

REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE NO. 4 - REGIONAL NSW

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

CORRECTED

At Dubbo Regional Council Chambers, Dubbo, on Friday 16 May 2025

The Committee met at 9:30.

PRESENT

The Hon. Mark Banasiak (Chair)

The Hon. Aileen MacDonald

The Hon Sarah Mitchell

The Hon. Peter Primrose

PRESENT VIA VIDEOCONFERENCE

The Hon. Emma Hurst (Deputy Chair)

The Hon. Cameron Murphy

The CHAIR: Welcome to the second hearing of the Portfolio Committee No. 4 – Regional NSW inquiry into the impact of regional energy zones on rural and regional communities and industries in New South Wales. I acknowledge the Wiradjuri people, the traditional custodians of the lands on which we are meeting today. I pay my respects to Elders past and present, and celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their ongoing cultures and connections to the lands and waters of New South Wales. I also acknowledge and pay my respects to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people joining us today. My name is Mark Banasiak and I am the Chair of the Committee.

I ask everyone in the room to please turn their mobile phones to silent. Parliamentary privilege applies to witnesses in relation to the evidence they give today. However, it does not apply to what witnesses say outside of their evidence at the hearing. I urge witnesses to be careful about making comments to the media or to others after completing their evidence. In addition, the Legislative Council has adopted rules to provide procedural fairness for inquiry participants. I encourage Committee members and witnesses to be mindful of these procedures.

Mr MURRAY WOOD, Chief Executive Officer, Dubbo Regional Council, affirmed and examined

Mr STEVEN JENNINGS, Director, Development and Environment, Dubbo Regional Council, affirmed and examined

Mr BRAD CAM, General Manager, Mid-Western Regional Council, sworn and examined

Mr LINDSAY MASON, General Manager, Warrumbungle Council, sworn and examined

Adjunct Professor WARWICK GIBLIN, FEIANZ, FRSN, Environmental Consultant for Warrumbungle Council, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: We now have time for short opening statements from witnesses. Mr Cam, do you have an opening statement?

BRAD CAM: The Central-West Orana Renewable Energy Zone—the first in New South Wales—has been marked by an alarming lack of planning, leadership and coordination. Small rural communities and regional towns within the REZ footprint, such as those in the Mid-Western Regional Council area, are paying the price. There was and is an genuine opportunity for the REZ to become a model for responsible, well-planned energy transitions. If EnergyCo had embraced the whole of the leadership and the coordination, working with council and the developers—not just a select few—our region could have avoided many of the negative outcomes that have occurred. The challenges that are facing the small communities include the absence of a master plan. The whole region master planning for the REZ has not happened. Transition capacity has been increased multiple times without infrastructure planning. EnergyCo initially only worked with six generators, ignoring other project proponents that are part of the REZ.

You can see that we have 38 State-significant projects. I have a copy of the plans for the REZ. The local services, housing and roads are overwhelmed. There is no New South Wales Government oversight of overall community impacts. The crushing strain on council and staff has led to complexities, with staff involved in hundreds of repetitive meetings with multiple proponents, with the same issues discussed repeatedly. There is no centralised coordination. Council are forced to negotiate solutions project by project. Subsequently, rents, particularly in places like Gulgong, have increased by 22 per cent. They are predicting an additional 1,800 workers and dwellings are needed for the REZ by 2026. Council has also tabled clear water and waste management solutions over the past two years and they have been ignored. There has been failure to act in any form of regional coordination. Council have strongly advocated for centralised workforce accommodation coordination to avoid community impacts, which are causing problems. The outcomes of multiple large camps, planned side by side, including a 1,200-bed camp at Merotherie and a 650 bed camp at Birriwa, will have impacts on townships like Gulgong, only 20 kilometres away, which is going to have a population of construction workers bigger than the town itself.

There are issues around oversize, overmass vehicle movements severely damaging rural and regional roads. Regional Development Australia has developed and produced a document on the impacts and the upgrades on the Golden Highway by eminent people, which has been ignored. Frustrating and concerning for us are the impacts on the Golden Highway and also our local roads. The community-benefits distribution, because of the transmission line and the access fees, is disproportionately being distributed and is ignoring the impacts on communities within Mid-Western. In conclusion, the first REZ was meant to be a model for renewable energy transmission. Instead, it has become a case study of what happens when small rural communities are excluded from decision making and are left to manage overwhelming impacts alone. It needs to be coordinated and someone needs to take a coordinator role to ensure proper planning and to ensure that the sequencing of projects and integrated infrastructure solutions are dealt with. There needs to be urgent intervention, leadership and investment in partnerships that are essential. Otherwise, the legacy of this REZ will be a disaster, fracturing communities and causing undue concern. The Mid-Western Regional Council stands ready as a partner with the Government and its agencies to help deliver the outcomes, but action must happen now. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Wood?

MURRAY WOOD: I will say some short words and then I will pass to my colleague Mr Jennings. Certainly, as one of a group of councils, Dubbo Regional Council is lucky to have more resources, as a larger council, than the smaller councils. Some of the impacts on resources are less for a council of our size. We understand that this is happening and contracts are signed. That is challenging for the community to understand. We often explain to the community that the REZ projects in our patch are three projects—and we have 22 in terms of renewable projects. There is a difference there. I will get Mr Jennings to explain that as well. We are very focused—if this is to happen—on how we can shape legacy and lasting legacy. We don't want a construction boom and we don't want workers to be solar panel polishers. We want lasting legacy. We're very much focused

on that. We understand that as the first REZ, this is a plane that is being built as we are flying it. To Mr Cam's point, we are seeking collaboration with government and other parties to minimise negative impacts on community and maximise any legacies. We aren't an approval authority, so there is less power for us in that regard. I will now throw to Mr Jennings.

STEVEN JENNINGS: I thank the Committee for the opportunity and for coming to Dubbo and the renewable energy zone. It's a great inquiry and process, from the council perspective, to provide our submissions and evidence, and also for community to have that access to the Committee from that point of view. As Mr Wood touched on, we have 22 projects in our patch of the REZ. There are three candidate foundation generator projects up in the north-western tip of our local government area. There is one wind farm and two solar farms as well. There are another 19 projects ranging from solar to wind. There is large-scale battery energy storage and a pumped hydro project that is proposed at Burrendong Dam. There is a hydrogen project here in Dubbo, which has gone through the planning system.

As Mr Wood touched on, our focus through this process is to make sure that our community can have the access to the information that they need to understand, first, what the renewable energy zone is; and second, what the role of local government is and what the role of State government is in respect of being an approval authority. We are also focused on ensuring council has the right policy settings in place so we can have those benefits flowing in the short, medium and long term from these projects in our local government area. We've got two very different settlements. So Dubbo, 44,00 people, then Wellington as well. We've got two very different socio-economic groups, so we're very focused on making sure that we can capture those benefits for the Wellington community and the villages around as well. That forms part of our focus.

LINDSAY MASON: Thanks for this opportunity. I'll say a few words and then I'll pass on to Mr Giblin. Key points are that the declaration of the REZ brings with it the prospect of profound change in the Warrumbungle Shire, the likes of which has not been experienced in its 200 years of European settlement. REZ-wide, there are 40-plus generation projects planned from the major transmission line. A dozen of these projects are to be located in the Warrumbungle Shire. Grappling with change of this magnitude poses significant challenges for our small rural council, our rural communities and the rural landscape. Deciphering the environmental, social and economic costs and benefits is a complex task for a small council.

Since day one of the REZ declaration, Warrumbungle Shire Council has been advocating for the New South Wales Government, DPHI and EnergyCo to address the likely REZ-wide strategic cumulative impacts arising from these 40-plus projects and identify the measures to be implemented to mitigate the adverse impacts, and for this assessment to be conducted before individual projects are assessed and determined. Such a strategic, whole-of-government cumulative impact assessment is now underway some four years after the REZ was declared. These studies have not been completed. Warrumbungle Shire and its communities wish to know what mitigative actions will be implemented and when. For example, police, doctor shortages, nurses, hospital beds et cetera.

Our recommendations would be that strategic, whole-of-government, cumulative impact assessment, including implementation of mitigative actions, be completed immediately for the REZ, and that the State Government defer decisions on individual projects until this vital cumulative impact work is completed. That any project consents protect council's rights as the local roads authority to determine the scope of road upgrades necessary to cope with heavy and oversize traffic and to also secure road maintenance funds from the developers. The last one is that the use of planning agreements managed by local government is the best way for REZ developers to make financial contributions to fund community benefits. I'll pass on to Mr Giblin.

WARWICK GIBLIN: Thank you, Mr Mason. Good morning Chair and panel. Just a couple of points to elaborate on what Mr Mason has said. Firstly, to clarify, a cumulative impact assessment has two phases or two elements of that. One is at the project level, the other is at the strategic whole-of-government, whole-of-REZ approach. What Mr Mason and the council is calling for is that strategy REZ-wide cumulative impact assessment be conducted. Crucially, we wish to see these remedial mitigating actions, especially on social matters, particularly the things that require additional resourcing—like police, paramedics, doctors, nurses, hospital beds, mental health services—to serve something like an additional 7,000 to 10,000 workers across the REZ over the next decade.

The New South Wales Government clearly sees there is a need for this strategic cumulative impact assessment because it has announced the same not only for the Central West REZ but also for the New England REZ and the south west. However the crux is, here, that work has not been done yet the Government is determining these projects now. In our view, there is a material and significant procedural error in the State Government's planning and assessment process, and thus we call on the State Government to postpone any further determination on the generation projects until such time as the strategic impact assessment work has been completely, firstly; secondly, the mitigation measures are identified; and thirdly, that they are implemented.

The CHAIR: The Committee has resolved to have free-flowing questions. The questions can come from anywhere, including some of our panel members that are appearing via videoconference. Mr Mason and Mr Giblin, you're talking about essentially a pause on going forward in terms of approving planning before this cumulative impact study is done. Given the evidence we heard from planning in EnergyCo on Tuesday, where they said there is nothing they can do to stop more projects going into the planning pipeline, what is the point of having a cumulative impact study being done when that will essentially continue to be a moving feast while these projects continue to go into the pipeline? There may be a pause in terms of them being approved, but they are adding to the cumulative impact, aren't they?

WARWICK GIBLIN: Yes, they are. But, at the moment, we have a situation where decisions are being made for projects which are in the pipeline already for which there is no understanding or appreciation of what those cumulative impacts might be. It is very common for a region that is about to undergo major change in land use that you conduct strategic cumulative assessment work. That would have flagged, and pre-empted right at the very beginning, the likely impacts but also the flow-on consequences for the conditions of consent relevant to each and every individual project.

The CHAIR: The point I am trying to make is not necessarily against the cumulative impact study, but do we need to not pause the approval but pause these projects going into the pipeline in the first place?

WARWICK GIBLIN: The first point I would make is, at law, there has to be due process and proper process, procedural process and policy process adopted in decision-making undertaken by the State Government. At the moment there is, arguably, a question mark about whether things are appropriately done where the proper process has been followed. It raises the risk of a judicial review in the Land and Environment Court if this strategic cumulative impact assessment work is not completed. I hear your point. There are two major extensions of the transmission line foreshadowed into the future. One for the line to go all the way across Warrumbungle to Tooraweenah, and also an extension of the line down to Burrendong but, at this point, we have no strategic cumulative impact assessment idea at all.

The CHAIR: To the whole panel, what has your engagement been with developers, if you could characterise that engagement with the developers and EnergyCo? We have heard a lot about the lack of engagement with the individual landholders. I'm just wondering if there has been a better engagement with you guys.

BRAD CAM: First up, we need to understand that EnergyCo, for me, is only one proponent. That gets lost a little bit. People think that whether it's wind, solar or pumped hydro, it all goes through EnergyCo. It's not.

The CHAIR: That's why I broadened it to developers as well.

BRAD CAM: They are individual developers. Putting it into perspective, last year I attended 270 meetings in the 12 months with proponents, all to do with REZ. We can't ever seem to get the proponents to all sit at the table and talk together. It would be great if three councils could sit together with the proponents and talk, but they are not willing to do that. They are not interested in doing that, but they are all competing for a project to get approval.

MURRAY WOOD: I would say that there are good proponents who work actively with council and proactively in understanding community and I suggest working with community. And there are others who are genuine flippers. They will just want to get it to a point and flip it. I think Canadian—we've had one that's probably done that three times, and that's where we find the negative relationships develop with the community, because they are not interested in having a long-term presence. I will add, I'm on a working group as a representative of the Mid West in the Federal Government's program for a rating system on developers that actually will—I'll colloquially say it—a five-star rating is if you are good working with community, you've got that formal reputation. That way it's easier for community to understand who are the good operators who have a record of good collaboration with community, and others who, like I suggest, are more interested in flipping something and getting a short-term return rather than having a permanent presence in the community. I think the legislative framework is challenging if you've got property rights to develop your property—that would be a challenge to say you can stop things entering a planning system. It's not so much about the proponents, but about other people such as landholders working with a proponent on their patch of dirt. There would some challenges there in property law, I'd suggest.

STEVEN JENNINGS: Like Mr Cam, I'd hate to go through my diary over the last five years to understand how many discussions I've had with proponents. It's probably taken up half of my professional time over that period. As Mr Wood touched on as well, there's definitely a range of experiences that I've had in that five-year or so period between proponents to have more of that local presence and foothold ranging from proponents that you won't see a lot of. It's a lot of Teams meetings as well.

LINDSAY MASON: My tenure's only been short in the GM role but I have, like these other guys, attended an enormous amount of meetings with proponents, some good and some bad. I like to advocate that they've got to do more to consult the community. We do have a couple of pop-up shops within the Coolah area relating to the Valley of the Winds and the Liverpool Range Wind Farm. One of them's not always open, and the other one is. I might pass to Warwick Giblin. He's had many dealings with the proponents, as council's rep.

WARWICK GIBLIN: The observation I would make is that over time the developers have demonstrated a greater willingness and openness to talk with council. I think that's come about primarily because council has made strong representations to DPHI about better engagement and for developers to listen more carefully to councils. I would suggest we're seeing a more productive dialogue now than we did in the earlier couple of years.

The CHAIR: Mr Wood, one of the submissions we received spoke about one of your councillors doing some of the planning work as part of their business for the REZ—Councillor Ivey did some preliminary planning work for an EIS. Given that with regional communities a lot of councillors and people take on multiple roles—not just on council but volunteer organisations—has that added complexity in terms of how councils have dealt with their engagement with EnergyCo where you might see potential conflicts of interest with landowners also being on council or having a role in council et cetera?

MURRAY WOOD: I'm not aware of that allegation, but we've just had an election and one of our strong onboarding processes is that we get them drinking from the firehose, metaphorically speaking, to understand their obligations. In a regional community, that's always a risk because we are so connected, so it's up to individuals to be aware of their conflicts of interest. I guess part of that is managed by the fact that council aren't an approval authority. In terms of providing input, we have technical officers. If you need a road for your development that is going to bring in oversize or overmass, we specify the standards by which you build. We've actually had a good outcome there at Twelve Mile Road where it's a \$30 million or thereabouts investment in a road that we would never be able to afford. So there are those technical areas that elected bodies aren't a part of. For voluntary planning agreements, we have to go through a public process in terms of decision-making by an elected body. Then it goes out on public exhibition, so there are controls there in terms of public decision-making. It is very separate from technical, which is the standard way of councils operating, if that makes sense.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: I will probably direct this to you, Mr Wood, because it came from the Dubbo submission, but I would be interested in all councils speaking to this if you'd like to. In your submission, and some of you mentioned it in your opening comments too, you talked about the role for council, given that you're not the consent authority and you don't have approval authority, yet you are in many ways the closest level of government to the community. How do you manage that role of being a conduit between what your local community wants and some of the potential benefits but also the very real concern that is coming from some of your community about what's happening in the rollout?

MURRAY WOOD: I'll have first go, and then I'll pass to my colleague Mr Jennings before the other council representatives. It goes right back to when a proposal first starts and we hear community angst. It might be actually getting the community hall. For example, we did one down at Euchareena. We heard from our villages committee there were some angst, so we went there. The planning system is hard to understand. It's hard to understand when you can put your views forward and when a project is actually more than just a concept on paper. That fundamental level of explaining how this fits in the New South Wales planning system is one part of uncertainty that is challenging for everyone—so how to help people understand the system and how they can participate in the planning approval process.

There are the technical elements, which I touched on before. Our ratepayers are concerned about proponents consuming road assets and then ratepayers' money having to go back in and fix those assets. I would say that we have had greater support from the planning department, similar to what Mr Giblin said, whereas in the past we didn't have as much support. We were on our own and we could be ignored by, for example, solar panels. We had some projects that had that negative outcome in terms of community assets and infrastructure, so it's about representing that. Given that we aren't the approval authority, yes, we try and capture community sentiment and pass that through the planning system as well. But I guess we have a technical area—if it's going to happen, we need to protect community assets and infrastructure so there's no ongoing cost or liability to the community, and then there's that perception and helping neighbours understand the planning process. But I'll throw to Mr Jennings.

STEVEN JENNINGS: I'll just touch on a couple of things. One of the big areas that we've just started a process with is that we had our first meeting of our renewable energy community committee last week in Wellington. The role of this community committee is for representatives of the various communities of interest where projects are happening or proposed to happen to have a say and input as to where voluntary planning

agreement funds go to in respect of community projects. It's also got a role in making sure it's that conduit so that council can understand some of those issues of interest in these areas. It's also going to have a role where a proponent can come along and give project updates as to where their project's at. It's also for council staff and council to provide updates on our policy settings as well. Council, at the staff and elected body level, see it as a very important conduit to community.

We're building the committee based on a local-representation model based on the old-fashioned localities where we have locality members on the committee as well. We had our first meeting last week, but we're on a journey with that brief, and we'll see where it goes. I don't know of any other councils that have a similar group that has been built like that, but it's one way that we're trying to get the message out and provide that two-way communication loop as well. Council also has a role in policy settings and trying to manage some of those impacts that come from State significant projects. One is through the voluntary planning agreement process, of course. Councils had three policy settings over the life of the REZ. With the release of the State Government framework last December, our framework's been updated for the \$1,050 a megawatt for wind, \$850 for solar, and also to integrate pumped hydro and batteries. That's an important link there to show community how, at the strategic level, we're going to look at how those funds can be distributed to community projects.

The other thing that I'll just touch on is our approach to housing. Obviously, Dubbo is a city of 44,000 people. We've got a lot of land here in Dubbo, upwards of 10,000 lots where housing can relatively happen with the right enabling infrastructure. So there are lots of opportunities there that we are trying to make sure the proponents understand. In Wellington, it's through infill development opportunities, as well. We also see the villages playing an important role in housing opportunities in that regard.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: If you want to answer this, you can. I have got another one for you, Mr Cam, as well. It might even tie in a little bit. I noticed in your submission, particularly the parts where you talked about the impact you have already seen from the solar project, and not just on things like infrastructure such as roads but your health services and your tourism—I think it was good for the Committee to have that information. I was particularly interested in one of the recommendations where you talk about establishing a cap on the number of renewable energy projects within an LGA. That is something that has come through to us in the submissions and in some of the visits and the hearing that we had already. From your experience, being from a council that has lived through these projects already, can you put on record for the Committee why you think the cap is important, what it should look like and how quickly it should be brought in?

BRAD CAM: The impact that we had with two solar arrays happening at the same time was prior to council wanting camps built, because what we found is we ended up with 800 to 900 construction workers for about 12 months in and around the communities of Gulgong and Mudgee, and it had significant impacts on the community. We know the volume of projects that are going to occur in Mid-Western. We are the heart of the renewable energy zone. It's in the centre of us. We're the ones that are mostly impacted with not only what we call REZ projects but also projects that are connecting to existing infrastructure that are not classed as REZ projects but are still renewable projects. We have as many of them as we do that are connecting to the high voltage.

I think one of the things that goes back into the other question is that our conduit of listening to the community is our whole-of-government steering committee. We have identified a number of issues in there, such as water—drinking water, but also construction water, wastewater, waste itself, and the biggest problem the steering committee has is that it has no funding. There is no money to act on the suggestions and the solutions to health, the solutions to water, the solutions to wastewater, how we deal with waste, and that has become a really frustrating, never-ending circle, because we have a steering committee that's trying to work these solutions, but the constant comment is there is no funding. So we go nowhere. That's why we're wanting a cap, because let's stop, let's plan this properly and get some funding together to try and ensure that we can meet the needs of health.

Gulgong has no doctor. We're going to have 1,850 workers for 4½ years, a township of 1,800 people, and we have no GP. They're all going to be overseas workers living in that area. They are going to be actually impacting on the communities of Gulgong and Mudgee, and Dunedoo in the Warrumbungles. We need things to be capped, we need it to be slowed down so we can actually deal with these issues and resolve these issues prior to these camps coming on board. We've got two—one under construction right now, a 1,200-man camp. In three or four months, we will have another 650-bed camp, and next year we've got three other camps coming with collectively, I think, about 1,400 workers, all within 20 kilometres of Gulgong. Enough is enough.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: This question is for Mr Mason. In your submission you also talked about concern about firefighting capabilities in the event of there being an issue at one of these projects, and it was something that came up again yesterday with landowners that we met with, who were very gracious and let us visit them at their homes and on their properties. What would you suggest in terms of where that responsibility lies? Should it be within those organisations and the businesses running those projects to have that capability?

What are some of the concerns that you are hearing from the community about what might happen in the event of an emergency?

LINDSAY MASON: For sure, they've got to be locally based, near those facilities. You've got towns like Coolah and Dunedoo that have retained firefighters—they don't have permanent firefighters, that's New South Wales fire brigade. You've got the various Rural Fire Service brigades and limited other emergency services. We've heard concerns from the communities around aerial firefighting, which has been around the wind farms, which has largely been ignored by some of the developers. You've got to understand that these airports and things that we have in local areas are strips on farms. Even around places like Coolah, it's a unique airfield.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: I live in Gunnedah, so I know the area well.

LINDSAY MASON: If you've been to the Coolah Airport, it's a unique landing. It's a long way down to get to the strip, and it's just a nightmare to think that we could rely on existing services to deal with these things.

WARWICK GIBLIN: If I could just add to that. To answer your question, unequivocally, each of these developments should have onsite mobile—even if it's trailer based—firefighting tenders, with water and tanks. Because it's incumbent that they have that resource there immediately and are not relying on the local Rural Fire Service to come and put out a fire.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: I have a specific question to Dubbo Regional Council and then a general question. My first question to Dubbo is that on page 4 of your submission, you talk about:

Dubbo Regional Council has proposed the Renewable Energy Awareness and Career Training (REACT) Centre.

I was wondering if you could perhaps elucidate a bit more on that proposal.

MURRAY WOOD: Sure. That was council's strategic focus, certainly in the last term before the election for applying for the legacy infrastructure funding through EnergyCo. The logic there is that we have low unemployment—1.7 per cent—but if you actually peel back the layers, particularly in the Wellington end of the local government area, there is significant disadvantage. Whilst everyone is very committed to local developments and therefore local jobs, we don't want industry knocking off people from other jobs that's going to hurt other parts of our economy. So how do we get, particularly underemployed, particularly people experiencing the justice system, as well. We've got two large facilities in Wellington. That's certainly part of the business case, it was based on a Treasury model business case—how do we empower our community to participate, not just in the construction pulse of activity, but also into the higher level of ongoing jobs.

We do have this mantra of "How does a kid in Wellington year 6 look at all this going on and understand and have a clear pathway?" With the overrepresentation of disadvantage in Wellington, that is significantly overrepresented by First Nations people, as well, that is part of the logic of targeting training in community to make it accessible for all. It's not just about underemployed or unemployed people, but it's also about people who want to pivot, whether it's their businesses or their careers, to what is coming at us based on what's already approved and what's happening in this renewables sector. But it can also relate to skills that may be required for the mining sector. There is critical minerals, there is metals mining going on, the same skills, electrical engineering and what have you, but then also for the circular economy piece, as well. We are very focused, as a council, on what are the industrial opportunities around the circular economy. We've got good projects cooking away at the moment. I can't talk about them just yet, but it's about how our community can participate.

For Wellington, if you look at what's happened over time, more and more resources come into the Dubbo area in terms of what government provides and training opportunities, and things have shrunk in the Wellington end—and so targeting purposely, because this is where the activities are for renewables, but also having that foundation of capability and training skills right through from entry-level jobs to higher is why that base. We wouldn't look at doing the training; we would be the landlord. Have a building, have a property. And TAFE NSW, we're working through registered training organisers so that we are doing that at a fee charged to renewable components. I guess I would call out, if you wanted to understand how we could make this happen, through council lobbying and working with the Rural Fire Service out of the airport, we've got the NSW Rural Fire Service State Training Academy here. We've got a police training facility out at the airport. So we have some experience at building this capability to be in our community, rather than it be somewhere else.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Can I ask when you expect the EnergyCo legacy fund may make a decision on this matter?

MURRAY WOOD: We have successfully announced the grants. I won't say we've signed the deed; it's very imminent because we've just got to work out the contract for funding, and we're in parallel or we're already in deep discussions with the registered training authorities and TAFE as well. The funding is there. It's about now stacking up the model. Again, we don't want to be a registered training authority, or organisation, sorry—RTO;

there are plenty of people that can do that much better than what we can and it stops people having to go to Federation Uni in Victoria to get training about how to work on a wind turbine, for example. We want that to happen in our community and particularly for that disadvantaged sector of our community.

WARWICK GIBLIN: Just on the working issue, for example, only recently we've had representations made to us by the transmission line developers that they are struggling to find workers to build that transmission line and they are seeking foreign workers to come into the country to do this work. Now I think the greater priority really is to invest in our peoples here, train our local people up, train up national Australians first to then capitalise on that for our own economies and also broader for the 9,000 to 10,000 transmission line kilometres that have to be built.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Mr Cam, we were talking to landholders yesterday about insurance—the risk and things—so I'll follow on from my colleague. You've noted concerns about landholders' liability in case of fire. Has the council raised this with insurers and/or government agencies and, if you have, what has been the response you've received?

BRAD CAM: Thank you. We haven't raised it with insurance companies, but we have raised it with the Government and at this point we have no responses. It's certainly a real concern to us. It's not only insurance; it's also around fire, as you said, but also there's the risk of the insurance just having that particular product, whether it be a wind turbine or whether it's solar panels on a farm. It's causing significant concerns.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: You've also indicated that local manufacturers are ready to pivot into renewables, supply chains, but lack certainty. What do you need from government that would provide that certainty? Would it be something like a State-supported local procurement quota, or can you give me some sort of examples?

BRAD CAM: We are really trying to pivot on the fact that there's got to be opportunities for locals to be able to either manufacture components of the renewable or train them into those areas, and we're really wanting the Government to sit down with us to be able to have regional development for our local communities. Particularly, we'd like to see industries set up to actually deal with solar panels at the end of life as well. We've been speaking to a company that's interested in being able to break down the entire component of a solar panel. It's not going to be recycled; it's actually going to be re-used so that the individual components can go off to manufacturers to actually be re-used again. That is something that we want to see.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Also, in your opening statement—and I believe all councils said this with regard to the number of hours that you spend talking and dealing with proponents' concerns and you mentioned staff, or funding that you would need for extra staff to deal with this or the extra workload. How are you managing this at the moment, and what kind of support would you need from government to help with that support or funding extra staff?

BRAD CAM: It would be remiss of me if I didn't say something positive that's come from EnergyCo is the fact that they actually have contributed to the three councils in providing some funding each year to help with dealing with the SEERs and the EISs that are coming that are nine and ten thousand pages long. But we recognise that that's still not enough. That is certainly paying for some development engineering expertise and it's certainly paying for some planning staff expertise, but it's not enough because we're still engaging our existing staff in dealing with the number of submissions that we're getting, and continue to keep getting, every week another proponent coming to talk about a project, so we want to see more certainty in actually providing more funding—I think all of my colleagues would be saying the same—to help support us deal with the avalanche of proponents.

MURRAY WOOD: Can I just add, one thing that took us by surprise is, right, we specify you need to reconstruct a road to take oversize and overmass. Of course, all the rural roads sort of wander in and out of the road reserves. We're the road authority, so it's been good money from EnergyCo because I've had to put more resources into something I wasn't aware we'd have to do so much land acquisition to get our roads formally back in a road reserve, but it's another impost on us that we weren't aware of. But, yes, we've had funding from EnergyCo and that is most welcome.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: I have just one more question, and it's to you, Mr Wood, with regard to the partnership with Squadron Energy on advanced wastewater treatment. Do you believe that this model is scalable for other LGAs in other renewable energy zones?

MURRAY WOOD: Yes, we are very willing to share our lessons learned, like we got—and it's no small bar to get over—a public-private partnership through Office of Local Government. It's a very regulated process. But certainly, not just in terms of the process we've gone through and the contribution we've got from a proponent of renewables, but then also the science about how to get it approved for use as well. Certainly I think

it's a learning we're very happy to share with our local government colleagues and we do collaborate in that sense anyway locally and as far as we need to.

BRAD CAM: I think that's the difference. They've got a good proponent that's prepared to sit down and talk. We are certainly wanting to engage the same with other proponents, but we can't get anybody to come to the table.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for your evidence today. I don't believe you took any questions on notice but, if you have, the secretariat will be in touch.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Can I put a question on notice, please? This was my second question. I refer particularly to Warrumbungle's recommendation No. 3 in relation to roads. I would ask, and basically invite all members because you've all addressed issues with local roads and also I want to refer to regional roads, what specific recommendations would you make to the Committee? I know you have already highlighted those in each of your submissions, but which would you specifically highlight to the Committee that you would ask us to make recommendations on in relation not only to local roads, to the various alignments and whatever, but also particularly to regional roads?

The CHAIR: I just note, Mr Cam, you wish to table those?

BRAD CAM: Yes, I'll leave them. There are 10 copies, as requested.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that. You may receive some supplementary questions from us, but the secretariat will be in touch regarding those and the time frame. Thank you for your time.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

Mr GRANT PIPER, AASM, DFSM, Chair, CWO REZist, affirmed and examined

Mrs ANNETTE PIPER, Secretary, Uarbry Tongy Lane Alliance, affirmed and examined

Mrs MARGARET CONN, Landowner, affirmed and examined

Mr TERRY CONN, Landowner, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Does anyone want to make a short opening statement, starting with you, Mr Piper?

GRANT PIPER: Thanks, Mr Banasiak and the Committee, for coming to Dubbo. Welcome to the centre of the Central-West Orana REZ, a "modern-day power station", as EnergyCo gushingly describe it. When we tallied up the proposed projects in the REZ last year, it was 53—wind, solar and BESS—totalling over 1,000 turbines and nine million solar panels. The nameplate capacity is in excess of 14 gigawatts, where New South Wales only draws between eight and 11 gigawatts at any time. Despite being surrounded by all this short-lived, soon to be toxic junk, Dubbo will also have a gas turbine to help keep the lights on. And this is only one of the five REZs in New South Wales, all similarly overbuilt.

This massive overbuild, plus a gas turbine, in the Central-West Orana REZ is a clear admission of the gross inefficiency of the wind and solar power generation. "Inefficiency" means you ultimately use more resources to produce the same power. Add in the many kilometres of new transmission, plus batteries and pumped hydro, which produce no power, and the whole scheme is not only wasteful but counterproductive to the stated aim of reducing material consumption and CO2 emissions. The cost estimate has escalated from sub \$1 billion in 2019 to over \$5 billion now, and so far only some dirt has been pushed about. The final cost will be immense, financially, socially, environmentally, and in land lost to primary production. We, the citizens of New South Wales, underwrite all of this, and if it goes ahead as envisaged, it will lock us, our children and their children into perpetual debt and high power bills to benefit mostly foreign corporations. It's like having to pay the carpenter to build your own gallows.

Over the last few years, we've experienced a constant changing of faces that come and consult with us, from proponent staff, department staff, EnergyCo staff, EIS REZ staff and independent planning commissioners. None of this consultation has resulted in our key concerns being acknowledged, significant changes made to or cancellation of a project. Few, if any, of these people will be there during or after construction to police their conditions. None will be around for the decommissioning, but we and our children will be left with the consequences.

Key problems are aerial firefighting, soil, water contamination, decommissioning, compulsory acquisition, insurance, noise, and the fundamental economic and technical deficiencies of the whole scheme. Despite typically there being 97 per cent opposing submissions to projects and a similar percentage of opposing presentations to IPCs, we have not yet had a project denied approval. No discussion on the merit, technical or financial, of a project or the Net Zero Plan is entered into, yet the failings of the AEMO ISP, the CSIRO GenCost and the RepuTex report are well known in the public domains via open fora and Senate inquiries. Those implementing the transition on us continue to act as if they are unaware that the foundations on which they build rest on sand. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mrs Piper?

ANNETTE PIPER: Thank you to the committee for coming to Dubbo. The Uarbry Tongy Lane Alliance is a community group whose aim is to protect, preserve and enhance our district. We have recently been involved with protecting our homes, farms and local towns from two wind projects, totalling 316 turbines, and nearby transmission lines, substations and accommodation camps. As landowners and residents of the CWO REZ, we can see the spin that is happening, starting with the South West REZ and Hay council saying that all the farmers were happy. One of our members was in the South West REZ recently, and we can categorically state they are not all happy and there is a lot of resistance. We can see the same spin being used here now, tied in with the NSW Farmers *Renewable Landholder Guide*. The story is being pushed that all the farmers are now happy and projects can go ahead. Nothing can be further from the truth.

After experiencing almost three years of developer and government department spin that this rollout is for the greater good, we are angry. We have tried to tell them that they were going about things the wrong way, that they weren't consulting, that there were real problems. We gave constructive advice. We tried to tell them that their plans for an energy system run on intermittent and unreliable wind and solar, requiring massive overbuild and reverse engineering of transmission infrastructure, won't provide baseload power, as evidenced overseas, but none of them listened. It is obvious that they did not have social licence to proceed, but they pushed on, and to our dismay, projects keep getting approved on inadequate and poorly prepared proposals and consultation.

Examples of putting the cart before the horse was EnergyCo acquiring easements for transmission lines before the project was approved. And then last week, they proudly announced 10 projects that were approved for network access in the CWO REZ, yet six of those projects have not yet been approved. We feel ignored, dismissed and under attack by multinational developers and our own Government. After watching Tuesday's proceedings, we saw numerous departments and organisations admitting only now that there were errors made in the CWO REZ. Why have the residents and landowners of the CWO REZ been treated as test subjects and second-class citizens? The problems brought on by the multiple projects in the CWO REZ are real and deadly, and no amount of spin can make the fundamental problems go away. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr or Mrs Conn, do you want to make a statement?

MARGARET CONN: I think we each do, Chair.

The CHAIR: Yes, sure. Please, go ahead.

MARGARET CONN: Thank you for the opportunity of speaking today. For the benefit of the committee members, I'm here as a landowner, a farmer and a lawyer. About 40 years ago, my husband and I bought over 900 hectares of farming land within the Mid-Western Regional Council area and now within the CWO REZ. We've lived and worked here ever since. My professional qualifications are honours degrees in law and psychology from ANU. I practised law for many, many years in the region, and when I retired, I worked for the Law Society of New South Wales professional standards. There are a couple of themes I would like to address with the Committee. First and foremost, I'd like to address the particular cumulative impacts which we personally and our neighbours are experiencing as a result of the build-out of projects within the REZ. You've heard, and you will hear, a great deal about transmission lines. There are extensive impacts from the projects as well, and I can speak to these.

Our farm's located in land zoned rural and agricultural. Until recently, it existed surrounded by working farms. It's now sandwiched between four projects: the Ungula Wind Farm, Burrendong Wind Farm, Phoenix Pumped Hydro, and the Piambong Wind Farm, with which we have a very lengthy boundary. So we've got over 240 turbines in these wind farms, but—and this is most important—in addition, we have the heavy vehicle transport route for the Burrendong Wind Farm, which is a council-managed road, running through our property for about five kilometres. The present traffic on that road is very light. It's scenic, narrow, tree-lined, runs right past our house and yards. The *Burrendong Wind Farm Scoping Report* outlines a minimum increase in traffic movements to 800 a day during a two-year construction period, and after that, we have the construction of pack hydro, with the pack hydro project likely to commence.

We've been engaged with proponents for 10 years, but for the last five years, it's been especially arduous. The particular issues I would like to speak to relate to the reality and inadequacy of what I euphemistically call "shared benefits", neighbour agreements, and the power imbalance between developers and landholders which has been created by the present planning situation. This touches on developer conduct issues, of course, in the absence of any real engagement, consultation or negotiation with project neighbours. If there's time, there are also legal issues raised by the build-out of REZs and the CWO REZ. Historically, of course, we've had the Legislature, the Executive and the judiciary, and the judiciary provided the fallback for the enforcement of laws and for preventing operation outside the law. There are many, many examples of this fundamental balance of powers being destroyed in the haste to press ahead with the energy transformation and build out the REZ. This ranges from the lowest level to the highest levels. Developers and developments had to comply with the law, and government bodies had to act within their statutory powers or they didn't act at all, traditionally, but with the REZ, many of these principles have just gone to the wayside. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Conn?

TERRY CONN: Thank you for the invitation to appear. I'd like to explain the context in which I appear so that those present can see how I fit into the picture. I'm a long-term resident of this area, with long-term roots in the cultural, agricultural, social and economic development of this area. I was born in Gulgong and raised on a farm between Gulgong and Wellington. We live on a farm situated at the back of the Burrendong Dam in the Yarrabin valley, which is being surrounded by windfarm projects and a pumped hydro situation. There are four projects immediately around us. The heavy-duty transport route, as Margaret has said, traverses through our farm operation for nearly five kilometres. I have a law degree from ANU and have practised as a solicitor for a number of years. I have established and run a significant local business. Over the past nearly 40 years, my wife and I have run our farm as a commercial sheep enterprise. The first knock on our door from a wind farm developer was in 2008. Since then, there have been countless hours of unpaid and heartbreaking work in research, submissions, letters and meeting with developers, politicians, experts and neighbours, all to no avail.

Focusing today on the terms of reference, I can offer what I call a reality rule in relation to impacts. I would like to see that reality rule extend way beyond that in respect of a number of the things that were raised by the council members today. The rule is based on now considerable experience in respect of impacts on locals. Those impacts include how my host neighbours have stopped farming. What happens to good agricultural practices such as maintaining fences and spraying weeds when hosts sign up for wind farms: feral animal impacts on agricultural land; loss of community; loss of vital community services, such as volunteer fire brigades and support staff; loss of farm labour; impact on farm succession plans; loss of land value; potential permanent land use changes; water table impacts; livestock impacts and local climate change brought about by the impacts of the numerous renewable developments; and total disruption during road reconstructions for access to various renewables sites. In fact, we were late here today by up to an hour because of delays on the Twelve Mile Road, which is our access to Dubbo. That relates to the Ungala Wind Farm.

None of those impacts describe the personal losses associated with the renewables build-out overwhelming our families, communities and environment. I am seriously suspicious of the reasons why Dr Richard Parsons, whom I watched give evidence on Tuesday, is, since 2022, no longer involved with the department of planning processes. Listening to him on Tuesday, I felt that he was a whistleblower. I recommend that this panel listen very carefully to what he had to say. Consultation is not engagement. What passes as consultation essentially doesn't care. It is rife with bullying et cetera. I am able to address questions on most aspects of the terms of reference, particularly (a), (d) (iii), (i) and (k). Thank you.

The CHAIR: I have one question for Mr and Mrs Conn and then I will pass on to my colleagues. I want to press on the insurance issue. Have you investigated whether you will be able to obtain any level of insurance to cover your risk with the four projects alongside your property?

MARGARET CONN: No is the short answer. At this stage, it's not an issue that we have looked at.

The CHAIR: Is it something that you are going to potentially look at now?

MARGARET CONN: Definitely. It's something that we have discussed with the Piambong Wind Farm. They have indicated to us that there are no insurance issues. They laughed at us. But we have not explored it.

TERRY CONN: Our involvement went back to 2008, as I said, when the original Ungala Wind Farm was in two parts—east of the Cudgegong and west of the Cudgegong. There was an enormous brawl between members of our rural community and that organisation at that time. With the assistance of Mudgee council, who at that stage apparently had some play in the approval process, they actually decided to move out of the eastern side. It is developed now by Squadron on the western side. Those issues began there for us with respect to having look at insurance and so on. The reality is that we have not got a wind farm operating on our boundaries yet, or the pumped hydro et cetera. However, there are still considerable impacts, which I have just referred to.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: My question is directly relevant to that, so I will just follow on. I have a question for Mr Piper about the recommendation and comment on page 6 of his submission. It states:

(b) current and projected considerations needed with regards to fire risk, management and containment and potential implications on insurance for land holders and/or project proponents in and around Renewable Energy Zones

Could you please elucidate a bit on what is in your submission, particularly in relation to the insurance issue? I will then invite other members of the panel to comment.

GRANT PIPER: Yes. We haven't investigated insurance at this time because, again, nothing has been built. But as that gets closer, we will. The turbines themselves are an ignition source. That is another potential source of fire. Then there is the problem of fighting those fires. The insurance problem, as I perceive it, is that if we've got \$1 billion projects on our doorstep and a fire accidentally starts on our property and we're deemed liable, our insurance will need to cover the losses. At the moment, with the \$20 million farm liability insurance, that won't be adequate. The Conroys down Meadow Creek towards Victoria have done a lot of extensive research on this, and they've investigated insurance at high levels. Basically, it becomes unaffordable after about \$50 million for a normal landowner.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: We heard similar evidence yesterday. I was wondering if any other panel members would like to comment on the insurance issue.

The CHAIR: Obviously, if it becomes unviable in terms of not being able to afford it, you are effectively sterilising your land as well as the land that would have the panels or turbines on it, aren't you?

GRANT PIPER: What do you do as a landowner if you don't have public liability insurance? What do you do? You're uninsured if something happens. You then have to manage that risk yourself somehow and hope that nothing happens.

TERRY CONN: I would note that the Law Society submission to the inquiry also mentions the problem with insurance.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Mr Conn, in your opening statement it struck a chord with me when you said that there were hours of unpaid and heartbreaking work that you are putting into this. I am sure that sentiment is shared by a lot of your neighbours and people in the community who are trying to understand the process of what is happening and how to work through it. Are there any examples that you'd be willing to share around ways that you could have been better supported as landowners through this process? I imagine it is quite a bit to grapple with. With both you and your wife having legal backgrounds, you might be ahead of some of the others who aren't in that position. Could there have been more done to support you as a community? I am happy for anyone to add into that.

TERRY CONN: I may start the answer. Overall, we have met nothing but barriers in every respect from the time we became involved in 2008 to now. At that stage, we were very involved in what was going on around Boorowa and Yass and throughout the State and other places, extending into Victoria and South Australia. We met with farmers from all those places. For example, Margaret, who is very well qualified in respect of assessing the impacts of noise, worked with one of Australia's most renowned acousticians for a number of years, editing his work so the results of his work could be put into English, essentially. Now, those people made numerous submissions to the likes of the department of planning and were involved in an original guideline discussion at the beginning of the decade, of 2010, with the department, with other people—landholders. I say with no equivocation whatsoever that one of our most frustrating experiences is we have never ever received a single response from anybody at all, in any form, to the matters that we raised. Margaret went through—

MARGARET CONN: With all support for Mr Conn, we need more than responses to submissions. There is an enormous power imbalance at the moment in terms of impacted individuals dealing with developers. That's where the problem lies. The developers of the projects are commercial operators. Their sole object is to get the project approved for as little cost as possible—cost is really important to them—and as quickly as possible. They are paid well to do a full-time job of getting the job done. The policy framework is entirely behind the developer. The public service has been charged with getting the projects approved. It hasn't got the manpower to be investigating the little things that we raise.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: And not so little things.

MARGARET CONN: Not so little things. The planning framework is with the developer. You heard Mr Cam say that council needs more staff, they need more money to deal with EISs of 9,000 pages. We get four weeks and we're expected to put in a meaningful response. The only avenue of appeal is by way of merits or process. What I am trying to say is in order to be able to appeal on merit, we've got to be able to digest 9,000 pages in four weeks. It's an impossible task. The project framework is with the developer because the developers know—wind farm developers, in particular—that they may be developing, on paper, a 120-turbine wind farm but, really, they're going to be reducing that to 100. So they can negotiate with you, offering to remove three or four or five turbines, knowing that those turbines are going to go, anyway. They don't have to offer anything realistic.

I would also add, because of the confidentiality clauses in the neighbour agreements, there is no knowledge amongst landowners that we can share about what benefits should or shouldn't be paid. The only way that the power imbalance can be redressed is if, somehow or other, there is a government recognition that having got behind the renewable energies push, having got behind it financially in a big way, there is some responsibility to get behind the impacted landholders by making some form of—and I'll call it compensation because it is not a benefit-sharing agreement. We don't get any benefits, particularly. Compensation is the operative word. If compensation were mandatory, if that was enforceable, then perhaps there would be some rebalance. But if compensation is not only mandatory there would have to be time limits on the negotiation of neighbour agreements. If we had a situation where, for example, developers were required to have in place neighbour agreements with all impacted landowners prior to filing an EIS, or prior to consent to the development, then there would be something to give the landowners to fight with in relation to their situation. I think I've taken up too much time answering that.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: No, that's very useful, thank you.

TERRY CONN: Can I just make one last comment about it. We can see that the powers are aligned against us big time. I think that if the department of climate change—DCCEEW, whatever—had made a submission into this enquiry, it would set out right there that multiple governments, multiple political parties—we're all behind this; everybody is behind it. Back in the early days of the Bodangora wind farm, I wrote the opening address in respect to the PAC hearing. In there I made the comment—and we saw it in action in other places—that the department at that time had on its website, "The department of planning supports the development

of wind farms." What on earth did they have to do with making that statement? They are supposed to be there considering planning issues.

I made that complaint and since then I noticed that they do not say that on their website anymore, but that extended right through the government processes. Even where they are saying they are objective, they're not. They're agenda-based. That agenda does not have any place for these rural communities because they're not going to build them in Sydney, are they, these things? They're aimed at us. We've got to be quiet. We've got to be kept quiet. We've got to be kept out of the picture. I can talk all day about the city and country divide, but that's all part of it. There is not an understanding of what it means to live in a rural community. It doesn't matter in what respect—we're all used to having city visitors—they do not understand how the land works.

GRANT PIPER: Relating to the council issue about the projects coming through and also what we just talked about, just like there is no rehabilitation bonds for wind and solar like there is for mining, I think a system like an exploration licence for the wind and solar prospectors would be suitable in these areas so that you don't get the prospectors coming into a virgin area signing up anchor tenants, if you like, on non-disclosure agreements. From that moment on, the damage is done. The community is divided and the inuendo starts.

They should not be allowed to come in and sign up people to confidentiality agreements on the sly. Then they advertise a community drop-in session and that's when it's sold to you as a done deal. We've signed up. It's 150 turbines. It's all done. And that's the first formal knowledge that the community has. I guess you could almost argue that the REZ has been declared a REZ so therefore the whole area is open, but if they're going to extend to Rowena and start signing up landowners now, which they are doing, with confidentiality agreements, it should be said, "Well, that's open for an exploration licence. It gets published in the paper; everyone knows." And there's no non-disclosures in the contracts. That should not be allowed.

About the traffic and the false normal, they use that technique all the time. In the EIS for the project opposite us, they said the turbines wouldn't have lights. It's a legislative requirement or a CASA requirement that they have lights, anti-collision lights for aircraft. They know that if they say they're going to have flashing lights, a lot more of the community is going to be upset about looking at flashing lights all night so they will make a submission opposing the project. In the subsequent approval and consent conditions they say that we have to put lights on, but it removes that resistance at the initial EIS stage because they've said we are not going to have lights. We've seen this now for two or three wind projects. So they are underhanded and they are not upfront. They are manipulative in the way they structure the whole thing. They game the process. They know the process. They're experts. We're just doing this for the first/umpteenth time sort of thing. But the exploration licence idea would solve what projects are coming, or at least may lead into knowing what projects are coming and who's doing what when.

MARGARET CONN: Could I elaborate on something that Grant said there. He was talking about when they come in, they sign up landowners on pieces of paper that are biased completely towards the proponent. One of the things that we could really do with are better pro forma contractual documents. We've begun to see some pro forma documents now appearing. They are still far from perfect. In recent discussions we had with one of the proprietors of one of the wind farms, the solicitor acting for the wind farm was from Ebsworth and she was scathing about the pro forma document in the State guidelines. If there were more detailed pro forma and more consideration given not to what the hosts should be signing but what the impacted landholders would be signing, that would be helpful.

Grant touched on bad behaviour. We heard on Tuesday, listening to the commissioner and conciliating disputes, it would be very helpful if there was some kind of financial penalty for developers who are fraudulent or engage in misleading and deceptive practices in their dealings with local landholders. We don't want to negotiate with these people. We have, for example, a proponent at the moment who is telling us in relation to the road which impacts us that our land can be and will be compulsorily acquired. It cannot be, because council is the manager of the road. Mr Cam has assured us, and council has indicated quite firmly, that council is not going to be resuming land from private landholders. It would be very helpful if there were the capacity to enforce fines for proven offences—serious and fraudulent-based offences—in terms of dealing with inducing benefits from landholders. I don't see why that could not be part of the planning process.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Mr Piper, thank you for coming today. In your submission you raise concerns about competition for materials, skilled labour and impacts on agricultural productivity. What coordination mechanisms would you like to see implemented to prevent economic displacement?

GRANT PIPER: On the agricultural side of it, there's been an impact on agriculture from the get-go because we're here and we're not there doing our job. We do this for years without much headway. That has an impact on agricultural production and on your future investment decisions and everything that goes on with your business while you're in this limbo. I think all the other businesses around the community and in town would be

in a similar situation because they're going, "Do I try and expand or get some of these contracts, or do I put on staff or try and find staff?" With the uncertainty, most of them are waiting to see what is going to happen. You move areas between, "It's definitely going ahead, there's nothing I can do to stop it," and, "Maybe things are turning around and we won't".

The previous presenters talked about the unemployment numbers and things like that. There's not a lot of spare manpower around. There is a lot of people underemployed, but they're also under skilled. There are no facilities to upskill or train people. The TAFE's been shut down and moved away. You can't do anything locally anymore. It's a 140-kay drive to Dubbo to go to a night's TAFE. If you hit a kangaroo on the way home, there goes the week's work. It's just impractical. All those resources and training opportunities have been moved away. Having one in Wellington isn't going to solve the problem when the REZ is how many hundred thousand square kilometres and there's people everywhere.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: You also raised questions about, say, contaminated sites and cultural heritage destruction. Are you aware of any assessment failings or misidentifications during the current processes?

GRANT PIPER: I'm not an expert on that section. You got anything on that, Annie?

ANNETTE PIPER: What was the first part, sorry? The second part was heritage; what was the first part?

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Yes, cultural heritage destruction and around contamination.

ANNETTE PIPER: You can do contamination.

GRANT PIPER: We keep broaching contamination, and it's one of the unacknowledged problems—the erosion of turbine blades and bisphenol A spreading over the land and water. It's an endocrine disruptor, which means it affects the reproduction of people and livestock. Obviously, in a rural area, that's not good. There's been no action on that because there's no formal acknowledgement that it's a problem from the proponents and, so far, from any government agencies that we've seen.

There's also the disposal and, over their life, the contamination around solar panels. We're not directly affected so I'm not as understanding of that, but definitely damaged solar panels or a fire in a solar farm, which has happened around Gulgong a couple of times, is a problem. Another problem is vehicle rollovers when carting solar panels to the worksites. They have occurred and they've all sort of slipped under the radar without much examination as to what the consequences might be for spreading contamination. It's an insidious problem, and we're building it in, and I don't know how you could realistically mitigate it. You're accepting it's going to be a problem in the future but it's going to be someone else's problem.

ANNETTE PIPER: With regard to the heritage, with the Aboriginal sites, EnergyCo's environmental impact study stated that their project, in combination with relevant future projects, would result in a potential cumulative loss of between five and 16 per cent of Aboriginal sites that were identified. This is obviously spread around multiple developers, so finding one little thing here and one little thing there, but they have done an assessment there that says that's a huge loss. As far as local cultural interest items or local heritage items, we were in contact with a professional historian who basically looked at a couple of the environmental impact studies and said that they weren't suggesting sufficient protection for the historical sites. More work needed to be done to actually address it.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Just following on from the contamination, you also suggest that with wind turbines, the proximity could compromise access to markets for grain and livestock producers due to BPA concerns. Have you had any guidance provided from DPI or any other agencies about this concern?

MARGARET CONN: They ignore it.

GRANT PIPER: No.

ANNETTE PIPER: It doesn't exist.

GRANT PIPER: It's not acknowledged; it's in our minds. Currently Meat and Livestock Australia, when you have to go through livestock production assurance re-accreditation every three years, the question has appeared now: Are your stock grazing near a renewable energy project? That's turned up just recently. Obviously within that system they are aware of potential problems down the road. We're not a big crop grower, but the croppers are also saying that, in their accreditation scheme, they've got to certify that it's clean and hasn't been contaminated, so that will be affected down the track as well. You can't stat dec it if you're not sure, you don't know or you suspect something's wrong.

TERRY CONN: We can give an example of somebody up at Bodangora that has got a big station there—two herds of cattle, one near the wind turbines and one away. They have observed a 30 per cent reduction in calving rate, observed a loss of ability to do well. Gets the vet out—can't see anything clinically wrong et cetera, so he says, "No evidence, no problem." This is what everybody says. That extended right through to human health in the early days of arguments related to and involved with the NHMRC. One of the issues was that the people claiming, seeing, feeling and observing these things right throughout the country were given the onus of proof, scientific proof. But when it comes to the principle in relation to the Hippocratic oath, the major thing is that you do no harm. There is absolutely no obligation whatsoever on any renewable developer or anybody connected with this industry to prove or take the obligation of a scientific exploration into that, and they refuse to do so, for very good reasons.

MARGARET CONN: Can I say one more thing? In relation to the question to Grant concerning contamination, it raises this problem of cumulative impacts of all of these developments. I know on Tuesday the Chair asked a question—I think it may have been of Liam Ryan—about the cumulative impacts, and have any studies been done and where are the results of the cumulative impact surveys. The Committee may be unaware that recently the Valley of the Winds IPC public meeting took place and the issue of cumulative impact was prominent there.

Some days after that, the chair of the IPC for Valley of the Winds, Mr Pearson, had a meeting with officials from the department of planning. I think Mr Preshaw, who gave evidence on Tuesday, was there and officials from EnergyCo. That meeting dealt, at some length, with the issue of where is the study of the cumulative impacts for the REZ, where is it up to, how is it taking shape, what are you doing. There are pages and pages, and I have a single transcript of that meeting, but it would inform the Committee's answer to the question of where is the study in relation to cumulative impacts.

The CHAIR: Are you happy to table that?

MARGARET CONN: Yes. Can I table it now?

The CHAIR: Sure. That will take us up to 11 o'clock. Thank you very much for your time today. I do not believe you took anything on notice, but you can expect some supplementary questions from the Committee.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: There wasn't enough time to get to everything.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for the time you have taken today, but also the time you have taken to respond to the umpteen proposals that you are facing on your doorstep.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Short adjournment)

Ms SALLY EDWARDS, Past Community Representative/Active Rural Community Advocate, sworn and examined

Ms EMMA BOWMAN, Landowner, sworn and examined

Mr NIGEL ROBERTS, Landowner, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: We welcome our next witnesses. I understand you have asked for the opening statements to be done in a certain order, so I will let you direct that.

SALLY EDWARDS: Welcome, and thank you for coming to the Central West. I sincerely thank the members of the Committee for your work and efforts to truly understand the once unimaginable and now real and serious impacts of renewable energy zones. I fear this statement and my submission can't adequately summarise my volunteer experiences from over three years of piecing together many projects, including EnergyCo's transmission project, to try and understand the Central-West Orana REZ delivery in its entirety, and the many impacts it presents.

The REZ model was never wholly presented to the New South Wales public, and we could say will never be. The risk that presents alone should be of grave concern. At the time our communities learned they were in Australia's first REZ, they had together weathered an unimaginably tough four years—a catastrophic Sir Ivan fire and firestorm, record drought, hailstorms, a mouse plague of Pied Piper proportions and then COVID. I am deeply concerned that the threads being pulled on what was once a tightly knitted community fabric will soon unravel, and that our century-old social fabric cannot be repaired.

The planning and delivery of renewable energy zones either outgrew the skill and resource capacity of the New South Wales Government or that capacity for this type of development was never there in the first place. If the Central-West Orana REZ was a private business venture, the company responsible would have already gone bust. A planning failure of such magnitude will go down in history books, and I hope this inquiry illuminates the risks of proceeding with the current inadequate and irresponsible process and governance for the sole purpose of meeting a legislated target. What good is the target if the delivery is unsuccessful?

The consultation with communities has been far from adequate for the development of a REZ. The complex, multi-layered, project-stacking nature of the first Australian REZ, and a development of national importance, should have demanded strict, extensive and measured consultation with both local government authorities and local communities from the outset. When the very nature of not just your local community but the whole region is being entirely transformed from rural to industrial and, in the words of the Minister, "to a renewable energy power plant of the future", shouldn't every resident be rightfully informed?

A project of such magnitude, where temporary workforces outnumber permanent residents, one would expect many avenues to be taken to reach the people and none less than a public notice sent directly to ratepayers. At the start, there was zero consideration of local community views before the REZ was declared and glaringly insufficient early REZ-wide and collaborative planning with both local government and local communities. Still missing today are REZ-wide and statewide cumulative impact studies and findings to guide potential mitigation and planning decisions.

There has been no demonstrated accountability and transparency around the use and cost of consultants and contractors. There is continued voicing on delivering local jobs and opportunities, when in actuality this will mean a loss of employees for local small business, agriculture, local government and tourism and a significant loss of available local contractors. EnergyCo have never professionally collaborated with communities or local government to allow them to have agency or influence over REZ decisions that directly affect them. There is a failure to consider the constraints already faced by local communities, and council, of human and industry resources to even complete EnergyCo-funded projects on time and successfully. When the local builders and tradies accept contracts to work at the energy hubs, who is going to do the routine work or the project work in the local community? Who is measuring, monitoring and addressing these trade-offs and costs?

The community reference group is a considerable cost of time and money. Questions were routinely not answered and risks of cumulative impacts remain unaddressed. The newly released New South Wales Government *Regional Communities Consultation Guide* lists a CRG as an adequate process for collaborating with community in decision-making. The CWO REZ CRG terms of reference clearly state the CRG provides an advisory function and is not a decision-making authority for the project.

In March 2024, I contacted the NSW Ombudsman to make a formal complaint against EnergyCo. They couldn't accept my complaint as I hadn't lodged a complaint direct with EnergyCo. EnergyCo did not even have a formal complaints process at that time. How can such an important authority get everything so wrong? EnergyCo

have consistently failed to act with transparency, integrity and an acceptable level of due diligence. Their actions are frequently inept and at times utterly despicable. And while the faces have come and routinely gone, none more visible and unbelievable than an entire change of community engagement contractors during the public exhibition period of the transmission project's EIS, and others may have been replaced, the New South Wales Government cannot possibly begin to rebuild trust and work towards a successful transition without first accepting the many faults made and holding the authority responsible accountable.

So much is at stake for every Australian and, profoundly, for rural communities in a REZ. We feel the weight of that so acutely right now. At what point do we farewell life and entire landscapes as we know them, when in our mind this could mostly be avoided by slowing down and delivering a transition that is well scrutinised, planned, governed and executed? I urge the Committee to consider the 14 recommendations outlined in my submission.

EMMA BOWMAN: Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. We are here as concerned, frustrated and devastated community members, business owners, farmers and volunteers. The Central-West Orana REZ and the rapid transition to renewable energy has decimated our once cohesive and prosperous region, transforming genuine, trusting, practical, commonsense individuals into heartbroken, suspicious, exasperated, irritable, exhausted fragments of their former selves. It might sound dramatic, but the impacts cannot be understated any longer. The official narrative from government authorities and Ministers bears little to no resemblance to the reality on the ground.

There have been countless attempts to protect rural and regional land, businesses, industries, environment, water and communities from what has been a masterclass in project delivery failure—disastrously conceived, deceptively presented and incompetently executed to date. Community members and landowners have been raising concerns about the potential negative impacts due to the installation of infrastructure in the CWO REZ for years, predominantly without acknowledgment or satisfactory response. We have endured an endless parade of bureaucratic drivel from EnergyCo, and now ACEREZ, and other government authorities advising the transition.

We have raised concerns regarding the potential impacts to agriculture—for instance, taking valuable land out of production. Calculations show more than 11,000 hectares of solar panels and nearly 1,000 wind turbines operating, under construction and in planning for the CWO REZ. That doesn't include projects at the pre-SEER stage mentioned by DPHI on Tuesday, possible soil and water contamination issues and the impacts to the health and ultimate productivity of livestock, unnecessary environmental vandalism for road upgrades and general infrastructure. Do we really need to destroy the environment to save the planet? Alternatives have been suggested but quickly swept under the carpet. The potential negative impacts on the Talbragar River system due to the upgrade of the Merotherie Road are causing serious distress. Can we trust that the experts employed to design the road upgrades and assess the possible impacts will get it right? I have serious doubts, given one ACEREZ engineer's confident assertion that the Talbragar River ran from west to east. This is a glaring testament to the depth of professional incompetence and proof that at least some employees' understanding of geography stops at north is up.

Memories of the immediate threat and clean-up of the Sir Ivan bushfire are still very vivid for this region, making locals sceptical and nervous about the lack of planning for future bushfire catastrophes. There have not been any cumulative impact studies completed to ensure no adverse impacts on our groundwater aquifers and projects are being approved without certainty around where water will be sourced. Twelve CWO REZ projects are expected to use over 3,500 megalitres of water per year. That's enough water to sustain at least 120,000 cows every day. We can continue farming without feed, but when our dams are empty and the bore starts pumping dry, that's game over.

All of these things could be better prepared for and solutions implemented if the responsible agencies would only properly engage with local landowners and community members—those with longstanding local knowledge—instead of relying on expert bureaucrats who have never set foot in the region. There are many practices being undertaken in the name of the transition that would see any private landowner heavily fined, imprisoned, or both, but are deemed justifiable and lawful when carried out by government authorities. The impacts on the ground are the same, no matter who carries out the work, so why do the terms "for the greater good" or "in the public interest" and a government logo make the works compliant and acceptable? Most farmers wouldn't label themselves environmentalists, but the vast majority care greatly for their land and are busily working to improve lands and soil, plant trees and better coexist with the natural environment.

I am not an expert in any specific field, but my land is my heritage. Farming is in my blood. My livestock, family and community are in my heart and I will do whatever it takes to protect them. It's time to press pause on the rapid transition to renewable energy. We need to quantify cumulative impacts on the rural areas being forced

to host large-scale infrastructure and come up with suitable community agreed mitigation measures to address any issues that will arise. Australia's future depends on it. Thank you.

NIGEL ROBERTS: Good morning, Chair and Committee. As you know, my name is Nigel Roberts. I'm a fourth generation farmer alongside my wife and three children at Dunbogan Merino Stud at Elong. We run an intensive ag operation. I studied honours in agricultural science at Sydney university, specialising in agronomy. I've been working in the agricultural space for the last 25 years. Our own business produces 108,000 kilos of dressed lamb a year, meeting the yearly lamb requirements for 16,000 people. Our business produces the equivalent of 90,000 woollen jumpers per year. As well as this, we sell rams and surplus ewes across New South Wales and Queensland, and produce beef, wheat, barley, oats and canola for the Australian people to consume.

I sit before you as a business owner, a father and a community member that is grappling with the immense changes that have been brought about by the Central-West Orana REZ. Whilst the requirements to meet energy demands are vital, food production must take precedence. We need to remember we do have the option to develop many of these projects on areas that do not produce any food. According to the FAO, we need to produce 70 per cent more food by 2050. As you all witnessed yesterday as you drove around our family property, these solar projects are intended to be developed on highly productive agricultural areas. Why is this? And who is allowing this to happen? Are we going to be addressing the same energy issues in the future with regard to food supply? It certainly looks like it.

Whilst on the topic of food and energy, I will mention agrivoltaics or sheep grazing under solar panels and I'm sorry to disappoint the many believers, but the two cannot coexist. Recent studies have shown elevated lead and cadmium levels leaching from panels into soils and grasses consumed by these sheep. I, unfortunately, cannot see our consumers happy to consume this lamb, or even wear this fibre. Across the Orana REZ we're witnessing a common pattern. Each energy project seems manageable when assessed as a standalone project. However, they are not being assessed collectively, which is what our community requires. NSW Planning continue to assess Das on an individual basis, which is grossly inadequate.

Of late, my family and I have made the difficult decision to be involved in a wind project. Once three large-scale solar projects totalling 10,500 acres were proposed to surround us, two of which are proposed to be the biggest in Australia, this seemed like our only financial out. This would enable our family to leave this monstrosity. Was this the intention of the REZ? Families are leaving. Families have left. It's time to wake up. Are we expected to sit by whilst our assets are devalued, in this case our valuers are telling us by up to 25 per cent? In my case, \$6 million written off our bottom line. I can only say the Lightsource bp offering of \$20,000 a year for the next 10 years is nowhere near adequate to cover these losses.

On 28 November 2022—nearly three years ago—I asked EnergyCo and Lightsource bp the basic question of public liability for the proposed Sandy Creek solar factory. What is to happen if a fire I'm responsible for burns out the \$1.8 billion worth of infrastructure neighbouring us? I'm still yet to receive an adequate answer on what is happening in this scenario. I guess I could have attended the table outside the Dunedoo Newsagency where the majority of these consultation boxes were ticked off.

My final point is with regard to the independent EIS that these developers have to partake in as part of their development assessments. This is far from independent, given they at times cost up to \$2 million and are paid for by the developer. The Lightsource bp EIS, for example, is full of lies and inadequacies. You would think a fourth generation farmer in the area would be key to such an EIS with their wealth of knowledge of the local area, but no—no consultation, no conversations and not even a question. My dealings with them to date have been abysmal. If this is how a world leader in renewable development deals with its potential neighbours, it gives me little hope for the future of farming and families in our area. On this note, how can this project have a connection guarantee with an EnergyCo transmission line without having approval from NSW Planning? It all smells a bit funny.

It has become very clear to me that these projects are all about profits and votes. Yes, we are desperate for electricity. But let's face the real facts. If it was about getting to net zero, we would stop digging up Australian coal and burning it overseas. I hope that each and every one of you on the panel can make a difference. The last three years' dealings with these various projects have been nothing short of horrendous. I just hope at some point someone will begin to listen. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you all for your testimony. Also, thank you, Mr Roberts and Ms Bowman, for your generosity in leading us on your land yesterday, listening to your stories and seeing your beautiful properties. Can I start off with a couple of questions before passing to my colleagues? You heard the evidence by the Government on Tuesday. Would it be a fair characterisation to say that they're detached from reality in terms of what's actually happening on the ground?

EMMA BOWMAN: Absolutely.

SALLY EDWARDS: No doubt. Yes.

The CHAIR: Mr Roberts?

NIGEL ROBERTS: Yes, I, unfortunately, was pretty busy in my own business on Tuesday and I only caught bits and pieces of it, but from what I saw, I would say that, yes, there's a fairly distant—they've got no idea about what's going on.

The CHAIR: And, I guess, given that detachment, what hope do you have in terms of rebuilding that trust? You spoke about it, Ms Edwards—that there's a serious mistrust in the community with this process. If they are so far detached and not willing to accept that things have gone wrong, what hope do you have in terms of them making some positive steps in rebuilding that trust with community?

SALLY EDWARDS: If they don't have the willingness to address that what has happened previously is wrong and accept that accountability, then I would hope that there is power within the Government by those that represent us to hold them to account. If they were to acknowledge where they have gone wrong and maintain a consistent team of staff, instead of changing every few months or every contract, then maybe they can apologise and take a back step and go, "How do we work with you? How do we fix this?" But they have not at any time accepted suggestions or local information that could have guided better decisions around the planning.

The process alone for route selection for transmission lines is appalling. We sat in on a session by the New South Wales Government to review the just terms Act, and when I asked about reviewing the process for route selection—"Oh, sorry, that's not part of this legislation." That process needs reviewing as well, and I'm not sure what legislation that falls under, but they need to acknowledge what's wrong, stand true with a team of staff that actually are employed by the Government—not fly-by-night contractors who seemingly only created their businesses back in 2020, just in time for the transition—and work with us.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Just one final question, and I appreciate it might be a bit of a personal one. Mr Roberts, you spoke about the impact that it's going to have on your family farm, the possibility of moving and uprooting your family. What does that do to a small community like Dunedoo? You mentioned you've got three kids.

NIGEL ROBERTS: Yes. I guess it's a flow-on effect to the community. Every family that leaves the area—and they are leaving—it's kids out of our schools, it's committee members off our local sporting clubs. The flow-on effects are huge. If we're not getting this right up-front, this is what's happening, and we've already seen it in our area. There's properties been sold and families moved away.

The CHAIR: I lied; I'm going to ask another question. In terms of your young children, having experienced what you've experienced, can you honestly encourage them to take up the family business and go into farming, if this is the future?

NIGEL ROBERTS: That's a really good question, and my wife and I have talked about that many times—whether we would genuinely say to our children, "You should go farming." I think three years ago it would have been a yes, but after the last three years it would most definitely be a no. I think the last three years as a farmer, I've probably never felt so unsupported, as an Australian farmer, in our roles. There's a number of bodies around us that are failing us. But, for the whole farming community, it's very hard. We're all in our own businesses with huge debt levels, and we're all running our different directions. It's very hard for us to get some amalgamation together and have some strength in numbers. But I definitely at this stage would not be encouraging my children to partake in a future in farming.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I've just noticed one of our members on videoconference has her hand up. Ms Hurst?

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Thank you to all the witnesses for coming and speaking with us today. I've just got a couple of questions for Ms Sally Edwards, and thank you for your submission. One of your recommendations in the submission is that the New South Wales Government investigate and formulate a minimum level of consultation requirements to be legislated, and I appreciate that you gave the committee a really thorough understanding of your experiences around the lack of consultation and how that really felt for yourself and the community. But, for my benefit also, can you outline what you think these minimum consultation requirements should really look like in practice?

SALLY EDWARDS: Thank you for the question, Ms Hurst. I believe there is no simple answer, but it has to be formula based—something proportionate to the significance of the project, the value of the project, how far the impacts flow, whether that's to families, communities, industry, even to the State's availability of energy.

I am still gobsmacked today that a nationally significant energy project such as Australia's first renewable energy zone can have zero per cent population consultation achieved at the time the transmission project went to the planning department to be assessed.

We must note that the REZ was never taken as a whole to be assessed, so our first opportunity in regard to the REZ was to the transmission project, and to see such poor numbers! We have more consultation levels achieved for a local sporting oval than what they did for Australia's first REZ. It's not good enough. So that formula-based—I haven't actually seen that utilised somewhere. I think it's an opportunity for Australia to lead and actually demand that, for the projects we put forward with State money or with Australian taxpayer money, we demand a minimum level of consultation and effective engagement. That's another conversation, on the interpretation of what consultation and engagement actually is.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Thank you. You mentioned as well in your answer to the Chair in regard to your concern—and I know you mention it in your submission as well—about the extensive use of consultants by EnergyCo and their lack of disclosure around that. Is some of the use of these consultants part of the cause for that lack of consultation and communication with the community, and are there other aspects to the use of consultants that have caused further problems, within your own experiences and the community's?

SALLY EDWARDS: The first part of that question, the answer is, yes, absolutely. As a community member, as we all do, I wear a number of hats, and one of those is treasurer of a volunteer organisation for our local hall. That hall was utilised for a community consultation session, and the invoice was sent to EnergyCo for the hire of the hall for that session. The payment was received from the contractor, from Turnpike. That immediately led me to question: If they are paying for the costs of conducting the consultation as a private contractor, doesn't that mean the less they consult, the more they make? And I didn't see that as fair. That transparency—when we were first introduced to those consultants, we were led to believe they were staff members. That may have been our error in assumption, but that's what we were led to believe.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Thanks for your answers.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Thank you all for being here and for your very honest submissions as well. We appreciate it's a fairly emotional and distressing time, and it means a lot for us to be able to hear from you firsthand, close to where you live. As the Chair said, thank you for letting us come and visit you yesterday. I've got two questions that I'm happy for all of you to respond to. I might direct the first one to you, Mr Roberts, because we spoke about it yesterday, and it's in your submission as well. Can you elaborate a bit more for the Committee on some of the impacts of these projects around things really across the district—on salinity, soil quality, flood plains, pest and weed management and what that will look like going forward—in terms of your concerns long term about what some of those impacts might be?

NIGEL ROBERTS: Yes, for sure, and I guess it goes back to some of my touchings on the EISs from the companies. They might walk across a paddock or particular area at a certain time of year and that's their assumption of what that country is like or what it's doing. We've got some particular examples next door to the Lightsource bp project at Sandy Creek. There are some pretty significant salinity issues there at present. They are visible from our boundary. We're there reading an EIS that is stating that they're going to be clearing 20 to 30 hectares of native vegetation off that. Who knows what the long-term ramifications of that will be—how long is a piece of string?—and what they will do. There are already significant weed issues there in those project areas. Our property is lucky enough to be upstream of the projects, so we won't cop the weeds. But I feel sorry for our neighbours downstream, who will have the effects of those weeds.

The other big one is the feral animal population, which I have touched on. In this area, there are 10,500 acres of country that will be taken out. That will be free of any feral animals. Are they just moving into neighbouring areas, into our place and into neighbours' places? What are the ramifications of that? I guess nobody really knows the answers to those questions. I expect that we will have a significant influx, in the short term, of feral animals from those areas.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Do either of you ladies want to add to that?

EMMA BOWMAN: The thing I would like to raise is the Talbragar River flood plain with the Merotherie Road upgrades, which we discussed yesterday. I think there has been—it's the same thing—a lack of consultation and a lack of transparency. We aren't being shown, a lot of the time, what they are actually planning until suddenly, tada, it's all planned and done. Then it's, "Here are the details, there you go," if we're lucky. I think one of the biggest problems is that we're not being engaged early enough to give local knowledge, and local knowledge isn't valued enough by people who have letters behind their names. My biggest fear about the Merotherie Road upgrades is changing the course of the water and the flow of the water. The health of that river system is really important. I don't think enough emphasis is being placed on that in the design process.

SALLY EDWARDS: I have one comment that is more on process. Nigel and Emma have just raised a couple of good points. I know that feedback has been provided to proponents and EnergyCo over a number of years. What we see on the ground is that when we do have the opportunity for a site visit or a cup of tea to sit around the table and share information, there is none of this happening—there is no note taking and there is no official recording. Our request to track our conversation with minutes is met with an immediate distrust instead of a willingness to be transparent. If there is an official recording of the feedback that locals provide from day one, wouldn't that better set us up to achieve better outcomes as we move from planning into construction?

The other point is around the difference between hearing and active listening. I almost feel a bit like a kindergarten teacher, but there is a big difference between paying lip service and somewhat hearing but doing something else compared with active listening to see where the opportunities are for change and then having an established structure for how that can be implemented. A lot of the processes that we have endured as consultation actually failed to allow that consultation to connect with implementation. It's just like the CRG—it's not a decision-making process. It's an information connector. But where is the step to turn that information into an effective decision that could have even prevented us all being here today?

EMMA BOWMAN: I want to add that the issue comes from the level of staff that we are allowed to engage with a lot of the time. You have to become a real pain in the arse to get to the top and to the people who can actually make any decisions, and even then it's pretty tough. You're basically dealing with community engagement staff all the time. They can't really do anything. I often wonder if the things we've spoken about even go further or if they just stop there.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: That was going to be my second question. In your opening statement, you talked about alternatives that are suggested that then end up being swept under the carpet or don't really go anywhere. Is part of that problem the level of engagement and where your information, as the local landowners, actually ends up in terms of the hierarchy in some of the companies?

EMMA BOWMAN: I think it's definitely part of the problem. I will just give you an example. A group of local landowners round Merotherie camp, where you were yesterday, got together and had a look at the roads there. We thought that we might be able to save the trees along Merotherie Road and the Birriwa bus route south from being destroyed for the road upgrades. We put together a bit of a proposal that EnergyCo or ACEREZ—whoever it needed to be—could run the road in their new land that doesn't have a tree on it and save the Merotherie Road and let that be.

We got an audience with ACEREZ. I had to fight to get an answer back out of them. They claimed that they couldn't do it because it didn't meet Austroads safety provisions or whatever it was. But we didn't get an opportunity to hash that out at all. It was very much, "If that's what your alternative option is, sorry, it's a no-go." There was never any follow on from that or, "Okay, how about we try it this way? Could we improve it by doing this? Could we do this?" It was "No, thank you, we don't want to do that. That's not in the planning agreement. That's not what the conditions of the consent state." It's just, "Sorry, no."

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: I have a follow-up question. That issue was also raised during our visit yesterday and I would like to explore it a bit further. Ms Edwards, in your submission, your recommendation No. 14 requests:

... that immediate and adequate research be commenced and undertaken, to be reported to the NSW Government and the public on these potential long-term risks on both livestock health and fertility and meat contamination and safety for human consumption.

I would obviously include public health and water in there. First, can you talk about that a bit more so it is on the record? Second, which agency or body do you believe should undertake that, if it is possible? Which agency would you feel comfortable doing that work?

SALLY EDWARDS: A supplementary document to my submission was the only study I could find, which was published back in 2012 by the Technical University of Lisbon. It was a veterinary medicine study on acquired flexural deformation of the distal interphalangeal joint in foals. I apologise if I pronounced that wrong. I am astounded that we can begin to plan and construct an energy transition in Australia with no R&D beforehand. The timing doesn't make any sense, even for a small project, that if you are talking about R&D we should do mid planning and construction—but here we are.

What authority or agency would I trust? I can't name one. I would suggest that it not be done by one and that it be done openly and transparently so that whatever organisation is contracted to perform it could be trusted by those who need the information. It needs to be done urgently. The reason we are sitting here is for our kids' futures and their kids' futures. If we are not trying to protect our health, why are we here? It must be of utmost importance.

EMMA BOWMAN: I don't have a lot to add. I agree with Sal. I don't think my faith in government authorities to carry out this sort of work is there yet, so I think it needs to be done very transparently. I completely agree it needed to be done 15 years ago, before we even got to this point. We've already done damage that I don't think we can repair.

NIGEL ROBERTS: I probably don't have a lot to add to that, but I think our consumers will sort that out very quickly, certainly with regard to meeting the products that we're growing in and around these projects. The health side of things is of huge importance to our consumers. At the moment, we grow some of the best lamb and beef. All our produce that comes out of Australia is some of the best in the world, so we need to protect that. My big point that I keep trying to get across is we don't need to be combining the two of them. We can put these projects somewhere where we are not producing any food so we don't have these issues. There are other options there, to put them there.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: You propose that the REZ process has eroded social cohesion in the communities. Do you think that there are any measures that could be implemented to rebuild that trust, if at all possible?

EMMA BOWMAN: Can I start and say it's going to be really tough. These are generational relationships that have been pulled apart. Sometimes family versus family, sometimes long-term friends, neighbours. There's not an easy fix, and I don't know if there's ever a fix from that. Trust has been eroded. People feel like they have been stabbed in the back, for want of a better word, by people they've trusted their whole lives. As much as we probably all need to move forward there are some people that won't ever get over that.

SALLY EDWARDS: A couple of practical steps. An immediate pause on the freight train that is the planning portal of these projects, and the time that it takes from the EIS being exhibited to us being able to view the documents to then being at IPC if there was enough objections, that would be one to then allow proper engagement and discussion. There has been no agency for communities to be involved in decision-making and that's probably too late for the projects that are already approved. The suggestion this morning about the change to the NDAs would go a long way as well. Small rural communities work together with everything, whether it's the P&C or taking the kids to the bus or the canteen on Saturday mornings or—

EMMA BOWMAN: A disaster.

SALLY EDWARDS: An accident on the road or fighting fires together. Everything we do we do together. If someone's in trouble, we help them. We might not even know them. There's no homelessness in small rural communities because we don't allow it. We work together. If we are not given that agency to be involved in the decision-making process, then there will be no repairing the damage that has been done. There are communities across Australia from other developments that have gone boom and bust, and they are ghost towns or they're a fraction of what they were 50 years ago. We don't want that.

NIGEL ROBERTS: Following on from Sal, just in that farming perspective, we're so reliant on our neighbours. We need them. I need to borrow your dog. I need to borrow your truck. If I don't have good neighbours around me I usually won't have a good business. Not only that, I probably don't have any good mates around me. I don't have anyone there I can have a beer with, or a coffee with, or bounce ideas off.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Can I just ask a follow-up. Just with the NDA comment—it would be good to have it on the record—would you all be in agreement that that's part of the problem? The privacy around that? We had someone on Tuesday say they found out about it literally having a beer at the pub on a Friday night, that someone had decided to sign up to a project on their property. Do you think the removal of that, more openness, everyone in the community knowing what's going on at the same time, would be a good thing?

NIGEL ROBERTS: Totally. Sarah, in my experience—I'm happy to share. My next door neighbour, I first heard about this and he's words were to me—and we were quite good mates—"I've signed a contract with a solar company to lease our property. I can't tell you who it is. See ya later." From then, ties cut. He's lost all trust.

SALLY EDWARDS: Can I say, too, that also goes against both the landowners for their future. In the ability to communicate what they perceive as risks or benefits in these contracts, they don't get to discuss that. There's no protection for either of them. In very simple terms, one could be taking half the amount of money as the other, one could have a caveat over their property and the other one mightn't, but they can't discuss it over a cup of tea and go, "How do we make this work for ourselves and what do you see as risks?" They've each got to pay for their own legal team and you get what you pay for.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: We have mixed views on how renewable energy affects land values. In your experience, what's the relationship between hosting renewable energy and land values?

NIGEL ROBERTS: I'm probably one of the lucky ones, Ms MacDonald, because I will probably not see a big devaluation in land values in my situation. The case would be very different if I did not have an income stream coming from a wind farm, though, and I was stuck next to a solar farm. Then we get into the depths of it all. Our valuers are telling us this, but they won't put it on paper because they're there doing all this work for the like of EnergyCo. I've seen the bills. They're making a lot of money out of it, so why would they shoot themselves in the foot to make less of a fee out of it? It's getting really hard. I think we saw it at the Coolah IPC hearing there the other day where one of the ladies got up and they had a contract fall over with the sale of their property once the to-be owner found out about the wind farm that was about to happen.

The CHAIR: That takes us to time. Thank you very much once again for your evidence. It was excellent. Thank you for the privilege of being on your properties yesterday and seeing the work that you do there. I don't believe you took any questions on notice, but I highly suspect we will have some supplementary questions for you, so be prepared for that. Thank you for your time once again.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

Mr JAMES MATTHEWS, Executive Committee Member, Merriwa Cassilis Alliance, sworn and examined

Mrs JANE HEGARTY, Chair, Cassilis District Development Group, sworn and examined

Mr JAMES ARMSTRONG, Owner, Cassilis Park Merino Stud, sworn and examined

Mrs LINDA GANT, Committee Member, Cassilis District Development Group, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: I invite anyone to make an opening statement, perhaps one per group if possible.

LINDA GANT: Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Linda Gant, and I've been a resident of the Cassilis district for over 40 years. Currently I'm an active member on the Cassilis District Development Group and on the community consultation committee for a wind farm proponent within the Central-West Orana REZ, a position I have held since the committee's inauguration over 12 years ago. There have been 28 formal community consultation meetings held by the wind farm proponent since March 2013—28 days given to attending meetings without any compensation whatsoever for travel or costs or time. Out of area consultants employed by the proponent appear to have much more credibility than these CCC community members. Many reports presented to the CCC have been generated by desktop audits and desktop research without any ground truthing. Mapping provided by the proponent or consultants is of poor resolution with a lack of identifiable reference points. Inaccurate reporting by the consultants is hard to change.

Items like the voluntary planning agreement and associated community funding agreements get taken off the CCC table and are discussed behind closed doors between councils and the proponent. Lack of transparency and disregard for the community input through the CCC leaves the community members with a feeling that we only are there to allow the proponents to tick a box. As a community, we feel the important change to renewable energy should be done a whole lot better. A once-in-a-lifetime project is being rolled out using outdated technology, with a wilful disregard for the cumulative impacts on the environment, agriculture and our communities. A project with international developers, operators, regulators, consultants et cetera all clawing to gain profit, which in turn will make the electricity very expensive. On behalf of the communities impacted by the rollout of the renewables, I beg you to listen carefully to what we've got to say. We are fatigued and disempowered, and we really need help. Please try and help us advocate for better environmental and social outcomes.

The CHAIR: Mrs Hegarty, do you want to add a few words at all? Sorry, I didn't want to discourage you there.

JANE HEGARTY: No, that's fine. We'll just do it in the order that we're sitting in.

JAMES ARMSTRONG: Thanks once again for the opportunity to speak today. My name is James Armstrong, and I represent a third-generation farming family from Cassilis. We are directly impacted by the CWO REZ, with a nine-kilometre high-voltage transmission line proposed through our property, connecting a wind project to the regional hub. I share our story today, not just to highlight our personal experiences, but because it reflects a broader systemic issue with EnergyCo's conduct and existing compensation framework. What we've faced is not unique. These problems are affecting landholders right across the zones. We're not opposed to modernising the energy sector, but the way this rollout is being managed on the ground is deeply flawed and, in some cases, indefensible. EnergyCo has shown a consistent lack of transparency, empathy and procedural fairness.

Our dealings began in August 2022 and resulted in a proposed acquisition notice in December 2023 for the nine-kilometre easement that cuts our farm into four separate sections. It would require the removal of more than 300 trees and severely affects our homes, infrastructure, machinery access and everyday operation, all of which directly impacts the viability of our business. Despite more than two years of seeking detail, the only documentation we've received is a generic 695-word easement memorandum. It lacks even basic information needed to understand what is being proposed. How are we expected to make informed decisions about our future with so little clarity? And how can EnergyCo, or their valuer, claim to fairly assess the impact as well? A basic example from the memorandum says:

Network infrastructure may be established on the land. The term includes transmission and distribution infrastructure.

We have asked whether that includes substations or telecommunication towers. We still haven't received an answer. If neither party knows what infrastructure is permitted, how can the impact possibly be assessed accurately? Authorities talk about consultation. In reality, these are often token meetings, with no details provided to landholders. These are followed by compulsory acquisition notices and compensation figures that come with no explanation of how they've been calculated. I don't believe that is consultation. That's forced compliance dressed up as engagement.

When we submitted our detailed report outlining how the project would disrupt our operation, the response we received was that many of these impacts may not be compensable under the just terms Act, not because they don't matter, but because the law was not equipped to recognise them. This has been acknowledged at the highest level. During a face-to-face meeting at Merotherie in March 2024, Minister Penny Sharpe recognised that planning and compensation systems are not fit for purpose, and that landholders like us are effectively the guinea pigs. Treasurer Daniel Mookhey also attended, and he noted that the just terms Act was designed for roads and schools, not necessarily for renewable energy projects. He raised concerns about whether landholders should be forced to hire expensive legal help just to argue for basic fairness.

On top of this, there are some serious concerns about how the tax treatment of this compensation is applied. The uncertainty around income tax obligations adds another layer of stress—financial and emotional—and, quite frankly, it fails the pub test for fairness. In our case, achieving an even remotely fair outcome has required personal determination, the ability to delegate farm operations through additional labour and the support of trusted legal valuation and professional advisers. Without those resources, we would not have reached a result that was even close to satisfactory, and this is the situation many landholders face. They don't understand the process, they don't have access to expert advice, and they are often pressured into accepting unfair outcomes.

In our experience, the final result was many times greater than the authorities' original offer. I only highlight this to show how flawed and inadequate the initial process really was. That such an effort and cost are needed just to reach an outcome that is close to fair is unacceptable. If this is how we treat the people being asked to host the infrastructure that powers the clean energy transition, then the transition is already off track. We need urgent reform not only to the legislation but also to the culture and conduct of the agencies like EnergyCo, because without that trust, fairness and genuine engagement, this rollout will continue to divide the community and will erode the goodwill of the very regions expected to carry the burden. Thank you for your time, and I look forward to your questions.

JANE HEGARTY: Thank you for the opportunity to speak. I'm here to express the serious concerns and frustrations of our community regarding the rollout of renewable energy projects in the Central-West Orana energy zone. Our first concern is in the complete lack of meaningful, cumulative data on the agricultural, social, environmental, economic and cultural impacts of these developments. Key questions remain unanswered. How much agricultural land is actually being utilised by renewable energy? How much agricultural land is being purchased as offset and consequently production being reduced as well? What are the impacts on wildlife corridors, ecosystems, local employment, services and housing? What are the long-term consequences for bushfire management and operating viable businesses in what is fast becoming an industrialised landscape?

Each project assesses its individual impact, but no-one appears to be measuring the overall combined effect across the REZ. With 10 projects already approved for access rights, as per EnergyCo's 25 May media release, and more on the way, the lack of a coordinated approach is deeply concerning. Communities like ours need this data and deserve to have it communicated clearly.

Our second major concern is the complete absence of long-term planning for traffic and transport routes. The Golden Highway, Vinegaroy Road and Ulan Road are already vital commuter routes for us, providing access to schools, health care, work and services. These are now designated as haulage routes for heavy vehicles, oversize, overmass convoys and light vehicle contractors. For over two years we've asked EnergyCo and Transport for NSW how many OSOM vehicles will pass through our region each day and at what time intervals. They still can't tell us. Their current plan routes these vehicles through Cassilis, up a steep residential street and directly past Cassilis Public School, which has had no pedestrian crossing or footpaths available. Children and parents walk on the road to access the school. Now we're told to expect a truck or a vehicle every two minutes, without even noise monitoring being done.

Despite raising these concerns repeatedly, including EnergyCo staff admitting the route did look a little inappropriate, we've had no concrete response, only vague assurances that they're still looking into it. This process has left our community feeling ignored and undervalued. There's little evidence our safety, wellbeing or livelihoods have been genuinely considered. We are not opposed to renewable energy, but the way it is being implemented shows a disregard for the communities expected to carry its burden. We urgently need better planning, honest engagement and a process that puts regional communities at the centre, not at the margins.

JAMES MATTHEWS: I suppose one of the problems with being later in the day is everything's already probably been spoken about. Thank you for the opportunity to express my concerns regarding the impact of renewable energy zones on rural and regional communities, with my experience relating to the Central-West Orana REZ. The planning and development of these energy zones are causing significant distress and disruption to local communities, farmers and businesses.

One of the consequences of the REZ development is the division it has created within regional communities. These zones are pitting neighbours against each other, with some landowners being pressured into either selling their land or entering agreements with developers, while others face the threat of compulsory land acquisition. The tension has strained relationships and created an environment where communities are suffering for the sake of infrastructure projects that do not adequately consider local needs and perspectives. The REZ development has had a particularly devastating impact on farming businesses and families. The multiple developments being proposed in these REZ zones mean that landholders are no longer able to plan for the future with any level of certainty, resulting in reduced investment in on-farm infrastructure or long-term business plans. This is impacting the ability to maintain profitability, plan for droughts or invest in environmental projects.

The stress imposed on entire communities is profound. Families in these REZ zones are experiencing a deep sense of uncertainty about the future, with the majority of people I've spoken to feeling as though their voices are not being heard in the decision-making process, or that decisions are made before consultation has even begun. The concern surrounding the potential compulsory acquisition of land or the impact on land values because of these projects is creating resentment towards the Government and having a significant impact on the mental health of landholders. The situation is causing real harm to the mental and emotional wellbeing of residents around the REZ.

A critical issue with the REZ process is the massive imbalance of power between EnergyCo and private landowners. The introduction of State significant infrastructure legislation, combined with the threat of compulsory land acquisition, has left landowners with little recourse or bargaining power. EnergyCo, a government-backed entity, wields an overwhelming amount of influence in these negotiations, while landowners have been left with little say in how their land will be used or impacted. This imbalance has resulted in a sense of disenfranchisement and injustice among rural landowners, whose land could be irreparably harmed along with their livelihoods and the futures of their family and their children.

It is clear that EnergyCo has failed to adequately assess and address the risks that the new transmission projects will have on landowners, local businesses and the broader rural community. EnergyCo's approach seems to be focused on meeting renewable energy targets without fully understanding the consequences for the people who live and work in these regions, to the point where the MCA had to raise over \$30,000 to commission an actual independent report into the impacts of the REZ. Our transition to renewable energy should not come at the expense of rural communities that provide the food and fibre for our nation.

The approach taken by the New South Wales Government must be reassessed, and more meaningful consultation with affected landowners and local communities is essential, with a focus on ensuring that landowners have a stronger voice in decisions that will affect their land, businesses and way of life. The number of projects in an area needs to be capped to manage the impact on communities and their local resources. For example, in the small area between Dunedoo, Cassilis and Mudgee there were 28 projects proposed at the last NSW Farmers meeting I attended. This is too many for an area this size that is already struggling to provide resources such as doctors and child care to existing residents, not to mention the immediate impact on amenity and property values.

The current approach to the renewable energy zones is putting rural communities, farmers and businesses at significant risk. The lack of meaningful consultation and the overwhelming power imbalance between landowners, EnergyCo and development companies is leaving us feeling powerless and vulnerable. It is vital that the New South Wales Government reassesses its strategy to ensure that the concerns of local communities are genuinely considered and that the negative impacts on their way of life are mitigated. A more balanced and transparent process is needed, where local voices are heard and where the sustainability of both our energy future and rural communities can be achieved. I feel the New South Wales Government has lost sight of the fact that these renewable energy companies are not here to save the environment—they are here to make as much money as possible.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Thank you all for being here, for your submissions and for your testimony today. Mr Matthews, I appreciate what you said about when you're later in the day, it feels like it's been said. But it's important to get it from different communities that we're hearing from today, so we do really appreciate it. In your submission—and you talked a little bit about it in your opening statement too—you noted the idea of capping the current level of projects that are already approved or in the pipeline and not getting any greater, and also looking at specific no-go zones for certain areas of land. Could you talk a little bit more about why your community thinks that would be a good step forward?

JAMES MATTHEWS: The issue with the REZ is, I suppose, once the REZ has been established, it is flooded with companies that are trying to get their project in there. Probably not all of them are the most viable projects. From what I have seen, there is a company that comes in that does the EIS, gets it approved and then

sells that on to another company. That company may do some of the initial design work et cetera; nothing is done on the ground. They then sell it on to another company, and so it rolls on until someone eventually builds it and then someone eventually runs it. The issue, which stems from the constraint matrix, is that there is a lot of the Merriwa-Cassilis plateau that is classed as biophysical strategic agricultural land, which makes up only about 3 per cent of New South Wales. That's where a lot of the food and fibre for New South Wales is grown. That was given the lowest value on EnergyCo's constraint matrix, when really it should have been somewhere up around the highest.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Going forward, if that was clearer—one of the things we heard on Tuesday is that even though the area for the REZ isn't getting bigger, the number of projects that are still in the pipeline—initial conversations were around I think it was three gigawatts. Now we are talking up to 12 or more than in the planning process, and that uncertainty and what that means. You just said there will be some projects that won't go ahead, yet the community has got to go through that whole process and that uncertainty. In your view, would putting a pause, a moratorium on it now and saying let's deal with what we are dealing with and not grow this be the right decision for government to make?

JAMES MATTHEWS: I think that absolutely would be the right decision.

JANE HEGARTY: I'd just like to say, too, I think the thing we're forgetting here with the Central-West Orana REZ is that we're only in stage one. We know there's a stage two and a stage three planned and, if we've already got this many projects for stage one, then what is our area going to look like and what are our communities going to be like in the future?

LINDA GANT: I think there's development happening outside the REZs as well that are approved and being built, and I think, you know, you talk about a REZ and capping a REZ, but it's not only a REZ problem.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Mrs Gant, I think the submission from one of you talks about—and we picked up on this earlier today too—not being able to sit down with a group of neighbours to have a conversation about what's happening with the companies that are looking to do this. Do you want to put on record—I'm happy for all of you to do this—your views on what that should actually look like, whether there should be NDAs and would it be better if you could have that conversation more openly as a community?

LINDA GANT: Yes. The consultation is one-way. It's not consultation; it's presentation by a company about what they've got in mind. There is no real room for them to consider the community thoughts or inputs. I've been on this CCC committee for a long, long time and I'm really in the dark about a lot of stuff that's going on. There's been no value put on—and I don't mean in monetary terms, I just mean in terms of local knowledge value. Even when you question what the consultants have put on the front of the table, things as simple as houses in a two-kilometre zone from the wind farm considered impacted houses, they've got it wrong and you say, "There are more residents here; there are five houses in this little cluster alone." The response was, "Well, we employed consultants to do that job and we believe what they say." To get that changed, when you then say—I went to one of the impacted farmers and he said, "Oh, look, they've been hanging around here for 20 years. I don't believe this is ever going to happen. I'm not going to respond to them."

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Does anyone else want to comment on that broader issue of community—

JANE HEGARTY: I think the really poor thing that's happened here is that farmers feel isolated when they're having to negotiate with these multinational companies because they can't sit down with their neighbours and say, "Look, I've been approached about this. What do you think? Have you been approached?" They can't have those discussions and I think, in a rural community, that isolating process is a really disenfranchising aspect of it.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: There are about 300 things I'd like to raise with you, but we've taken some evidence earlier today and I'd be interested in your views to elaborate as well. At the top of point two in the Cassilis District Development Group submission, if I can just read it out, there are two sentences:

Insurance in this area is a real problem and there does not seem to be a will in government to address the inability of farmers to access insurance that would protect them financially if they impact a renewable development by fire. Are renewable proponents able to take out fire insurance for their developments to relieve this burden on rural land owners in the event of a natural disaster?

I was wondering if I could ask all of you to maybe elaborate and comment on that issue of fire and insurance more generally.

JANE HEGARTY: I personally haven't looked at it, but that issue has been raised a number of times in our local community meetings about the lack of insurance options for farmers near neighbouring developments and it's also been raised at the New South Wales taskforce into renewable energy. It is a real concern around

farmers because, if they can only access \$20 million of liability insurance, there's no way that is going to cover the damage incurred in a bushfire in our region if it burns a renewable energy development. Now I think if the renewable energy company is going to put that development on agricultural land, they should insure it themselves, irrespective of how that fire is started.

JAMES ARMSTRONG: I'd just like to add one thing there, if that's possible. With the insurance side of things, we've looked into it personally with our business and it's very hard to get some clear answers until the projects are actually built, so it's really hard to get some clarity around that, whether we're liable if the problem occurs on our property or from the project itself. I don't know how to create a solution for that, but it's really hard to get some clear numbers on it until the projects are built and you've actually got something tangible to look at. Maybe there's a framework that can be created that can allow some actual proper discussion about it prior to those things happening.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Mrs Hegarty, thank you for coming. I note in your submission your last paragraph says:

I realise that the CWOREZ has been a learning space for all levels of government however that does not mean that we cannot do better and initiate changes in all processes so that communities can have faith in decisions being a "win-win" for all parties.

I was just wondering what kind of changes you believe would provide communities that faith and make it possible for that win-win scenario that you talk about?

JANE HEGARTY: I really believe that in the development phase of these projects, before the EIS is developed and written for approval, they need to actually include local landowners and local community residents in that development phase so that there is local knowledge in there. When you read the EISs put up by these companies, there are so many assumptions about the community in them that are inaccurate and you're not going to get that change when you're doing it at a desk in Sydney. You need to get some local people on those committees and actually allow them to be involved in that decision-making process.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Can I just follow on—and this is to everybody. As a result of today's hearing and what we heard on Tuesday, and submissions, what would you like to happen? What recommendation would you suggest?

JAMES ARMSTRONG: I'll jump in there. A suggestion from our perspective would be, in terms of transmission line and the early framework of how these projects are rolled out, there was clearly no meaningful consultation prior to the scoping reports or the very early plans that were put forward and, if there was some community involvement, it would have actually benefited EnergyCo and the whole process by being engaged with the community and there would've been solutions brought forward without having to object. It would actually be a partnership. These things were presented as though they were a done deal and then that already set the relationship off on a bad note. In terms of the win-win, and I think it was mentioned earlier, early engagement prior to the planning process starting. It seems from our point of view that when you get involved in the planning process it's almost a given that it's going to happen and it seems futile reading an EIS of 9,000 pages and creating a meaningful submission. It's nearly pointless. There's got to be some genuine engagement before that happens, and there would be solutions. We're not objecting for the sake of objecting; we're objecting because there's also some solutions.

JANE HEGARTY: I also think that the companies have hired contractors to do a lot of the groundwork on the ground, but they don't have any skin in the game in the area that they're dealing with. They don't understand rural communities. It was really sad to read a lot of the EISs where rural communities and agricultural land are rated as of less value than anything that is publicly owned, like forests, national parks—they're all no-go areas and agricultural land is at the bottom of everything. For Australia, I think that's sad, because the agricultural industry provides a lot of income for our country and yet, reading those EISs, we're not valued at all.

JAMES MATTHEWS: Just further to that, too, previously disturbed mining land is classed as of higher value than agricultural land in their constraints matrixes. And as far as the consultation process goes, I would say there was very little consultation at all. It was very much a tick-in-the-box exercise when first Transgrid and then EnergyCo came around with their little roadshow. There was no genuine community consultation, and we were seen, as far as I can tell, as a bit of an irritation. And then when groups started to formalise and we started to put submissions on the table, we were then seen as very much a thorn in Transgrid and EnergyCo's side. It was already mentioned that the maps that we were provided were heavily pixellated. You couldn't tell, really, on the ground where anything was going. We were shown paper maps on a table at some of the meetings and told we weren't allowed to have copies. It very much felt like a cloak-and-dagger exercise.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: So more transparent?

JAMES MATTHEWS: A lot more transparency is required.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Mrs Gant?

LINDA GANT: I think there's never any value put on local knowledge as well. We're always called in as an advisory capacity, but not with any power to change anything. We're only asked because they need to tick a box, and that's very apparent with the way they deal with us, and with how they deal with the information given to them.

The CHAIR: That question of the value of different land versus the matrix—as a recommendation, would you want to see that flipped, in terms of priority, with agriculture being moved to the top?

JAMES MATTHEWS: Absolutely. Yes.

The CHAIR: Are there any other recommendations you think this Committee should be making, even in the interim, given that this is going to be an extensive inquiry? This is the first REZ we're looking at; we're obviously looking to go to other areas. What are probably the key things that need to change right now to make this process better, or to fix this clearly flawed process?

JANE HEGARTY: I think we're already down the pathway of some developments happening in the Central-West Orana REZ, and decisions have already been made that we can't change, but I really think that we've got to do something about those cumulative impacts. We've really got to start getting that data collated and actually saying, "Okay. Well, we've got 20 projects here. These 20 projects are going to use the Golden Highway. So, rather than having those 8,000 vehicles that one EIS might say, we're actually going to have 80,000 vehicles going along that road. What's this going to look like when we've got no development on that highway except for two intersections between Merriwa and Dunedoo?" No climbing lanes. We've got multiple intersections on that highway, of roads with no turning lanes. We've got verges on that road that you can't pull off if there's an OSOM coming along on that road. And we've already got 33 per cent of the traffic on that road is heavy vehicle. So, what is that road going to look like? That is our main transport route to access everything, for us, as a community, and it's really going to be unusable. Even listening to the inquiry yesterday coming over, Roads NSW said there were going to be significant impacts on the Golden Highway, yet EnergyCo's EIS says that they saw them as negligible.

The CHAIR: I guess, as part of that cumulative impact study, how important is getting the pause or the cap on projects? From my point of view, how can you fully assess the cumulative impacts if the goalposts keep moving and projects keep getting added to the pipeline? Do we need to have the pause first and then fully complete the cumulative impact study?

JANE HEGARTY: I definitely think you need to have the pause until everyone gets a handle on the cumulative impacts.

The CHAIR: Any other thoughts?

JAMES MATTHEWS: Yes. Just going back to your previous question about what needs to happen, I think the compulsory acquisition needs to be taken off the table. That means there's no real need for these companies to engage in genuine consultation, because they know if you continue to say no, "We'll just go down the compulsory acquisition route."

The CHAIR: Do you think the labelling of all these projects as critical State significant developments has really made that consultation process meaningless and has really been the cause of this power imbalance?

JANE HEGARTY: I think that is a huge issue, because what's happened in our area—we're in the Upper Hunter Shire Council, on the edge of the REZ. They're not negotiated with, with State significant projects. They find out at the same time we find out when something's happening, so they cannot even go into bat for us as residents of their shire. So there really is a power imbalance, because all the negotiations are between State significant projects and State Government, and we don't hear about them until they're basically at the EIS stage.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: We haven't talked about it today, but we did on Tuesday: the decommissioning process, and what would happen at the end. I know that's looking forward a number of years. Again, I'm happy for any or all of you to comment. Where do you think the flaws lie in that current process and the sort of lack of certainty around the decommissioning?

JANE HEGARTY: The flaws I see at the moment are that a lot of these developers are leasing land, so the cost of the decommissioning actually still sits with the landowner unless they've negotiated something with that developer. A lot of people, when they're negotiating those agreements, aren't thinking about 20 or 30 years down the track so haven't really thought about that, unless they've had very good advice. Some people say, "Well, they'll never be removed, because we'll keep just upgrading the technology and replacing it," but if it's leased land, who's to say that's not going to be sold on to someone else, who won't be interested in that?

Then who decommissions something? Is it going to be that landowner, who still technically owns the land? The costs of decommissioning are huge. And I cannot see, if we're having a rating system on energy developers, that Tony Dwyer recommended—and I think there's a trial of that at the moment—if we're rating energy providers, why we can't then license those energy providers that have those higher ratings as the preferred developers and, if they're licensed, why they cannot pay into a decommissioning fund that is held in Australian banks. These proponents are from international areas. They might tell us they've got money stuck in the bank over in some other country, but we don't know. Are we going to be able to access that 20 years down the track? We don't know.

JAMES MATTHEWS: Yes, just further to that, we don't let mining companies start operations in this country without a plan for what they're going to do when they've completed their mining and the money set aside to enable the regeneration of the land to happen. Renewable energy companies should be held to the same standard.

JANE HEGARTY: I think the other really important point here is that those long-term consequences of solar developments and wind energy developments—we don't know what they're going to be. We don't know, because we haven't done the studies, the research and development, as to whether our soils are going to be contaminated. So it may not just be about decommissioning the infrastructure and removing it. There may be lots of other issues there that we will have to deal with.

JAMES ARMSTRONG: Just back to the original question about some solutions—because I think it comes back to the planning stage. Putting a pause on the rollout of projects now might inhibit progress, but it would actually speed up progress in the future because once things are planned out, whether you agree with them or not, if there's a logical pathway to why it's being developed, you can't argue with it. It's just because we're in the dark that there's so much conjecture around different things. We've seen it on our property, but we've also seen it within the wider transmission line rollout—there's doglegs; there's things that people can't explain—which eventually costs the taxpayer more money. We're approaching August '22; they still haven't even come on our property. Imagine the cost to the Government via the third-party contractors, the cost to our business in interacting with all these different agencies. If this was done thoroughly, and whether you agree with it or not, there's a logical reason why it's got to happen, and potentially still compulsorily acquire land—if that's got to happen and you can't argue with it, it's a seamless transition. But, at the moment, there's no clear information that is put on the table. That means it's just backwards and forwards, trying to get a clear pathway forward. If they could pause it and do some better planning—macro and micro—then the developments can occur a lot quicker and with a lot more coordination between the different layers.

Just on the power imbalance, if it was seen as an equal partnership—at the moment, as a landholder and as members of the community groups, there is a genuine feeling of a power imbalance, especially in the compulsory acquisition process. That is true not only in terms of knowing the process but also, once you do understand the process a bit more, you find the power imbalance is even worse. The constraints within the legislation don't allow you to get fairness. The only way you can get some sort of seat at the table is by stopping whatever else you're doing and putting your heart and soul into it. That power imbalance is not only emotional; there are also structural problems that create that.

The CHAIR: That brings us to the end of our time with you today. Thank you very much for your evidence. We may come back to you with some supplementary questions. The secretariat will be in touch.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Luncheon adjournment)

Mr PETER ROTHWELL, Director, VRA Rescue, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: Welcome to the next session of the hearing. I welcome our next witness, Mr Peter Rothwell. Would you like to make a short opening statement?

PETER ROTHWELL: Firstly, I would like to thank the Chair and Committee members for coming to our beautiful region today to hear from stakeholders and individuals regarding the Central-West Orana REZ. VRA Rescue is the primary agency responsible for rescue in six locations throughout the REZ. These locations include Dubbo, Narromine, Mudgee, Gulgong, Mendooran and Coolah. There are two other centres for rescue that are carried out by the SES and Fire and Rescue NSW. We also have several squads that closely neighbour the REZ, with some of their territory falling inside the bounds of the REZ. These include Coonabarabran, Merriwa and Rylstone. The men and women of these squads are the primary people responsible for rescue response in those locations 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. When 000 is called and rescue is required, whether it be a road crash, industrial rescue, land search and rescue or general search and rescue, the volunteers respond. The men and women of the VRA are truly incredible. Being in this space means that you are 100 per cent guaranteed to deal with severe trauma and death. They do this to care for their communities and rarely get the acknowledgement they deserve.

VRA Rescue is a non-government organisation. As such, we do not receive funding through the normal channels such as the emergency services levy. We rely on grants from the State government and generous contributions from local residents and organisations. As an organisation, we have a budget of around \$6 million. We have to make this money stretch to enable our incredible volunteers, numbering around 1,400, to be there for their communities in their time of need. To break that down further, that equates to around \$4,000 per member per year. For further perspective, a single set of gear for a volunteer costs around \$2,000. Everyone in the organisation sacrifices due to the budget constraints. We have 10 full-time staff, who are paid less than their peers in other agencies and look after far more volunteers. We have roughly one staff member per every 140 volunteers, compared to other agencies, who have a ratio closer to one staff member per 30 volunteers. Our commissioner, Brenton Charlton, gave up his company vehicle so that it could be used elsewhere in the organisation. He instead uses his own private vehicle. They all do this because they believe in serving the community. Every dollar we save means a better outcome for our volunteers and the community.

The transmission project alone is set to increase daily traffic by some 2,000 vehicle movements per day. Individual renewable projects appear to have up to 200 extra vehicle movements each. To put that in perspective, the Golden Highway west of Merriwa has some 1,600 vehicle movements per day. That is where cumulative impacts must be considered. If there are approximately 50 projects, each with an average of 150 extra movements per day, we are quickly approaching an extra 10,000 vehicle movements per day. That's the equivalent of a 500 per cent increase in the traffic currently travelling on the Golden Highway. The workforce in the area is set to explode, with many centres more than doubling their populations. It's hard to get a grasp on the total extra population once all of the projects are built, but it would seem that little thought has been given to the impact on all emergency services. The change in land use throughout the region will add further challenges to our organisation. The industrialisation of the region will put further strain on our members and organisation through the requirement of specialised training, including vertical rescue.

Sadly, this will mean more accidents and a higher workload for our volunteers. There is just no way around the fact that these developments will add to the workload of all emergency services in the region. As an organisation, we will not let services slip in these communities. It is simply not an option for us. However, something will have to give. We are currently doing our best to expand our footprint to other rural areas of New South Wales to deliver rescue services to other in-need communities. With extra resources going into the REZ, that task becomes more challenging. To the best of our ability, we are trying to project possible increases in need, availability and capability. This is a massive task made harder by the lack of information and mixed messaging coming from all sectors. I have tried making contact with EnergyCo through phone numbers listed on their website. Some numbers are disconnected, and others go unanswered.

There is no clear indication of the number of projects to be built. Even this very week one person at this hearing said there isn't even enough capacity in the system for 50 projects, while another said there are 30 projects approved and a further 19 in the pipeline. To be fair, 49 isn't quite 50. Road upgrades to the Golden Highway touted as improvements for everyone are, in fact, small improvements to facilitate the movement of wind turbine components. Who in government do we deal with around these issues—the Minister for Emergency Services, the Minister for Energy or the Minister for Western New South Wales? It is totally unacceptable that our amazing communities and volunteers should simply be expected to cope with this with the resources currently available to them.

The CHAIR: I will ask a couple of questions and then I'll pass to my colleagues. I am looking at some of the data from your website. In 2023, you attended more than 1,700 incidents. How many of them would have been road incidents, compared to other incidents?

PETER ROTHWELL: I would have to take that on notice for the breakdown. I know it is increasing this year. I think in the first three months of this year we did 500 call-outs. We are on track for well over 2,000 this year.

The CHAIR: Obviously, if we get that 500 per cent increase in vehicle movements along the Golden Highway, it is going to blow that number out of the water, isn't it?

PETER ROTHWELL: Sadly, yes. I was looking at some road crash data that's available in the northern region of the REZ—it wasn't even the entire REZ. Last year alone, there were 40 what we call casualties in road crashes. We will only be called for rescue—if someone is trapped in a motor vehicle et cetera. We don't attend all crashes. Out here, because of the high speeds, most crashes are serious. We do attend a lot.

The CHAIR: To go to the question around volunteer base, have you given any consideration to what will happen when we have that displacement of people? We get small communities, it's generally always the same people putting their hand up to be volunteers on everything. If you lose some of those volunteers, because it's no longer viable to be on the land, what's that going to do to your capacity?

PETER ROTHWELL: It's an incredible problem. Volunteers would be lucky to be 1 per cent in the community. Volunteers for rescue, as I said, you're guaranteed to deal with severe trauma and death. I call them the 1 per cent of the 1 per cent, so the people that do it are few and far between. We are already seeing this. We've started a squad in Western Sydney for the sole reason to come out and relieve squads out here when they fall slightly short of numbers or get overworked. Again, you can imagine what that does to our budget. It blows it out. You've got to bring those people up, provide food and accommodation for them. It's amazing they want to do it. It's a fantastic squad down there. It's a great initiative, but it's a big impact.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: I'm not sure if you were here before lunch, but we had evidence from some witnesses. I think you talked about the Golden Highway in your opening submission as well, about some of the concerns around the existing road infrastructure, there not being turning lanes, and it not being ready or capable to take on not just the number of vehicle movements but heavy vehicle movements as well. As best as you can from your experience, what do you think would be some of the infrastructure needs around not just the Golden Highway but some of those other local roads as well in order to be able to handle the scale of investment and infrastructure that's coming in?

PETER ROTHWELL: I travel that road a fair bit. I'm sure that anyone here who has done the same, you can get stuck behind vehicles a lot. I think overtaking lanes are probably a really big part of that. The general condition of the road in areas is really quite poor, and there's not that many rest areas for heavy vehicles. That's a main thoroughfare. There's so much produce and stuff from the Central West going to port the other way. That would be the sort of upgrades.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: In terms of funding for your organisation, the \$6 million that's allocated, that's statewide.

PETER ROTHWELL: Correct. That's statewide.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Would it be beneficial if your particular area was allocated some additional funding to cope with what is about to and already occurring in terms of increased vehicle movements?

PETER ROTHWELL: Absolutely. It's our number one hindrance. As I said, our staffing levels are poor. Our volunteers do an amazing job. There's a lot of the facilities we have that aren't up to scratch. We need to spend money for the volunteers but we're always juggling, right? Like a \$6 million budget, a heavy rescue vehicle is north of half a million dollars for one vehicle. As we said, a set of uniforms is \$2,000. We're actually increasing our membership quite quickly, and there's calls for us to go into other areas and we're struggling with that. We can't. We don't have the money to do it, which is a real shame. So, yes, funding is a massive issue for us. I was going to say, to break it into another way for you: Mark was saying, a couple of years ago, we had 1,700-and-something calls. We're well on track for over 2,000 this year. Roughly, an average of 2,000 calls a year, so \$6 million, if we have 10 people who spend 12 hours on a job site rescuing a family from a motor vehicle, that's cost the taxpayer \$3,000 from the volunteers. Bang for buck. It's extraordinary.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: One of the things we talked about on Tuesday with EnergyCo and some of the departmental officials was around community investment backing from some of these projects. They talked about some of the grant programs that are available for different things. Has there been any capacity for you as a volunteer organisation to access any of that money so far?

PETER ROTHWELL: Again, we are actually talking about that very thing at the board level. Speaking to some people in that space, again, it comes down to budget constraints for us to put a grants officer or someone on. Is that going to cost \$100,000 or \$140,000? I don't know. That's a light rescue vehicle for a squad, so we're always—

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: You've got to balance that.

PETER ROTHWELL: It's a tough thing but, yes, we are dealing with that at a board level at this very moment.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Do you think it would be worthwhile, rather than making you as volunteer organisations—whether it's yourself or the RFS or the SES—have to apply, would it be better if there was almost an automatic process where some of that money was funnelled into some of the rescue and emergency service organisations that are volunteer led?

PETER ROTHWELL: Some of the grant money around the REZ?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Yes, and some of the community money that's meant to be coming back in so you get benefit here from what's happening.

PETER ROTHWELL: Yes, absolutely. I think there should have been a bit of a break up there. Again, we are very different because we are an NGO, which makes our representations to government a little bit harder. But, yes, something like that, a break up to say we need X amount of money for emergency services, X amount for community benefit. Well, it's all community benefit, but I do think that could be—

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: I suppose my suggestion is rather than you have to proactively ask for it and try and find the resources to apply, would it be better if there was just something that was available in recognition of the increased work you are going to have to do?

PETER ROTHWELL: Of course.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Please feel free to take this on notice but, ultimately, this Committee will be making recommendations to government. I'm just wondering, if you were writing it, what would be the top three recommendations that you'd be making that you would want this Committee to make in relation to your organisation to government that are relevant to this area? Again, feel free to take that on notice.

PETER ROTHWELL: I may take that on notice just because I don't want to absolutely be speaking as Peter Rothwell as a director.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: That's ultimately what we'll be doing. If you wish to sneak a fourth one in, that's fine too. But what I'm looking for is that it is important that we know precisely what you want and precisely the message that you want us to give to government. Please take it on notice and come back to us and the Committee secretariat will be in touch with the details.

PETER ROTHWELL: Thank you very much.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: I just wanted to ask—we've talked about engagement and consultation. Was the VRA Rescue part of any engagement strategy or were you consulted at any point in time? Have you had that opportunity to then say, "Hey have you considered this, this and this?"

PETER ROTHWELL: No, originally we weren't at all. I've only been on the board for a few months from the end of last year. I know that the commissioner—I flagged it as a concern when I wasn't on the board and the commissioner did reach out to EnergyCo. He had one or two conversations that he was disappointed with, and then communications stopped. Then since being on the board—because I live in the area and spend a lot of time around the REZ—I could see it as a real risk to our organisation, how we provide service. We're sort of starting from scratch again in that regard. But, yes, there was no initial—when this whole thing started, there was nothing.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Are you the only emergency services organisation on the board?

PETER ROTHWELL: Yes, so this board, this is the only board.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Your board. Sorry, I thought you were talking about with EnergyCo. Do you know if the Rural Fire Service or other organisations have been consulted?

PETER ROTHWELL: I don't know.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Okay. It's probably out of your remit, but what are your views on fire risks at the renewable energy projects?

PETER ROTHWELL: Again, not my area of expertise. I can take the VRA cap off and put my farmer hat on, if you like. I've got a farm inside the REZ. It has to increase the risk. I can't see any other way around it. As soon as you industrialise any sort of landscape, you're going to increase the fire risk. Firefighting capabilities would have to, in turn, be affected. I see ag pilots, we have ag pilots at home, and I think they're incredibly skilful and a little bit mad. To think that they're going to have the same level of access that they currently do now in open country with these structures, I'd say, yes, I would doubt it.

The CHAIR: Is it anticipated that you might have to provide some service to some of these camps that are being set up in the event of an emergency situation with their construction where a worker's injured on site? Would you be one of the first people called?

PETER ROTHWELL: We would be. We haven't been involved in that process, so I'm not sure what staff they have on site. It is a concern for us. That's why I mentioned vertical rescue there, the training that's going to be involved around wind turbines and stuff. The simple fact is that if a call goes through to 000 and rescue is required, we're the ones that are tasked in those areas.

The CHAIR: The vertical rescue thing, for a layman, would there be any added complexities between a normal vertical rescue and a vertical rescue with one of these wind turbines?

PETER ROTHWELL: I'm not a vertical rescue expert, but there are always complications in everything you do. It would be another set of training, without a doubt.

The CHAIR: Which is another set of costs?

PETER ROTHWELL: Correct.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: That follows on from what I was going to ask in terms of local capacity. Noting that you are a volunteer organisation, is there a sufficient skill set locally to be able to deal with an emergency of that magnitude at this point?

PETER ROTHWELL: It depends what you'd call local. We are aware of this. We've got specialised teams, like Dubbo, for example, and Narromine—we've got some very good vertical rescue crews there. Some of our smaller locations, like Gulgong, for example, I don't believe we do. I'm not operational, but I'm pretty sure we don't there.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: And you wouldn't expect that capability to be in every unit that you've got?

PETER ROTHWELL: Correct, and we have flagged it again as a thing. We are training more specialised squads for this. We don't know the answers to that. As I said, we're trying to find our way through it all. But definitely not severely local, but pretty local, yes.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Just going back to the issue of attracting volunteers as well—and I think you're absolutely right when you talked before about there's almost certainties that you'll be dealing with fatalities and very high-pressure environments when you do go to one of those rescue scenes—do you think it will impact your ability to get volunteers in more generally, knowing that you might actually end up with many call-outs going forward? Does that worry you?

PETER ROTHWELL: It does. We've talked about this. The men and women that we have, they're so incredible and some of them have been doing it for such a long time. I tend to think there is a lifespan in this sort of role. To start with, they are built differently, but it's one of our great worries as an organisation. We provide really good peer support and support people, but you never know what's going to be the thing that stops someone from doing it. It might be something that's too close to home. You've got to remember that these volunteers live in these communities, and sometimes you can be called to an accident where it's someone you know, and in some cases it's been family members. No, it's tough and, if the workload increases, then I think the attrition rate may be higher.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: In terms of the mental health support for your volunteers, what's available now? Have there been any offers from government of increased mental health support for your volunteers if you've got more jobs?

PETER ROTHWELL: I can't speak to that directly. I know it's an important part and if you'd like the full details, there are full plans of what support has come direct.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: You can provide some of that on notice if you want, just in terms of what's available. That would be good.

The CHAIR: Any other questions from you, Mr Primrose?

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: I think all of these questions that we're asking are simply trying to get an understanding of what you're doing, but also what recommendations can we make in relation to the REZ. If there are any other matters that you want to raise with us, please do so.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Even with your farmer hat on. If you want to talk about anything from that perspective, rather than the VRA, feel free.

The CHAIR: Just before you put your farmer hat on, has your organisation identified any other specific training or upgrades that you will need to do to deal with incidences on the REZ in terms of hazardous materials et cetera? Is there anything in that space?

PETER ROTHWELL: Can I take that on notice?

The CHAIR: Yes.

PETER ROTHWELL: I'm now a pen-pusher in the organisation. I used to be operational, on the coalface, so I'll speak to the operational team and get back to you on that one.

The CHAIR: Okay. We'll put your farmer hat on. Is there anything you'd like to say?

PETER ROTHWELL: No, I don't think so. If you have any specific questions—I will say one thing. This entire rollout, across all levels of government, has been severely lacking, and I think we've been focusing on the wrong things. It beggars belief to me that, say, at a Federal level that you have these enormous renewable energy subsidies through the RET scheme that fluctuate depending on the value of these green certificates that they get, but anywhere between \$1 billion to \$2 billion every year going to these large-scale renewable generators. I'm no fan of subsidies, I really detest them, but if there was ever—it's sort of the wrong way around. I could maybe cop a subsidy if it was looking after the men and women on the ground, the people affected by this, the little guy, so to speak, but we're not. They're looking after the big players and, if renewable energy is the cheapest form of energy, then they shouldn't need that help, and we should be helping the little guys.

You see the same thing at a State level. It disappoints me a bit to see these upgrades to the Golden Highway and stuff touted as community benefit when they're not. They're there for the benefit of these projects. I then see legacy infrastructure funding that comes through, a round that's come through, and I see that some councils have spent it okay, I think. Other councils have put it into centres that are there to train workers for these large multinationals and then to act as a bit of a propaganda outlet for renewable energy. Imagine these poor people that have had their houses and farms interrupted by compulsory acquisition for transmission lines, and a part of that sorry money or whatever community benefit is then spent on a centre to train workers for those same projects and to then tell them how good this stuff is. I think it's been rushed, and the level of resourcing and where it's been pointed to has been misplaced.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: There are a lot of nodding heads behind you if that's any consolation.

The CHAIR: If there are no other further questions, we might end our time with you a little bit early, but thank you very much for your evidence. It's something that we hadn't really looked at, in terms of emergency response, so that evidence is really valuable. Thank you, Mr Rothwell, for your time today.

(The witness withdrew.)

Mr STEVE MASTERS, CEO, ACERERZ, affirmed and examined

Mr ROBERT ARMSTRONG, Operations Director, ACERERZ, affirmed and examined

Mr BART SYKES, Acting Head of Community and Regional Development, Squadron Energy, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: We now welcome our next witnesses. Mr Sykes, do you want to make a short opening statement?

BART SYKES: Yes, I will take the opportunity, thank you. I will start by thanking you for the opportunity to come and speak today and talk a little bit about Squadron Energy, which is Australia's leading renewable energy company that develops, owns and operates renewable energy assets in Australia. We are 100 per cent Australian owned and we are here for the long term, with two gigawatts of renewable energy in operation or under construction. I am from here and I live here, and I get consistent feedback that sovereignty and full life cycle ownership are important to the communities in which we work.

Squadron has a significant presence in the Central-West Orana Renewable Energy Zone, with several projects in construction and development including our Spicers Creek Wind Farm, which last week gained access rights. Our other projects in the region include Uungula Wind Farm near Wellington, which is currently under construction, an operating asset at Crudine Ridge, outside Mudgee, and a planned firming project for Dubbo. We want to contribute to an industry with high quality jobs and benefits for hosts, neighbours and the wider community. Squadron's current pipeline of projects will create more than 6,000 jobs during construction and ops and, in addition to those, will support thousands more indirect jobs.

A little bit about our approach: We want to create a lasting economic legacy for the regions where we develop and operate renewable energy assets. We see that as being just as important as the infrastructure itself. Alongside our renewable energy projects in construction and development we have also partnered with Dubbo Regional Council to deliver an advanced wastewater treatment facility, which will provide long-term water security for the Dubbo region. It is a win-win for the community. Not only does it secure water for construction use on renewable energy projects; it also provides long-term infrastructure and water security for the region. Anyone that was here through our last drought knows that it was horrible time, with dust storms, mice and obviously the lack of rain. The advanced wastewater treatment facility will have the capacity to treat 700 megalitres of water per annum.

We have engaged early in Dubbo. We've also partnered on an accommodation solution for our workforces. We have entered into an agreement to lease 10 hectares of land from council for a workforce village. It's on the urban fringe. We did that to ensure full economic benefit is realised by the broader community. The REPLAN data the council provided regarding that village and moving it into town indicates it will add \$250 million worth of economic activity to the local economy each year. We have paid to rezone that land, align it with council's future subdivision plans, pay leased fees, enter into a VPA and then leave legacy infrastructure behind, which will expedite their longer-term vision for the site.

We're deeply committed to the CWO and collaborating with landowners, community members and all levels of government to ensure our projects deliver long-term economic value for the region. Our approach to engagement is threefold and quite simple: We partner early. We've had offices in town here now for two years for a project that's just started construction, and those projects I mentioned—both with wastewater and accommodation—have been circa about 18 months to get those opening, so we understand the need to partner early. We want to think laterally and solve problems. We think we've done that, and we've provided a couple of examples. And we want to leave the region stronger. I am happy to take questions from the Committee as they arise.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Masters or Mr Armstrong, do you want to make an opening statement?

STEVE MASTERS: I'd like to start by thanking the Committee for hosting this important inquiry. I would also like to thank everyone who has taken the time to make submissions or appear in person. I look forward to taking questions, and that's why I'll keep my opening statement short. As you're likely aware, ACERERZ and EnergyCo recently achieved financial close, appointing us as network operator for the Central-West Orana Renewable Energy Zone. I've been in this role for about six weeks and I'm excited to be leading the team that will enable one of the most significant renewable energy projects in the nation, both for what it promises in delivering safe, reliable and clean energy to households and businesses in New South Wales, and for the opportunity to create a legacy of economic prosperity, more jobs and better community infrastructure in the region.

Whilst electricity transmission represents a cog in the energy wheel, it is a critical piece of infrastructure that is essential to keep the lights on. Before we get into questions, it's helpful to consider this project through a wide lens. It is the first project of its kind—in the nation, and in many ways—but that comes with the challenges and opportunities in undertaking something that has not been done before. Annual generation in the REZ will power more than two million New South Wales households. The project will deliver at least 4½ gigawatts of new network capacity by 2028 to connect 7.7 gigawatts of wind, solar and battery storage projects. This month 10 renewable energy projects successfully secured access rights to connect into our transmission network.

I want to thank the New South Wales Government and EnergyCo for creating a concession model that facilitates private investment, protects consumers and ensures the modern electricity infrastructure our society needs can be built. But for all the project's value and significance, we know we need to work hand in glove with communities in which we are investing, and do that for the long haul. We are committed to working with the Central-West Orana community for the next 35 years.

As long-life investors in the region, and wanting to be a good neighbour, we're determined to listen, stay engaged and ensure our legacy is a positive one. That's why, in my short time in this role, I've prioritised meeting and listening to as many people as possible—that includes introductions to the Central-West Orana First Nations working group, landholders, council mayors and general managers, and others—and I'll continue to do so. It'll ensure ACERREZ is well positioned to deliver benefits beyond its contribution to the decarbonisation of our electricity network, safe and reliable energy, and jobs and investment across the region. Thank you again. I look forward to taking your questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you. At this point I would actually like to acknowledge that you are the only two players, I guess, on the other side of the discussion here that have actually come forward and agreed to engage with the Committee, so I think that has to be noted. It doesn't bode well for the others, but it at least probably paints you guys in a potentially better light. Also thank you, Mr Masters and Mr Armstrong, for allowing us out onsite yesterday to see what you're doing with the camp out there and get an understanding of what that is.

STEVE MASTERS: It's a pleasure. Thank you.

The CHAIR: You talk about working hand in glove with the community. Given that 369 out of the 398 public submissions opposed the REZ during that environmental impact statement phase, how are you, ACERREZ, going to address what is clearly evident community dissatisfaction and a lack of trust?

STEVE MASTERS: Thank you for the question. I think it is fair to say that I certainly acknowledge the feedback—that I have certainly had the opportunity to read and listen to various stakeholders, not just as part of this inquiry, but certainly my visits in the past couple of weeks. I think the opportunity that we have is to do a hell of a better job based on the feedback that has been received. What that looks like, I am certainly happy to work with the communities to ascertain that. One thing I think is important to acknowledge, and that probably speaks to generators as well, is that obviously financial close was only reached for this project only a few weeks ago, and access rights for each of the generators only a week or so ago as well. I think there's hopefully the opportunity to turn a fresh leaf for the community, and I'm certainly giving my personal commitment to wanting to engage in a way that is meeting the satisfaction of all stakeholders.

The CHAIR: In terms of those 10 projects that have achieved access rights, do you think the fact that only maybe three or four of them have fully gone through the planning and approval stage helps your cause in terms of gaining trust with the community? These projects aren't even approved, haven't gone through the proper process and they've already been granted access rights. What do you think that says to the community in terms of a proper process?

STEVE MASTERS: I think again, Chair, based on the feedback that I've heard today and certainly over the last couple of weeks, there is a lot of work for industry to do in terms of that engagement going forward. There's certainly been many suggestions that have been offered during the inquiry, which I look forward to the Committee's feedback on in due course.

The CHAIR: One of the things we heard today was that when companies are engaging with landholders, the people that are put in front of landholders are often people probably best described as low down the company ladder. They probably can't really effect any change and are just there as a face. There is a lack of belief that their concerns will be taken back to the highest level where the change can be made. What are you committing to do differently in that space? Mr Sykes, can you talk about who is the person that engages with landholders at Squadron Energy? Is it someone that can effect change, or is it essentially just a community liaison officer?

BART SYKES: Absolutely. Our development is all done in house, so it's by our own teams that we'll develop a project right from origination. I mention that we maintain ownership through the life cycle so, like ACERREZ, from a project being a dot on a map right through to a financial decision, being built and then upgrading

the asset. That sits with us for the duration of the project. We're nimble. Our development team are very good at what they do, given our industry-leading development pipeline—I think that that's evidence of that—and they've absolutely got the chains of communication they need to raise any issues or deal with any issues with landowners as they come up in our projects.

The CHAIR: Mr Masters and Mr Armstrong, in terms of that level of engagement in terms of who meets with landholders in ACEREZ, who are you sending out to meet with landholders?

STEVE MASTERS: If I speak in a general sense, Chair, we are trying to ensure that all of our landowners have dedicated personnel they can talk to at any point of time, so that obviously goes to having a breadth of individuals that can certainly deal on a day-by-day basis with landowners. I think one of the things that certainly I'm aware of is making sure that senior representation in our businesses can have the opportunity and the time to meet with landowners and to make that happen. That's certainly one of the commitments I'm prepared to offer today from a personal perspective in terms of making myself available as much as possible to meet with landowners.

The CHAIR: I guess a question more to the camp that we saw yesterday, if we can talk about it: Some of the concerns we've heard from community is that there are going to be 1,200 unknown people essentially on their back fence. After finishing work, what are they going to be doing? What is the risk of them potentially wandering on to private property? Can you talk us through what things you are putting in place to ensure that people's privacy and private property rights are protected from workers at these camps?

STEVE MASTERS: The design of the camp—it's certainly a large camp with 1,200-bed accommodation as has been noted. It will be built in phases, so there won't be a 1,200 person bed from day one as the project develops and winds down as well. That's a reflection of the peak capacity at the camp. I think we have certainly tried to design the accommodation there in relation to being very sensitive to the local communities and particularly sensitive to the neighbours in proximity of the camp. A lot of the protocols that we will be having in place around security, code of conduct and the way that we've designed the camp is certainly trying to minimise the impact to our neighbours and to be very clear with our employees and contractors that come onto site as to the expectations that we want of them as good neighbours. A lot of the design pieces around the camp itself are there, anything from the footprint, which is taking into account feedback from the RFS right through to engagement with key experts around mental health and the like to have a camp that we believe will be attractive for the workers but also minimise the impact on the local community. I'm not sure whether Rob might have anything to add on that.

ROBERT ARMSTRONG: I think just on the last point, we're working really hard on the pull factors to have staff happy on the camp and not want to go elsewhere, so we're working hard. We've got a gymnasium on site, we've got a mess, there's exercise facilities, chances for people to interact and build a community on site to hopefully keep them there as much as possible. People will go out into the community, absolutely, but like Steve says, there's a code of conduct. We're expecting really high levels of behaviour from our staff in their engagements with the community.

The CHAIR: Will there be curfews or anything that permits or limits late-hour access?

STEVE MASTERS: The accommodation site itself will be fully fenced. It will have a security gate command 24 hours a day. All movements in and out of the camp will be monitored. Again, there should be very transparent and clear records of all personnel in and outside the camp.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: In terms of engaging local businesses for some of the supplies to the camp, have those conversations started yet and what might that look like?

STEVE MASTERS: We're certainly intending to have the opportunity for local businesses to supply as much of their local services and goods as possible. That is anything from cleaning services right through to the provision of food for the camp. We are certainly encouraging that and we would certainly hope that that provides again an economic benefit and opportunity for the broader community to contribute to the project.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: We also have heard, I think just this morning from Mid-Western Regional Council, about some of the constraints or impacts on health services when you've got a large number of people. I appreciate what you've said, Mr Masters, that it won't be 1,200 people from day one, but I think Mr Cam, the general manager, talked about how Gulgong doesn't have a GP at the moment and what might happen if people need to access those services. Is there anything that you're looking at as an organisation around that healthcare provision or support for your people on site, should they need it?

STEVE MASTERS: Yes, thank you for the question, and again it comes back to the way that we've tried to design the accommodation so that it does minimise the impact but provides opportunities for the

community. We will have a nurse and that kind of first aid responder people on site. That also goes to things like firefighting equipment and training for those that will be within the accommodation blocks themselves. Again, we've tried to minimise what I think would be an influx of new people into the town or the community with the way that the accommodation has been designed to minimise those impacts.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: I want to turn now to some of the more technical parts of your arrangement with government. My understanding is that your role as ACEREZ is to build the transmission network and operate it for a period of 35 years?

STEVE MASTERS: That's correct.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: At the end of that time, I've noted some of the documentation says that there'll be an expiry payment from the Government at the end of that concession, and I appreciate there might be commercial-in-confidence matters here, but are you able to confirm for the Committee has there been a final agreement on what that payment back from government to ACEREZ will look like at this point?

STEVE MASTERS: I think you've touched on to some extent that the terms at this point are confidential. What I'd also say to you is that we've been required to submit a revised revenue proposal to the Australian Energy Regulator, which again then comes back with the total costs that will be endorsed by the AER in the coming months. That information, I would expect, would be available in due course. But what I would say about the structure is it's a fairly typical public-private partnership type model, which again as you've alluded to does have a payment at the back end back to us prior to the asset being effectively transferred to—

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Returned back to government, basically.

STEVE MASTERS: Correct.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: I appreciate these things will probably be made more public in the fullness of time, but can that final payment figure change throughout the course of that 35 years? What might make that be negotiated along the way, appreciating that is a little hypothetical?

STEVE MASTERS: Again, I'd probably just offer the same feedback as earlier and that's commercial in confidence at this point, but I would like to think that in due course that could be made available.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: I want to echo the Chair's comments and thank you both for coming. I think it would have been good if some of the other potential operators and companies in the region were here too. I want to raise the issue about the NDAs and some of the concern that has come from witnesses this morning about neighbours not being able to talk to each other about maybe offers that are being made, not having that kind of whole-of-community discussion. From a commercial perspective, what are some of the reasons that you put the NDAs in place? Is it possible to be in a position where they could be lifted so you could have a better whole-of-community discussion, or even neighbours being able to talk to each other a little more freely? Is there anything you can offer the Committee in relation to that?

BART SYKES: Thanks for the question. In terms of confidentiality agreements, our neighbour agreements are fairly industry standard, is what I call them. They don't limit a landowner from raising concerns about breaches of approvals. However, they do contain clauses that limit their ability to object to a project, in terms of the impacts that they've already agreed to accept when they've entered into an agreement with us. They do include personal and commercially sensitive info for both parties, so that's why the clauses are included. We understand that every landowner-neighbour on a property is really different, and our approach to recognise each unique situation is to work with those individuals to create a solution for that unique situation. To that end, we encourage landowners and neighbours to engage their own independent legal advice before signing any agreement with us; that's at our expense, the legal advice, so there's probably a point of difference there. The last point that I just had jotted down in the notes was that across our projects, we have close to 500 landowner agreements in place, so it is common practice. It is something that we're quite experienced with and it has worked well for us with projects.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Do you want to add to that?

STEVE MASTERS: The only thing I'd probably offer in terms of the specific question is that I think the documents you're referring to, from an ACEREZ perspective, we're not party to. A lot of those would have been put in place by EnergyCo.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Yes. I just have a couple more for you, Mr Sykes, if I can. One thing that we've talked a bit about both today and on Tuesday is the community benefit from having these projects. Could you talk us through a little bit more about how your community investment strategy works? Do you think

community actually sees the benefit or recognises that some of that funding for those projects is coming from you? Could that be done better? What does that look like from your perspective?

BART SYKES: A couple of points before I answer the question. At Squadron, we are adhering to the Benefit-Sharing Guideline of \$1,050 a megawatt from construction operations for all our projects. Our most recent actually exceeds that amount, and we actually set the bar higher than that when we were working with Dubbo council and Warrumbungle on a VPA for our Spicers Creek project. Before those guidelines came in, we were above that. We've got VPAs in place for Crudine; Sapphire, in the New England; Bango, down near Boorowa; our Uungula Wind Farm; and with Dubbo and Warrumbungle, as I mentioned, for Spicers. For our projects that are in REZs, so the Spicers Creek project, as I mentioned, we pay an additional \$2,300 a megawatt for access rights.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Is that per year, sorry?

BART SYKES: Yes, annually. So that Spicers Wind Farm alone will contribute almost \$85 million in community investment over its lifetime, a significant amount of funds. To answer your question, for programs like the community employment program that EnergyCo have recently rolled out or initiatives that are rolled out through local government via VPA funds, I think they do need to communicate where the projects get their financial support from. I'm not saying that industry should auspice those funds, but I think community need to see where the benefits of the transition are coming from. So for Spicers, two-thirds of our contribution—of that \$85 million—would be administered by either State or local government. And I think there probably is a bit of work to do on making sure that there's a direct line back to industry, and even to project by project, about where that support's come from.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: One of the other things we've heard a bit is just the scale of projects, the number of operators coming in or development applications going in, particularly when an area is being earmarked as a REZ. In terms of that industry conversation, is there any talk happening between you, as the developers, about what's happening, whether you can look at how you can better manage the scale of projects and the community certainty?

BART SYKES: Yes, there is. A couple of things on it, just in terms of the number of projects. I just quickly wanted to touch on the developer rating scheme that's been raised throughout probably Tuesday and today a little bit as well, and just wanted to put on the record that we welcome the progress on the implementation of that. We're committed to setting a higher standard in working with landowners and communities. As I've mentioned before, we are here for the long term, and what we do now impacts what we do into the future, or our opportunity to do stuff into the future. That opt-in voluntary scheme, developed with input from all levels of government, will help to create clear benchmarks and best practice, and it'll create additional transparency. I think that that will have an impact on the number of projects we see. We hope to continue to work with landowners, community and the policymakers to get that scheme where it needs to be.

In terms of cumulative impact, I think it does come up. I know that in the IPC for Spicers it has come up and the department spoke to it directly. As developers, we're starting those conversations about minimising cumulative impact by working together where there's project overlap. Community engagement, aligning construction time frames and exploring that joint benefit-sharing are probably three things that we're really keen to work with other developers—and ACEREZ, as constructors of infrastructure in the REZ—on how we can do that better.

The CHAIR: Before I pass to Mrs MacDonald, I want to just pick up on your comments on the rating scheme. You said that it would be opt-in and voluntary. Do you think that's going to really encourage the bad actors to stick their hand up and say, "Hey, I want to be rated"? Do you think it actually should be mandatory that anyone that wants to operate in this space should submit themselves to a rating scheme, and those that, obviously, do the right thing don't have anything to hide?

BART SYKES: A couple of things. I think, by nature of the scheme, that landowners would gravitate towards those who have rated well in the scheme. Whether or not it's mandatory, I think it'll achieve the outcome of landowners wanting to work with developers that are doing the right thing by community. The mandatory nature of it is probably a call for government more so than industry, yes.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Mr Masters, some of the landholders feel the negotiation process around easements hasn't always been easy. How do you see your approach evolving to make sure landholders feel well informed and supported through what can be a very stressful time and process?

STEVE MASTERS: Thank you for your question. I think one of the things that's certainly not lost on me, particularly, as new in the role is the to some extent overwhelming nature of a lot of moving parts that landowners and landholders have had to deal with. In respect of the easements, obviously they've been put in place

through the government processes prior to ACEREZ being appointed as the network operator. Having said that, I still think all of our engagement with landowners going forward in relation to all aspects of the project is important, whether it's an easement or whether it's a particular concern for a landowner.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: We've heard from landholders about fire risk management safety concerns. Can you walk us through what your risk-management plans are and how you've worked with, say, RFS and local brigades to make sure that firefighting efforts can continue alongside your infrastructure?

STEVE MASTERS: Yes, thank you, and I might also ask Rob to make some comments. If I break the question down, perhaps, into two parts, I think a good example would have been the sites you visited yesterday. The design of the accommodation at Merotherie has gone through extensive planning that's taken particular account in terms of fire risk in relation to that, either starting from the facility or any other fire that might be in the area. The RFS is a great example of a lot of consultation that's gone in place there.

If I speak more generally around transmission lines, again, there's a very robust risk management plan that's required around any transmission—that said, that would be the same for Transgrid or what we are intending to build—which goes into a lot of detail in relation to mitigants that we put in place, processes that we are required to deal within around things like vegetation management, structures that might be near transmission lines that could potentially cause a fire to start. So fire risk is certainly a very high-profile and high risk-management opportunity that we do have, but Rob might also have some comments.

ROBERT ARMSTRONG: Thanks, Steve. In addition to that, we've started dealing with the local emergency management committees of the various councils that are here today. We've been to a number of those—there's another one on Monday coming up for Warrumbungle—and we continue to visit those. We have representation covering the design and construct phase and delivery phase of building the project, but also operationally, and how do we work with RFS and the various forces going forward to ensure it's safe. There are established procedures which happen now, and we're looking to work in with what they already have with other transmission and distribution providers.

The CHAIR: Are you prepared to include VRA in those discussions? We have just heard from a witness from VRA. They are concerned that there will be an increase in the need for their involvement with vehicle movements and them having to come and perform rescue operations on sites. Are you prepared to engage more broadly with them in terms of what their requirements will be and what assistance they may need to improve their capabilities to support you guys?

ROBERT ARMSTRONG: I think that's completely reasonable. I am absolutely happy to undertake that engagement with them and do what we have to, and work together to get the right outcomes.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Mr Sykes, in regard to working with the wind turbines, we have heard about aerial firefighting. What risk management plans does Squadron have around that?

BART SYKES: In terms of ignition or bush fires, our projects have a permanent operational team on site. All-weather access tracks make a big difference—not for aerial, obviously, but for ground-based firefighting. The Ungula project alone has somewhere between 75 kilometres and 80 kilometres of internal access for all-weather access roads, which is obviously a big plus in fighting fires. We have a commitment to reduce fuel loads around those assets. There are lightning protection devices on the turbines. There are monitoring systems that detect any sort of increase and cause them to shut down if there is fire danger. Those things underpin our ability to rapidly respond to fire. During any event, our teams have worked with crews as needed.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Decommissioning and long-term stewardship is also on people's minds, particularly when hosting large infrastructure. Could you outline what assurances are in place so people feel confident there won't be a legacy burden left behind?

BART SYKES: It's a really good question. I know it came up a couple of times over the last couple of days. For each of our projects, we have a decommissioning plan. That is part of the approval process for those projects. It was also mentioned earlier today that the technology may come where wind farms get upgraded and their lives get extended, pending discussions with landowners and future approvals that would be needed. I suppose that it is a point to make it clear that it might be 60 years, instead of the 30 years that we are talking about, for decommissioning. I would also like to put on the record that we are part of an industry working group that is looking at the framework to ensure those landowners have the certainty on where those funds are being held. Number one, absolutely, it's in all of our approvals and all of our arrangements with landowners to decommission those assets. Number two, the industry is working on the vehicle to hold those funds so there is another level of certainty in terms of how that decommissioning is going to take place and where the funds are coming from to pay for it.

The CHAIR: Are you able to provide the Committee with a copy of a decommissioning plan? The evidence we got from the Government was that they weren't really interested in pursuing that line. It sounds like you're a company that is proactively trying to look at that issue. I am happy for you to take on notice whether you can provide some more detail around what is in your decommissioning plans. They will be site specific, I imagine. But I think it would help the Committee if we had a better sense of how a company is already thinking about the issue.

BART SYKES: There are probably some legal ramifications, but I'm happy to take it on notice and consult internally to see if it's possible.

STEVE MASTERS: I am also happy to answer that question. From an ACEREZ perspective, our role is to build and maintain the network and then hand it back to EnergyCo at the end of the 35 years. Our situation is probably a little bit different to Bart's and other generators in terms of the decommissioning plans.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Some of the submissions have said that they feel the social licence has been eroded. What would you say to those communities and what steps are you taking to rebuild trust?

BART SYKES: In terms of our place in the region, as I mentioned, I grew up here and I live here. We've put a permanent workforce here; we've got a dozen staff across our Dubbo and Wellington offices. We've done some really good stuff with council. From being able to engage early and think laterally, like I mentioned, hopefully we will leave the place better. The point I raised earlier that I will touch on again is our support for the developing aiding scheme. I would just like to reiterate that. In terms of a social licence, as an industry, we are probably only as strong as the lowest performing provider. We probably need to pull the industry up a little bit and the developer aiding scheme is probably one way to do that, in turn building social licence across industry. I think Squadron is doing really well with social licence. I think we've got a lot of it throughout where our projects are. I think there is probably some work to do with the industry.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: I want to turn to First Nations and culture. We have heard that cultural heritage is more than just artifacts—it is also about country, connection and storylines. You've got something on your site. Could you share how you've approached your engagement with traditional owners to understand those deeper values and how that's shaped your project?

STEVE MASTERS: It's a very good question. It is one area that I am personally looking to get deeply involved in during my time with the business. I will give some examples. One of the things the Committee would have seen yesterday were examples of how we physically moved the camp to accommodate a grooving stone area within the accommodation site. We're very mindful of trying to minimise, to the absolute highest degree we can, impacts on the land with relation to those types of examples. A number of our staff have already gone through cultural immersion training and activities. We will continue to do that as our organisation grows. As I eluded to before, now that financial close has been reached, the focus in terms of how we can actually accelerate some of those activities is very important. In my opening statement, I eluded that I had the opportunity to attend my first First Nations working group meeting, which, again, was very insightful, from my perspective, in terms of understanding the people and learning the stories. We will be building that relationship and trust going forward. Rob, I'm not sure if you wanted to add anything particularly?

ROBERT ARMSTRONG: I don't have a whole lot extra. We are working with those groups. We are trying to build a culture within the organisation that has a greater understanding of the land they are on and immersing those people more fully and gaining a better understanding of what they are really doing.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: From an economic participation perspective, are there opportunities you see in working with Aboriginal businesses and workers on the project not only in construction but also long term?

STEVE MASTERS: Absolutely. We are definitely trying to encourage as much local content and First Nations content in all of our tender processes and opportunities for those organisations to be suppliers in the short, medium and long term for the project. Touching a little bit on your earlier question that Bart made some comments on, I think the social licence piece goes to the education, right down to schoolchildren to TAFE, which we're involved in, and other learning opportunities for young people or underemployed people in the different towns. I know within the region, some of the councils have a particular focus on some of those towns to see how we can actually assist in getting people employed. That is a really important and valuable contribution our business or any other business can make to any community.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: There has been an increase in the REZ capacity from around three gigawatts to more than seven—maybe more. That has been criticised. Can you explain why that happened and what consultation took place?

ROBERT ARMSTRONG: I think the numbers can be confusing sometimes. The seven gigawatts you spoke about is the total generation capacity, but our network capacity is limited to 4.5 gigawatts. That has been increased, but that is a planning function. ACEREZ has been commissioned and engaged to go and build a network that is capable of 4.5 gigawatts. It is an EnergyCo planning matter as to where they see the future of the network growing.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: I would also like to join with my colleagues in thanking you for coming today and taking questions. One of the issues that has been raised a number of times during our visits yesterday and today is the issue of insurance. I will read out a section from one of the submissions we've received just to explain it. It states:

Our business expects to be surrounded by in excess of \$4 billion of solar panels that includes the 3 solar developments only. My insurer has informed me that the maximum level of PL insurance I can obtain is currently \$20 million. If I or an employee here in our business starts a fire and is deemed liable for starting that fire that burns these solar farms down who or where is the difference coming from? Further to this all businesses surrounding these projects will be heavily affected as contractors will avoid the risk of damages to these projects as they too will only have \$20 million of PL cover. Our current business contracts out harvest and hay contracting (both are quite fire prone). Who is going to perform these jobs for our business with the added risk associated with the infrastructure losses from these projects? The issue is common to all mixed farming businesses in the area.

I'm just seeking any comments you may have. Please feel free to take it on notice if you wish. The obvious thing is, given the relative sizes, I was wondering whether indemnification might be something that could be considered.

BART SYKES: I'm happy to make a comment. For us on our squadron, projects that—obviously we insure our assets, and if there is any increase in premiums for hosts of our infrastructure, we cover those increases in premium. I'm happy to table a report that I've got in front of me from the Insurance Council of Australia. I'll just read a line from it, "So current information indicates that insurers generally do not have specific concerns related to a property hosting transmission lines or neighbouring energy infrastructure." I'm happy to table that.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Sorry, could you read that out again? I don't understand your point.

BART SYKES: "So current information indicates that insurers generally do not have specific concerns related to a property hosting transmission lines or neighbouring energy infrastructure."

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Is your point that these farmers and their owners—their concerns are unjustified in relation to only having \$20 million worth of personal liability?

BART SYKES: I think that's come from the peak. I think there's probably more work to be done in clarifying that position and communicating it.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Can I ask that you, maybe through the Chair, take that on notice because it is a repeating issue that's been raised here and one that has to be addressed, not only in relation to the owners but also, as that quote indicated, their contractors, who are now expressing reluctance to come in because they're concerned that they may only be partially covered under personal liability if something occurs that's more the \$20 million.

The CHAIR: Sure. That would be good. Learning how insurance works—often when unforeseen risks are identified then policies change and the goalposts change. That would be great. That was one of my questions I was going to ask as well.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: To you, Mr Masters or Mr Armstrong—I'm happy for either. Just in terms of time frame—we did talk about this a bit yesterday when we visited the site of the camp but, just to have on the record, what is the end date of construction, or when would you expect to start having workers on camp? Also, how long do you think the construction phase of your project—the full network transmission, powerlines, everything—is anticipated to take?

ROBERT ARMSTRONG: As was discussed yesterday, the first iteration of the camp—we're the first phase. We'll have about 300 workers ready and mobilised in, or capable of that in August when the first workers will move in. Currently, there's a lot of work going on as to how much we can flatten our workforce and minimise the number of people we have to bring in to undertake the works. At the moment late 2028 to early 2029 is when we're looking to start to demobilise that site.

The CHAIR: We've heard a lot today, and obviously through submissions as well, about the impact that some of these projects potentially are going to have on prime agricultural land in terms of water quality, changing hydrology and potential impacts on livestock that may be feeding under these solar panels. Are you doing any work in that space in terms of trying to assess that risk as part of your place in this community, and improving your standing in this community and trying to alleviate some of those concerns? It seems like a very valid concern by community and there doesn't seem to be a lot of information out there on that.

BART SYKES: I won't comment on solar because I'm not an expert on it by any stretch, but those 500 agreements that I mentioned with landowners we've got from Victoria up New South Wales and into Queensland—overwhelmingly those very important stakeholders of ours talked to a good coexistence of renewables and agriculture. The initial income assists with succession farm upgrades, which was mentioned earlier in a session, and ensures some viability during dry times. Big windfarms can cover extensive areas but the turbines and infrastructure will only occupy a very small per cent of the farmers' land so that would be my response to that, specifically relating to wind.

STEVE MASTERS: I'm happy to talk to transmission, Chair. As the Committee would know, the transmission line footprint itself is considerably smaller than the type of other solar projects or wind projects that you're talking to. What I would say though is that we certainly try to look at opportunities for coexistence. I know with respect to transmission projects I've worked on—not just on this particular opportunity but in my previous roles, encouraging and working with landowners so we can maximise the areas, particularly for grazing, so that the lifestyle or the economic benefit that a landowner of landholder will have isn't compromised by that infrastructure. I would certainly acknowledge that the feedback that the Committee has heard, and certainly is part of my discussions with different stakeholders, has raised that as a broader issue for the cumulative impact of all of these projects.

The CHAIR: I'm happy for you to take this on notice and give it some more considered thought but what we've heard a lot about today is a cause for a pause on all these projects that come in through the pipeline that don't have an access agreement, may never get an access agreement, are going to push the potential capacity well above what you're planning for, and what the government is planning for. Would you, as the manager of all this for the next 30 years, support a pause in projects coming down the top, down the pipeline that are surplus to our needs?

STEVE MASTERS: I'd be happy to take the question on notice and give it more considered thought. What I would offer, I do think is that, again, the feedback that is obviously coming through the inquiry is certainly planting a lot of seeds in people's minds as to how things can be done differently and better, and also the way the engagement works. One comment I would make just based on my reading and discussions is that there are obviously a lot of projects that are mooted. Not all of those projects are going to be built. I think that the numbers of indicative projects that are flagged—whether it is in this REZ or other REZs or other projects more generally—many of them won't actually be built, but I think it's a fair question.

The CHAIR: Do you accept, though, that even though they may not be built, they are still causing disruption, they are still causing that social cohesion to dissipate in communities because the conversations and the non-disclosure agreements are still happening with farmers, still pitting farmer against farmer, still contributing to stakeholder fatigue? In a way, it's hurting your position in this community as well as long as that continues.

STEVE MASTERS: I think that's an absolutely fair comment.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: With the benefit of hindsight, if any of you could start the consultation or communication, what would you do differently, if you would do anything differently?

BART SYKES: For us, I think those points that I mentioned—and we're quite comfortable with our social licence in the region at the moment, hence our willingness to get up in front of the inquiry today—about partnering early, thinking laterally to solve problems and leaving the regions stronger are our three key points that we work to. I'm happy to stand by those and the reputation that we've got in the REZ. The only comment that I would just very quickly like to make just on the potential pausing of projects—and I was just trying to find my notes there on the numbers. The developer rating scheme, I think, will potentially have an impact on the number of projects, but I think there's a significant build-out happening in the REZ, and coal's exiting the system as we know.

AMI is predicting that the future energy consumption from the NEM will rise by approximately 108 per cent by 2050, largely from business and industry. There's a long lead time with renewable energy projects, and consideration needs to be given to the conversion rate. Ten years ago it would have been really difficult to predict that we're here in an inquiry talking about the Central-West Orana REZ, so I think we need to make sure that the continuation of development happens to make sure that in 10 years time we've got projects that are ready to go to continue to meet the need.

STEVE MASTERS: If I can maybe just offer just a couple of comments, I think the one thing that's really struck me in my short time in the role is making sure that there's a good understanding as to why things are happening and people are well educated and informed. I think they're the kinds of things always that the earlier they start, the better, whether it's a project like this or it's just life in general.

The CHAIR: Thank you. That concludes our time with you today. Once again, thank you for appearing, like others, and also thank you for allowing us to come onsite yesterday and understand what you're doing out there. It's much appreciated. There may be some supplementary questions. You have taken some questions on notice, so the secretariat will be in touch regarding them, but thank you very much.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Short adjournment)

Mr STUART HACKNEY, Farmer/Contractor, affirmed and examined

Mr DAVID SEIS, Landowner and Vice-Chair, Three Rivers Landcare, affirmed and examined

Ms SALLY DENT, Committee Member, Three Rivers Landcare, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: We now welcome our final witnesses for today's hearing. Mr Hackney, would you like to make a short opening statement?

STUART HACKNEY: I've got an opening statement, Mr Chair. It's to do with the mistreatment of EnergyCo towards us during the acquiring matter of the easement through our property for the Orana REZ project. From the outset, EnergyCo got off to a bad start, with its predecessor, Transgrid, representative rolling a map out on our table, saying that we weren't in the preferred corridor—that is, our property was not affected. In September 2022 I received a phone call from EnergyCo requesting my email for some documents to be sent to us. To our amazement, we received a map of the transmission easement right over our property and our farming infrastructure. This had apparently happened with no interaction or consultation, despite the assurance that that was not the case. At no stage did anyone interact with us or step foot onto our property to see where the route was going. It was plain to see that they had drawn a line on a map without knowledge of the property. Farm infrastructure comprising a bank of silos, all-weather-access cattle yards, a partially built shed site, a large area of shade trees for stock and a soil conservation regeneration area—all directly impacted.

Through many meetings with our solicitors, parliamentarians, media and EnergyCo officials, we attempted to get a more reasonable outcome for everyone. One EnergyCo executive met with us and two others to discuss the line during the period of sorting the easement. That meeting finished up with the executive telling us that EnergyCo had the right to go wherever they wanted, and that the Government had given them the power to do so. Trying to get a satisfactory outcome was made all the harder by EnergyCo regularly changing their land acquisition managers. We didn't know who we were dealing with until contact was made by the next person EnergyCo had in the process. While waiting for this information, EnergyCo was continuing with the project behind the scenes, but was not keeping us up to date with the process. This caused constant stress and anxiety about what was going to happen to the property. The way we were treated waiting for answers took its toll with everyone in the family. I had weeks of little or no sleep and felt constantly stressed. No help was provided; it was something we had to cope with.

Throughout the process, we were being pressured to sign documents that gave EnergyCo access to our land. We refused until a better alignment was negotiated and terms of agreement were fair and just. At numerous times, we were being bullied and threatened that our land was to be compulsorily acquired if we didn't sign up. This was put in front of us because the project was going ahead, no matter what. The pressure came in meetings and phone calls. Ultimately, we were informed that the PAN date was set, December 2023, which meant that we had no choice but to engage with EnergyCo and go through the evaluation process for our compensation or face losing our land. We engaged an evaluator to start the process. We were able to arrange a meeting with Minister Penny Sharpe to discuss the process which we were being forced to follow. In that meeting, we were informed that the just terms Act that defined the compensation for this project was not fit for purpose, but there was no time to change it, and so the process was to continue.

When the interaction started, EnergyCo's valuation was half of that of our evaluator. Further on that day, the evaluators met to discuss the compensation. The alignment of the lines had been adjusted by about 60 metres by EnergyCo, something that we were told previously was not possible. This was to avoid some of the infrastructure, no doubt to reduce the compensation payment. Construction is estimated to take two to four years. We are being told that under the applicable just terms Act, we cannot be compensated for loss of income during construction. The current easement takes 36 hectares, or 90 acres, of arable land, which is about 16 per cent of our total arable land for the property. As a result, our income will be considerably reduced, yet the costs associated with the land still must be covered, such as rates and insurance. Based on the fact that the lines cross our property and effectively cut it in half, it will be very difficult to manage the property for cropping and grazing. Because of the impacts to so many of our paddocks, in reality we may have to destock or look for agistment for our stock, which directly affects our farm income.

The last straw in the process was when our accountant informed us compensation would be classed as off-farm income. As a result, our compensation payment is subject to tax to the tune of 48¢ in the dollar, so we are effectively losing half our money straight back to the Federal Government, and that was intended to make up for the transmission lines cutting the property in half and the destruction of it. This is on top of having our income and the effectiveness of our property reduced for the construction duration and after. Compensation should be classed just that, compensation, not as a taxable income.

To sum up, our interactions with EnergyCo have been a complete nightmare that no-one should have to go through. We've been told lies during the process. Promises have been made that successive people in EnergyCo do not live up to. There've been no negotiations. Instead it's been a one-sided argument where we are being told this is how it will be. The speed of the process that EnergyCo has driven has not allowed the issues to be dealt with with equal input from both sides and, from our perspective, nothing appears to have been done properly. Nothing has been properly considered. At every stage, we don't feel we have had adequate time to work through things properly. We are now at the next stage of dealing with ACEREZ, and it looks like the battle is still to continue. We have provided a list of our requirements for them to access the property, most of which have been dismissed outright by ACEREZ. The fast pace of this rollout needs to be stopped and some common sense applied, and those directly affected need to be properly compensated for the impacts.

DAVID SEIS: A lot of what I have been through, Stuart has probably identified a lot of it. I am a fifth-generation farmer in the Dunedoo area. As far as I'm aware, you probably went over to our original place yesterday. We owned, or my family owned, the property around camp which EnergyCo now own where the transmission substation is being built; not the block where the—there's two blocks there. The patch of land where the camp is currently being built wasn't ours, but our block was to the west and south-west of that particular spot. Where the house is—I don't know whether you went up to the house. We lived in that house for plenty of time. Raised a family there. Anyway, that particular property has been in our family since the mid-1800s.

Back two or three years ago now, consultants contracted from EnergyCo or from the Government started coming and seeing us and identifying that—we knew that the solar and wind installations were happening, but basically they turned up with wanting indications of—that they were wanting to build a substation. There were maps shown to us that were purely wrong, but they were designed to scare us. They had a substation, they had a power plant sitting on our house. We weren't allowed to keep that, so I can't show you that, but that's what happened.

We then went through a process of hell, basically, because they went through the whole process of basically consulting us. It wasn't consultation; it was, "This is what we're doing." I know we went to a meeting with them one day and I said to the guy, "What do you want?" He said, "I'm here to buy your land. I'm taking your land." That was it. There was plenty of bullying, there was plenty of mistruths and, certainly, working against landowners. They played, "If it doesn't go here, it'll be next door, so you'll have to look at it." Basically, we were tied by compulsory acquisition. At the end of the day it was, "You go ahead with what it is or you don't." I will say that even though it was our family's farm, my mother and father owned it so they then had to deal with the whole process of that.

As Stuart mentioned, we had no real help from a mental health point of view, and we still haven't. I won't say we haven't received any significant help, but one issue I have got—I've been pushing for the last two years for EnergyCo to supply a health system program that is well and truly above just a phone call, like talking to someone on the end of a phone, for people within the REZ who are affected to be able to offer support, financial support for people who want to go that next step and access the help that they need. It's still not there. I know it's there, but it hasn't been announced. Why hasn't it been announced? That's one issue. But basically, at the end of the day, we've had to move on. We've been through hell, but anyway. Open for questions.

SALLY DENT: I am here to represent Three Rivers Landcare, so that's covering Dunedoo, Coolah and Mendooran. We're a local active environmental group that's very passionate about the people and our beautiful local environment. To give you some context following on from the gentlemen, these large-scale developments imposed on us by government have been nothing short of a nightmare. We were first made aware that we were even in a renewable energy zone by our personal solicitor, who came out on a bus trip with Dubbo council. To be honest, I still believe many of our local people would not be aware of the sheer scale of the proposed Central-West REZ.

Our committee and wider community are already suffering from the cumulative impacts as we race to safeguard energy security for New South Wales. To date, our voices have not been heard. We strongly recommend a pause in construction whilst these issues are addressed. We desperately require a well-planned and managed expansion of renewable energy and associated infrastructure, carefully mitigating any losses of diversity and disruption to ecosystems—services on which we all depend.

We strongly assert that any impacts from developments need to be considered within the context of the REZ as a whole, particularly the direct impacts to our smaller communities and our larger region. Environmental impacts in particular need to be assessed within the cumulative context of the risk, not as an isolated development. The EIS has not done this at any stage. Our smaller communities have continually requested information about biodiversity offsets, food production and security and sustainability, and yet here we are in the construction phase and we are still kept in the dark as to where the water is coming from.

Over the years, we have attended, as volunteers, many, many token community consultations. No-one of any decision-making ability is ever present, and we are deflected continually and told it's too late to vary any of the plans. This is not our first encounter with poor Government decision-making and planning and lack of transparency in a community consultation process. Some of you may be aware of the failed Cobbora coalmine, which was a great example of historic failure with large-scale projects and our community, and we're still reeling from this experience. The underground gas line also passes through our small communities, with no advantage ever being gained by our communities.

We met just recently with the RMS service's Port to REZ about the widening of a corner in Dunedoo to allow for the wind turbines to go around. We suggested that they might like to contribute to our town in some way—because we clearly did not need this expansion of a corner—to gain access for a footpath and a river walk. Today we still haven't had any response from that.

At this point in time our energy and efforts are looking at just the Central-West REZ, but there are many, many projects proposed outside that geographical footprint and we worry who is monitoring and assessing those. The regions are bearing the brunt of all this, and we do not have the capacity to manage such large-scale development. For example, our council has decided to spend the funds from EnergyCo funding to update our sewage treatment plant. How is this providing legacy for our town? Despite our best efforts, it is not a level playing field and we will never be able to compete with the bigger councils, who are favoured and less resistant. Procurement is a great example of what has not happened with upskilling of our workers. It should've been rolled out years ago, preparing for education and getting people to be apprentices and things for these significant developments. Only the other day, I had to point out that we actually have a TAFE in Dunedoo; they'd only been ever consulting with people in Dubbo, Tamworth and Mudgee.

The proposed large number of worker camps surrounding our small communities is twice the size of many of our towns and, again, will add no value to our town. Sustainability is certainly not something we associate with these projects. Instead of energy security competing with food security, cities should capitalise on producing more energy where the power is required, thus reducing transmission losses, increasing supply chain security for cities and reducing the need for expensive new large transmission infrastructure. I thank you all for your time today.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Ms Dent, some would say that groups like Landcare and renewable energy should be natural allies, because they're both about sustainability and future-proofing. What would need to change in the current process or models to bring that into closer alignment?

SALLY DENT: For example, I think if you looked at the actual geographical footprint of what's being proposed, many, many trees will be bulldozed in the process. To give you one example, Merotherie Road, which is where you went yesterday, and you'll notice there's a bare paddock right beside it—they propose to knock down all of those trees. Some of them are up to 120 or more years old and they had this bare paddock parallel to it. Why not build the road on that bare paddock? And, of course, they just kept saying, "We can't change." It's that sort of resistance that we're up against all the time. I think, with food security, they keep saying, "Oh, it's not on arable land", but I'm sure you would have realised yesterday that it really is. Also, we can't eat solar panels. At some point of time there has to be some sensibility about where they place these things.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: I also get the sense that it's not just about the projects but how they've been rolled out that has contributed to community concerns. From your experience, what could the proponents or government have done differently to foster that sense of partnership rather than imposition?

SALLY DENT: Firstly, I think they need to actually declare up front. A lot of it was done with individuals and it was very much "Sign this declaration and don't spill the beans," so automatically they're creating a divide in the community. I think they need to have approached it by a community meeting: "This is what we're proposing; this is the area," and stop changing the plans. It's almost like, "We're just going to roll in and do it anyway." I think if they'd been transparent and there had been genuine community consultation, people would have told them—and they still do today—that where they're building that camp is a flood plain, and yet they're going ahead. They've had, I think, two things bogged already and they're paying \$10,000 a day in town to put the dormers there while they work out how to access out there. It's that sort of poor planning and consulting locals.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: I get that you've got that deep connection with the landscape and you know what's happening there. Do you feel planning processes to date haven't given space to that, or maybe consulting with groups like Landcare to avoid these problems and to avoid the conflict?

SALLY DENT: Very much. I think there's a real disconnect. I know people where you went yesterday said they looked out and they saw some of the ecologists working while half the young ones were on their phone. They really weren't looking at what they were even doing. It's that sort of lack of confidence, I think, in what's

being done, and also it's telling the local people—a lot of people today, if I go into our little township, still wouldn't realise the sheer scale of the developments and how it's going to impact on them. I think that's been the other disappointment: They look at these things as individuals, so one developer says, "Yes, this is great," and the other developer, but they're not looking at the whole region as a cumulative—

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Is there a way now, if projects were done right, where you could see them working together, alongside your vision for the landscape plus what renewables are doing?

SALLY DENT: I think so. I think the disappointment to today is that a lot of people are out there offering to pay \$200 an hour to sit opposite us. We're volunteers and we're giving a lot of the information and not being compensated for any of that. They ask for people to go on committees. They don't want to be on advisory committees where they really don't have a voice. It's got to be genuine, that they're there for a reason and they're going to be listened to, and I think they need to be paid. I think that the days are gone where people will just do it as a volunteer. They can't physically and mentally keep doing it. There's usually so few people to do it.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Are there examples from other industries or projects where there has been genuine co-design?

SALLY DENT: That's a great question. I have been asking that for the last five years. I kept thinking somewhere, so I rang the Wimmera region in Victoria and I've done quite a bit of research, and really I have not yet found a company that's prepared to say—Squadron is probably the only one that's mentioned that they've done things elsewhere. I think that's something that we really need to look at as a whole, particularly before these are rolled out in other regions.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: I want to put on record that Ms Dent and I know each other very well—our husbands are first cousins—just for full disclosure. But I actually want to start with you, Mr Hackney, in relation to the part of your opening submission where you talked about the compensation being treated as off-farm income and the taxation impacts. If we were to make recommendations, as a committee, to actually say it should be treated purely as compensation and not have that taxable income component, is that something you think both yourself and your community would support?

STUART HACKNEY: That's entirely what we're chasing because it's a compensation package for the damage that's going to happen. Why should we pay tax on it and give it straight back to the Federal Government? It's just letting the wheel go around and around. The State Government gives it to us—"Yes, we've fulfilled our books for the compensation"—but they've forgotten that the Commonwealth Government is going to take it straight off us. With that compensation of ours, we're losing 40 shade trees for our stock and some of the compensation was for shade sails to replace the trees, so effectively losing half of the shade sails is already happening. I think that it needs to be considered that compensation is compensation and not taxable because it's there to replace the destruction of these lines. We are looking down the line of a 250-metre easement, two 500 kVAs and a 330 kVA. It's not a small powerline; it's three powerlines side by side. It's going to ruin the place, effectively.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: You also said that you asked ACEREZ or provided them with a list of requirements to access your property, what you would like, and they just sort of dismissed that. Could you tell us a bit more about what you asked for as landowners in terms of how you wanted that process to work?

STUART HACKNEY: Back in 1979 the place was totally destroyed with bushfire as Dad was buying it, and then in the early '80s he got the whole place contoured to stop the soil degradation. Now they're telling us that they're just going to come in with their bulldozers and flatten the contour banks where they want the road to be put so they can bring all their gear in. I've flatly said to them, "You can't do that. This is all contoured for a reason." I have now been told that they're going to create an eight-metre-wide gravel road right through the middle of the place. We were not told that. My solicitor's jaw dropped when she heard that. There's a lot of arguing still to happen for that. There is a soil conservation regeneration area down on the major creek. We've fenced that out. It's all been re-treed, all been grassed—the stock aren't allowed in there—and that's where their access to our easement is going to be: straight through the head of that creek.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: You feel like you've got no say or input?

STUART HACKNEY: We've got no say. They've told us that. They're going to do what they want to do. They've just bullied straight over the top of us, at everything we've said.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: I might move to Mr Seis. Thank you for your opening statement as well and personal impact on your family, when you've had that property in your family for generations. I can't begin to imagine how difficult it's been for all of you. The part about the mental health support—is there more that you could share with us about what you think that should look like and what we, as a committee, should be

recommending is made available from your personal experience, as much as you're willing and comfortable to share?

DAVID SEIS: I suppose, like I said, I've probably been the main driver behind it but with help from others. Basically, everybody's needs are going to be different, whether you think a massage is going to help you or whether you need some full-blown serious therapy. It shouldn't really matter what you need, but whatever helps you should be available, at your disposal, for people that are seriously affected. I'm not really targeting necessarily people like Stuart and I that actually have been dealing head on with this situation. I'm not saying Stuart needs it either—don't get me wrong there—but as in our situation. But it's the community people in town that think, "What's going to happen to my town?" It is so broad. It's the people that are getting affected by transmission. It's the people that are next door to generators. It's the people hosting generators that aren't game enough to go to town because people are bullying them at the pub, because they've got it. There has been no support. My wife and our kids have been just as affected by this, but at no stage—and mind you, I haven't even been asked either—have any of us been approached by EnergyCo and said, "Gee whiz. How do you feel?" I've been on the phone to—I haven't made it quite as far as Penny Sharpe, but I've made it to her—

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: We can ask her. She might be listening, so we can see what we can do.

DAVID SEIS: Yes. I've been to her next-in-charge, Tim Lang, about trying to get this mental health program going. So they know that, and they know that I've been involved and have been down this road, but at no time have they said, "How can we help?" It has just been take, take and, "We're going to do this. It doesn't matter." So, as far as I'm concerned, it's whatever you need. It doesn't matter how much it costs. It's whatever you need to get over this and move on in life.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: I think we heard from other witnesses earlier today about how isolating the process has been too, and I'm happy for anyone looking to comment on that, particularly with neighbours not finding out until—Mrs Dent, you said you didn't know until your solicitor told you; others have found out just through the grapevine. The cost of that and that social cohesion really being ripped apart when you've got neighbours pitted against neighbours—how has that experience been?

DAVID SEIS: There's been a huge issue with lack of consultation. It's always pitting—this is what you've got to understand. There's two sides to it. There's the generators that are dealing with landowners to get access for generating, obviously, and then there's the government side of it, the transmission side. Consultation with that landowner, like Sal said, it's all secret squirrel stuff. You don't tell anyone what's going—and they start playing one against the other. "This bloke's going, so let's—you know". It's all that sort of stuff. And it's still happening. They won't disclose what's going on. Like Sal said, Merotherie Road, they won't—there's no consultation. It's "This is what we're doing, and that's it." By the time we find out, the community find out, then it's done. It's quite disrespectful whether you've been there for generations or whether you've been there for a short time. It's our land. We've been driving up and down these roads forever. And so to have that respect to talk—how many times do you hear "Put the wind towers down on Bondi Beach", "Oh, no." But when it comes out to us, "Just do it." You've probably heard plenty of it.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: A couple just quickly for Mrs Dent. You mentioned, I think, in your opening statement about the river walk or some funding that Landcare wanted for a project. Have you applied for that? Were you successful? Have there been any kind of grants open to you as Landcare and any benefit from any of these companies or government so far?

SALLY DENT: Years ago, we were actually asked to take part as—part of the community consultation was to suggest what sort of grants would be good and how it should be rolled out, by EnergyCo. So we all suggested that it should be done within a footprint of where the actual impacts are going to be. That meant, hopefully, that we weren't pitted against, say, Mudgee and Dubbo. I think we've got to keep in mind that a lot of these places have grant writers in place, they have access to expertise, and whilst we've done lots of applications over the years, and successful applications, it takes a lot of time and energy. It could be, I don't know, 100 hours on some of them.

So we already felt we're at a disadvantage, and we did put in for one for the river walk we proposed in Dunedoo. We've also got one up in Coolah, and we were hoping to do another one on the Castlereagh River in Mendooran. We thought it would have a bit of sway because it's an environmental one and, interestingly enough, most of them, when you go through what was granted, would have no environmental impact at all. I think it was a done deal. I think a lot of them were awarded to here in Dubbo, and a lot of them were awarded to Mudgee. And, of course, most of the impacts are not in those areas. They're actually in the towns of Mendooran and Dunedoo and Coolah and Cassilis, and very little has gone to them, and it's token sort of thing. I'm on a Zoom

once, and they said, "Yes, we'll give the CWA a barbecue." That's really disappointing, when they're about to pull billions out of our area.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Yes. And would you like to see better weighting towards the most impacted communities with that funding?

SALLY DENT: Absolutely. I think there should be a radius on who can apply, and I think the criteria needs to be firmed up, and a lot of people could actually contribute to that discussion, but none of us were ever consulted. Interestingly enough, the community grants that were done by EnergyCo, not one person was a local person. So there's people making the decisions that have no idea of where Dunedoo even is, or Coolah or Cassilis or Elong Elong, and they're doing the grants, so that's really disappointing. It's their one opportunity to prove real legacy to our area, and I think that was a missed opportunity, yes.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: And just one more. I'll direct it to you, but I'd be interested in the three of you, if you're happy to talk about it. We've had evidence today—you talked to me about some of the trees being removed—of impacts of roads being added, what that does to flood plains and watercourses, the issues around pest and weed management when you've got these solar and wind turbines in operation. From a Landcare perspective, but also as local landholders, how much does that concern you, and do you think there's anything government can do at this stage to help improve those environmental outcomes?

DAVID SEIS: Correct me if I'm wrong but, again, it's bound by legislation, which is ridiculous. They can go and—like Sal said, they've got permission to clear every tree on that Merotherie Road because they've bought a tree somewhere else, but it's a net loss. They don't have to go and plant another tree, but they've bought another tree somewhere else, so it's a deadest net loss. I'm guessing that's because of the legislation; we're letting them do it. Whether it's the Government or whether it's a generator, if they knock down one tree, make them plant 10 more. It's just ludicrous, that side of it, yes.

SALLY DENT: Just to add to that, Dave, I think as soon as it's known to be a State significant project, you really have no local input at all. I know out at Mudgee, mid-western council and things have got some great suggestions about environmental and how to mitigate those problems, and they're not listened to at all. Along that road, there used to be pink sort of little road—what do you call those things?

DAVID SEIS: Yes, those markers.

SALLY DENT: Markers saying that this is a biodiversity area. That doesn't seem to have had any effect. And water is a real concern. If you're going to put 1,200 people plus another 800 camp, and another one out our side for 800 people, and you don't know where it's coming from or you cannot tell the local community where it's coming from, and you're part of the Murray-Darling Basin and you're on the Talbragar River, that's really frightening—because Dunedoo was only in a drought a few years ago and we're on stage 3 water restrictions, so you're telling all those people in those towns that this could be a real problem for them in the future, and I just don't think all those things have been thought of or planned around.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: I'm obviously listening and trying to take in. One of the outcomes of this, obviously, we will be making, as a Committee, recommendations. You've already made a number of proposals in what you've said. I was just wondering if there were three things that you would be asking—I've just picked three out of the air—that this Committee actually recommends to government. Can you get it down to three of the most important things that we should be raising through our inquiry, that you'd recommend that we recommend to government?

STUART HACKNEY: I'll start with that one—the compensation being compensation. There's a lot of people that have got powerlines on there and it's all going to be affected, so why should the compensation be taxed? It should be tax free to repair the damage and look after your property after they've been through. I strongly recommend that. And part of that could be the just terms Act as well.

DAVID SEIS: I was just about add to Stuart and the just terms—that's just a debacle. We didn't ask for any of this, and yet legislation allows the Government to come in and just take it. And it doesn't happen just—you know, whether it's a highway or whatever it is. I know it's there for that reason, but still, the guy that gets bought out by the highway, he's probably still thinking and feeling the same way that I do. So, you know, just terms, fix the compensation We shouldn't have to pay tax on something that we didn't want to be part of to start with.

SALLY DENT: I would suggest looking at good examples somewhere else where this has been done well, so that no other communities have to go through what we've gone through. I think too, adding to that, you really need to look at what they approve to try and keep those jockeys out of it. For example, I know you didn't get a chance, but if you had gone to Wellington, you would have seen the scale of it. The solar on our side is proposed to be three times that development. A lot of people think, "It's not too bad. We've got a few turbines and

we've got a few solar panels," but when you do look at the whole geographical footprint, it is frightening. I really wonder what's going to happen to small communities in regional areas when we are going to be constantly dumped with things in our regions, whether it's, at this point in time, renewables—and then I hear on the radio they're looking to get rid of the waste out of Sydney. I mean, where does it end? We can't all live on the east coast of Australia.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: I know you've mentioned that you're trying to find places that are better. Are there any, at all?

SALLY DENT: I've actually asked the proponents to provide any examples of it, and the only thing I've ever got back was, "Well, you can graze sheep underneath it." To be really honest, I drive a lot to that Wellington area, and I see very few sheep under those solar panels. So I think that's a token. I don't know. This technology has been in other countries for 25 or more years. Surely there's examples that we can all follow, rather than have to endure what we've all gone through. It will take a lot of angst out of it, and it could keep our communities vibrant and going for the next generations. I think that's what we're all hoping will happen.

The CHAIR: One of the strong things we have heard over the whole two days is just how poor the consultation, and I use that term loosely, has been done by EnergyCo and other developers. If we were to mandate a level of proper engagement, what would that look like for you? I think one of the obvious ones from my perspective, from what I am hearing, is that the developers would have to send someone above the mailroom boy that can actually make a decision. But what else would you be looking for in that process that could be mandated and legislated that we could then make these agencies and these developers adhere to?

STUART HACKNEY: My thoughts are you probably want to get the scouts out before the paperwork comes out. Have a look at the land, have a look at the topography, have a look at the infrastructure. Have a talk to the people, go and see the neighbours. Bring everyone together. Nobody is going to want a transmission line, so that's probably one of the hardest ones you'd ever get through. If it's got to be there, it's got to be there, but there's got to be a preferred route that's not going to impact something. That's what I say about ours. We're impacting 40 shade trees and our infrastructure. There's other routes I picked out there in a straight line that hardly touch a tree, but nobody had bothered to come and have a look. Just somebody in a desk drew the line from the map. It needs to be somebody out there in the field, have a look around to start with, and then start doing the development.

SALLY DENT: I think transparency has got to be one of the top ones. I think you are pitting people against each other. This whole disclosure, this fear thing is where it's really awful for communities. That happened with the Cobbora coalmine. There was no way that project was not going ahead. So we lost 90 families out of our district, and it didn't get up. There's still that uncertainty with these projects. It's like, "Is it going to be as big as that?" There needs to be guidelines that they have to adhere to, and they can't just keep adding onto it, expanding it all the time without some sort of legislation to contain them, I think. I've got examples on my phone that I'm very happy to have tabled of people where they operate outside the REZ, and they flooded people's places, they burn ore and pay the EPA fines rather than take the rubbish away. It's all those sort of cowboys that are out there that are not being monitored or assessed. I think consultation is very important.

The CHAIR: I think the Committee would happily accept that evidence, so liaise with the secretariat on that. Mr Seis, anything you want to add?

DAVID SEIS: One thing that needs to be—not only proper consultation, but our whole process, and everyone's probably been through very similar stuff, was there was no written communication. It was all done face to face. "Here's a map. Oh no, you can't have it." And we've learnt the hard way. Hopefully, people that are involved in it now, they're saying, "If you want to talk to me, you put it on paper." I think that should have been from the start.

The CHAIR: A provision of documents to you?

DAVID SEIS: Definitely.

The CHAIR: Mandated, proper minute taking?

DAVID SEIS: "You want to talk to me, you write it down." Even now, we had consultation with regards to Merotherie Road. We put a submission to them, and it was a verbal meeting, regarding a change, "Let's not have to knock all these trees out. Let's move it." I asked them for—they took notes there. They had two people there taking notes. I said, "You'll supply us with some notes?" "Yep, no worries." I rang them two days later, "You going to send me those notes?" "No, we can't do that now." How are we supposed to have confidence and—

SALLY DENT: Trust.

DAVID SEIS: That trust in the process and in dealing with these people? That's got to be a given.

SALLY DENT: Some of these developers, you start off with one lot and you could deal with up to three or four, because they keep changing hands. That's with one developer. You times that by 11, and it's physically and mentally exhausting to try and keep up. What they put in the EOI, there was no reference to a camp, ever, for a 300 desk—that's just appeared now. So there's that sort of thing that is going on all the time, and there is no way you can physically read the hundreds and hundreds of pages of documents and keep on top of it.

The CHAIR: We've heard a lot about the cumulative impact, and there is talk of a study being done, but to your knowledge, Ms Dent, has anyone been keeping track of the environmental cost? I know I am probably the last person that you would think would ask that question, but has anyone been keeping track of how many trees we have had to get rid of, how much native grasses we've just scraped off the landscape?

SALLY DENT: Not to my knowledge, and I think we, as a group, just cannot physically do it. There's not too many of us, and when you ask for new reports, as Dave mentioned before, they don't always want to give you the access, so it's really tricky to determine what's been lost. We did ask for topographical maps, we did ask for some sort of photography to take place and put up a drone to show what the landscape looked like prior, but they're not interested.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Who did you ask for that?

SALLY DENT: That was EnergyCo, originally.

The CHAIR: I imagine you've asked for hydrology reports to be done in terms of how that will change the flow of water on your properties?

SALLY DENT: I'm sure the landholders have, yes.

The CHAIR: Have they been forthcoming with that?

STUART HACKNEY: No.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Thank you to all our witnesses for joining us today. I have got a couple of questions for the representative of Three Rivers Landcare. I know you have talked quite broadly about the local environmental impacts of some of these REZ projects already, but we have received quite a number of submissions more broadly about criticising, overall, many of these projects lacking quite specifically wildlife corridors, the sites weren't considered to avoid critical habitat and there was really no consideration in regards to the impact on animals. I don't know if you saw, but on the first day that we had the Government in, I did question about this. The response I got was "Well, that will all be changed within the Biodiversity Conservation Act," but then we were also told that no-one there who was from the department could actually talk to us about the Biodiversity Conservation Act and those changes. And of course, all along, we are seeing all of these proposals going ahead through Planning, which is saying that is not their responsibility. I wanted to get an understanding about the impacts of wildlife within the local area that you are seeing, or that you are concerned about.

My second question, which I'm happy to come back to, was whether or not we really need to make sure that any wildlife impacts are actually considered much earlier within those planning processes and, perhaps on notice, getting a bit of an understanding about what we actually need to have considered within those planning processes in regards to protection of the environment and of wildlife, if we do need to be doing it at that point in time, and by Planning.

SALLY DENT: Dave and I are both representing Three Rivers Landcare. Thanks for the question. I think there is a real disconnect between the proponents and the environment, and I think just from where the Committee went yesterday, you'll see that. You've got really beautiful old trees along Merotherie Road where it could be a perfect wildlife corridor. You've got BCT, or the Biodiversity Conservation Trust, giving out grants for people to try and lock up country and try to save some of the vegetation, and then on the other hand you've got proponents who are just saying, "We're going to offset it," and by offsetting it they say, "We will just buy someone's degraded land down the road. We're not replanting, we're not re-establishing anything."

So I think there's a real disconnect there. I think it really needs to be—Planning needs to have some sort of responsibility about making sure that these areas of huge tracts of land, of agriculture, are maintained. They're certainly not doing that. There's a great, great amount—I don't know exactly the cumulative impact of all of it, but I think if we were to look at it as a total, it's a lot of tree losses, a lot of vegetation losses. I know eagles are very prominent out in the Sandy Creek area. I don't know what's being done, where they are proposing the wind towers there. I don't think it's been really well done at all.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Thank you. And if you are able to take on notice whether or not you feel it is adequate that we say, "These will be changes that will happen at some point in the future within the Biodiversity

Conservation Act," or whether that's something that needs to be done by Planning so that it is actively done, rather than something that has sort of shifted elsewhere?

SALLY DENT: Thank you, we will.

The CHAIR: That concludes our hearing for today. The committee may have some supplementary questions. Witnesses have taken some questions on notice. The secretariat will be in touch with those witnesses regarding those. The secretariat will also be in touch regarding the examples that were spoken about. Thank you for that. I extend my thanks to everybody who has come and been in the crowd, given evidence and assisted us while we have been here. Thank you very much for your time.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

The Committee adjourned at 16.10.