle the dogma at every opportunity.

Meanwhile, in Hay, the model “Fundamental Principles of Renewable Development”, is being promoted and marketed to other regions as best practice and the ultimate archetypal for success. How can this be when the “model” is untried?

The “model” is yet to be evaluated or doesn’t this standard practice apply to Transmission lines as part of Renewable Energy Development? The Government continues to spruik that Hay loves the Wind Turbines and there is nothing to see here. The Council and a selected few have outspoken anyone that makes a stand or does not support the narrative.

Why were there no presentations in the planning and “community consultation” of the document regarding negative impacts to renewable energy developments? From the failures, the sell outs, the wind farms that have foreclosed or shutdown, the disgruntled communities of thousands of people and farmers seeing their properties trashed and devalued by up to 30% and affecting their ability to produce food. The Merotherie road environmental vandalism and hundreds of birds and wildlife injured and exterminated. The Wellington Solar farm blaze, albeit it happened in December 2025 but there are plenty of similar incidences of burned-out solar farms that preceded it. For an industry built on clean energy and sustainability, the image of a solar farm, wind turbine blades ablaze or a BESS installation fuelling a bushfire is confronting. It underlines a truth that risk engineers know well: renewable does not mean risk free.

Why weren’t these stories brought to the table for transparent discussion and thorough consideration for the public before they were romanced and signed up to a lifetime of commitment to environmental destruction and extermination of wildlife?

Misinformation

Media are still reporting that the original Pottinger joint venture proposal of the Pottinger between Someva and AGL will feature up to 247 turbines with a capacity of 1,300 MW and will provide power to up to 830,000 homes. This is incorrect and has since been determined under the Access Rights, that the Pottinger Energy Park is actually proposed to be up to 831 megawatts (MW) of wind (**approximately 115 turbines**) which is expected to provide electricity to power the equivalent of the annual needs of over **510,000 average** NSW households. Notwithstanding the employment opportunities promised at 900 has now reduced to up to 550 jobs at peak construction and 35 ongoing roles throughout its operational life. That's ONLY a difference of 320,000 homes and 350 less job opportunities, but we don't advertise that – it would take the shine off. This type of glorifying may incite interest and support from local communities in the outset but as time goes on and the reality is a far cry from the dreams of living in green paradise unfold, I foretell that support will begin to waiver.

Community Benefit Grants

For example, the community benefit funds announced by the Media and Hay Shire Council from this Pottinger project alone started at \$34-5 Million dollars over a 25-year period has now been reduced to \$26 million dollars over a 30-year period shared between Deniliquin and Hay.

\$13 million dollars to each community over a year period is roughly \$433,000 per annum. Are the neighbouring land holder payments (incentives) to be distributed from this cash pool or are they another separate secret agreement?

I acknowledge that there will be other contributors to the local REZ transmission line such as Bullewah with its 47 Turbines, however it is all falling very short of the promised mark to build and provided all sorts of wonderful new infrastructure, electric buses and other projects championed by the Shire Council in the Hay community.

- Housing and affordable electricity for households – Definitely NOT HAPPENING.
- Affordable electricity for small business and industry to reduce cost of doing business - NOT HAPPENING.

We are facing the highest electricity charges now and power prices are tipped to increase another 20–25% as Labor's taxpayer funded energy subsidies end.

Remember the \$275 power bill cut we were promised?

- Payments to landholders hosting solar, wind or storage projects on their land – Single digit figures would cover the number of windfall beneficiaries in this area.

Due to the vast distances required for the Turbines installations and the size of most grazing/ agricultural properties in the region these payments will be restricted to a very small number of landholders.

- Payments to neighbours adjacent to projects –

This mass scale inducement has ensured a groundswell of support despite any doubts they may have of the adverse cumulative effects on their own land, stock or property values.

- Community benefits from Developers either through Developer managed community benefit funds or through Planning Agreements between a Developer and Council.

The Dream Scheme to apparently compensate for the destruction of the environment, a bonus cash box of funding that Shire Councils can mechanise to offset their own financial obligations to regular operations under the guise of documents such as “Fundamental Principles for Successful Renewable Development” and other duplicate models.

The biggest marketing ploy pushed by The SW REZ Council of Hay and Deniliquin is the “drought proofing farmers and the economy” declaration. These renewable projects are drought proofing the pockets of a very small number of landholders in this district. There is no drought proofing or resilience building for the rest of our local agricultural industry or community from 118 wind turbines placed on private land and 47 on another, while the power generated is used primarily directed to the East coast cities.

Traditional agricultural farming in most of the SW REZ consists of intergenerational landholders, where ties between people and land run deep, these connections enrich family life, strengthen community, and support long-term farmland stewardship. The new age of “farming wind turbines, solar panels and BESS installations” brings a different aspect from viewing traditional grazing lands for cattle, sheep or cropping production to fast real estate turnover purely for the potential renewable energy projects and benefits that will increase multinational purchasers and drive out or minimise the ability for smaller family operators to survive. It sets a dangerous prefix for future food and fibre supply when valued continuation of traditional farming practices are removed and a huge wind or solar farm and all of their restraints is established.

Destruction of wildlife Habitat and Ecological impacts

There has been an avalanche of Renewable Energy development community grants over the last two years.

They have been used for a variety of purposes, including **Fireworks displays**, community markets, cultural celebrations and the purchase of single use items for events. There is limited or no initiatives offered from the Renewable sector or Shire Councils to support local applicants in the RE Zones for Wildlife rescue or rehabilitation. Alongside the Community Benefit funds, Australia urgently and legitimately needs to adopt a national wildlife levy funded by the Renewable industry so wildlife carers can access funding for feed, medical treatment, and proper housing that meets species-specific welfare standards.

It’s a shameful oversight that renewable energy projects will fund Fireworks displays when Fireworks are directly responsible for displacing bats, flying foxes and birds, particularly owls and Night Jars and even domestic pets, notwithstanding the huge cost and waste being blasted into the sky at every event from a birthday party to the annual Sydney Fireworks displays costing upwards of \$6 million annually. It’s outrageous that small and medium wildlife operations and wildlife carers are expected to cover all the costs themselves when they are involved in regular and distressing wildlife and bird rescues as a result of habitat clearing and renewable project development for Renewable Energy.

Largescale earthworks and infrastructure construction throughout NSW and QLD is obliterating native habitat of emus, kangaroos, wombats and reptiles and is pushing

homeless species into populated areas and into mainstream traffic where there are hundreds of birds and animals killed daily throughout Australia on regional roads and highways. It is not enough that the Research Grants Program by WIRES, launched in 2022, allocates only \$1.5 million annually to support critical national wildlife research projects. That amount of money is a pittance, and one-off grants of \$1,000 PA is all that is available to small operations and isolated rescuers in remote areas. It is not equitable to offset an unsuitable renewable projects such as a wind farm next door to a primary location of the unique and critically endangered plains-wanderer (*Pedionomus torquatus*) that has already experienced a dramatic contraction in its range by purchasing bio diversity offset credits or setting up an onsite or offsite Stewardship Site under the BOS and making perfunctory trade-off of future promises for cheaper and cleaner energy.

“Renewable Energy” projects including solar panel “farms,” wind turbines and BESS construction works, and the ongoing maintenance, repairs and monitoring are continuing to destroy wildlife habitats, killing and injuring protected and other endangered animals and birdlife while destroying local vegetation they need for survival. The purchase of biodiversity offsetting certificates will not address adequately the large-scale destruction of wildlife habitat in any of the areas in and around the proposed sites of the SW REZ. Energy Co announced in 2024 agreed to allocate on biodiversity offsets, after entering into a 'Biodiversity Conservation Investment Strategy' with the government for the Central Orana REZ for \$140 million. It did not deter the developers desecrating of hundreds of ancient trees destroyed along Merotherie road in the CW Orana REZ to widen the road for heavy vehicles and large equipment to be transported to the nearby energy hub. This environmental vandalism has decimated the native habitat of local fauna, killing and injuring dozens of native birds, birds of prey, parrots, kestrels. Projects are approved in isolation, ignoring the combined regional damage of dozens of overlapping developments.

The South West Conservation Investment Strategy released in January 2026 will supposedly guide biodiversity offsets under strategic offset delivery agreements for any projects associated with the South West Renewable Energy Zone. It is a little late for the Buronga Wagga transmission line connect as the damage is already done and no rehabilitation or assessment efforts have been reported. Budget information regarding a biodiversity offsets strategy for the SW REZ is not available in the report or in the planning process reports and won't be freely available to concerned individual objectors like me. Purchasing huge tracts of land under the guise of National Parks and Aboriginal conservation does not equate to stripping areas of land in an entirely different location for renewable energy and transmission infrastructure and only proves that biodiversity offsets are nature negative.

Regularly seen on BESS applications is the term “sterilising” large and small areas of land as a required process, disregarding the fact that it should be an unwarranted “byproduct” and a serious negative impact on future land use or any consideration of land being restored to its former use after decommissioning. This is a serious oversight and smacks in the face of renewable, clean and green claims. If a solar farm is 100 megawatts, it will contain several tonnes of silver, which is a toxic heavy metal, and if one per cent of that silver ends up in the soil through leaching or through large hailstorms, that will mean the soil will never be able to be rehabilitated for agricultural purposes and can lead to serious ‘forever’ contamination of soil, preventing plant growth. Fragmenting the landscape is hardly a description that will apply to a landscape that is completely, razed, sterilised and made permanently unusable for any other purpose.

The adoption of the principle “State-significant critical infrastructure project” for unsuitable or overreaching project or development is a back door agency being used to force through any controversial development in order not to rock the boat. Continuing to destroy nature in the name of protecting nature to make way for renewable energy projects doesn’t square up and the defective biodiversity offsets system is being used as a battering ram to push all kinds of development through the planning system at nature’s expense. Across the continent, the infrastructure of the renewable revolution — wind farms, solar megaprojects, transmission lines, battery plants, and mining operations — is tearing through forests, farmland, and fragile ecosystems. We are already in an extinction crisis, and we don’t need to lose any more biodiversity as part of the renewable energy transition.

Declaring State-significant critical infrastructure projects is just another way of driving the planning system that will approve environmental destruction, wherever they want to choose the quickest, or cheapest, or easiest way to do development. The bottom line is, that the construction of Wind Turbines, Solar Panel (farms) and BESS complexes destroy the habitat of native birds and animals and removes precious allocated farming land from the economy. The loss of genuine agricultural and farming land in the Riverina is already substantial with the construction of hundreds of kilometres of large transmitters and extensive underground disturbance and service roads that have permanently scarred the landscape while Australia’s quest to dodge an arguable “environmental crisis” is creating an actual one.

Annette Smith.