

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 Armidale Bowling Club, Armidale, on Thursday 17 July 2025

The Committee met at 9:00.

PRESENT

The Hon. Mark Banasiak (Chair)

The Hon. Sarah Mitchell

The Hon. Jacqui Munro

The Hon. Cameron Murphy

The Hon. Peter Primrose

The CHAIR: Welcome to the third hearing of the Committee's inquiry into the impact of renewable energy zones, REZs, on rural and regional communities and industries in New South Wales. I acknowledge the Anaiwan 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 respect to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people joining us today. My name is Mark Banasiak. 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 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 those procedures.

Councillor SAM COUPLAND, Mayor, Armidale Regional Council, affirmed and examined

Mr STEPHEN WOOD, Senior Strategic Planner, Armidale Regional Council, affirmed and examined

Mr JAMES PRYOR, Senior Strategic Planner, Armidale Regional Council, affirmed and examined

Councillor ROBERT BELL, Mayor, Uralla Shire Council, sworn and examined

Ms EMILY SIMS, Strategic Planning Officer, Uralla Shire Council, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: I welcome all witnesses. Thank you for making the time to give evidence. Starting with you, Mr Wood or Mr Pryor, would either of you like to make a short opening statement before we go to questions?

STEPHEN WOOD: We're fine.

SAM COUPLAND: I will, but I might let Mr Bell go first, if that's okay.

ROBERT BELL: I guess the challenge for Uralla shire—and we've provided an 11-page submission to this inquiry. Firstly, thank you for the opportunity, and welcome to Armidale. The challenge for us lies in ensuring the renewable energy developments integrate well with the local needs, and maintain Uralla's environmental and lifestyle values while fostering sustainable economic opportunities. The issue for Uralla is we're either on the edge of or have included up to 14 developments at various stages. We've got one that actually has stage one constructed, for a solar farm. We have another one that has been given approval by the Independent Planning Commission, and we have a number of others all the way through to scoping reports and the like. So we can see a huge influx of residents into the community, which will bring all of the challenges with it. While I'll ask our strategic planner, Ms Sims, to then detail those for the inquiry, at the end of the day it's about us maximising our benefits and dealing with all of the struggles that come in maintaining that sort of local environment. Thank you for the opportunity.

The CHAIR: Mr Coupland, did you want to add anything before we go to questions?

SAM COUPLAND: Yes, please. Firstly, thank you to the Committee for this opportunity to present. Whilst Armidale Regional Council has put a submission in, I would just like to summarise and highlight a few things. Our position is one of growing frustration at opportunity squandered. That's really what this REZ is. Done properly, it could represent a one-in-a-generation opportunity to deliver region-building infrastructure and bring the community along with it. But the reality has fallen far short of this. When I came onto council at the beginning of 2022 and started to get my teeth into the REZ, it was clear that the community was subordinate to the metropolitan energy needs and also an ideological race to net zero. This has been illustrated by three things in particular. Firstly, there was no integrated strategy on identifying, let alone addressing, the potential barriers and impacts of the creation of the REZ. Secondly, a distinct lack of leadership about how to roll out the REZ—how that's going to be orchestrated and also answering the question from the community, "What's in it for us?" That's been sadly absent. And thirdly, nothing meaningful in terms of community benefits. That's the situation that I found when I came in in 2022.

Now, to address these in a little bit more detail—firstly, barriers in creating the REZ. The two most important challenges that need to be overcome are water availability and workforce accommodation. This is well within the remit of the State. Armidale Regional Council or our Armidale region—Uralla will be the same; Walcha will be the same—we've been assessed as the highest water security risk. Our current storage and treatment capacity is only sufficient to provide sufficient secure yield for 60 per cent of our population. A recent wind farm application has sought 25 per cent of Armidale's daily water usage for a two-year period. It doesn't take a genius to do the maths and realise that one wind farm is not feasible, let alone multiple wind farms, solar projects plus significant transmission infrastructure.

Because we are a mature council, we have taken action and we're finalising our water security package. We've purchased Oaky dam, we're planning on the raise of Malpas Dam and there's the associated pipelines and treatments. But, for this to become reality, the State needs to step up financially and it needs to foot a significant part of that bill. Failure to do so, and do it urgently, is going to condemn the REZ being kicked into the long grass, and it won't come out of that for generations. The same can be said for workforce accommodation. A State government with any sympathy or affinity with the host regions would already be working to ensure a benefit for the REZ and there would be legacy housing and legacy infrastructure. To date, absolutely nothing and radio silence on what might be possible. You have just dropped the ball, and that's the distinct lack of leadership.

As a commercial person, I'm entirely familiar with the concept of the paperwork catching up with the project. That happens all the time. But what's happening here with New England—I can't speak for Central West, but I know that it's a bin fire—is in New England there appears to be a government that has abandoned its post. There is no cooperation on the ground. Proponents are also taking a small target strategy. They're too afraid to be

an informed voice in the national discussion, let alone the regional one. It's in this leadership vacuum that mischief is made. We need the Government to properly assess the cumulative impacts of the REZ and work with council to either mitigate some of those problems or fund the solutions. The developers, I think, need to grab hold of the narrative. They need to explain why they are investing billions of dollars into renewable energy.

Now, these organisations and their leadership—they are not dills. They are not successful by accident. The community doesn't need to hear platitudes; it needs to hear the economic rationale for why they are doing what they're doing. Finally, the big question: What's in it for us? Until 2022, when we created the Coalition of Renewable Energy Mayors, the answer was quite simply nothing. Initially, host communities—we were just an inconvenient afterthought. Benefit sharing was little more than trinkets and shiny things to be given to restless locals; that was the attitude of the State.

Effective lobbying by CoREM has seen the creation of a benefit-sharing framework, and that should be okay if applied properly. But engagement or benefit from the State—that's just a mirage. It's something that you talk about. Finally, the way that it's currently structured, the New England Renewable Energy Zone is not in the best long-term interests of the community unless it is bundled with economic development, and that needs to be front-run by the State. The whole thing is entirely doable, but there's a fast-closing window of time to get it done.

The CHAIR: The Committee has resolved to have free-flowing questions, so the questions will come from anywhere. I am looking to any of my colleagues to open up the batting.

The Hon. JACQUI MUNRO: Thank you so much for attending today and for your submissions. It is very helpful. I am curious about a couple of things related to the community benefit payments and the schemes that are being undertaken through voluntary planning agreements as well as future capacity building. Could each of you, or whoever is most relevant to speak to this, speak about the interaction between the voluntary planning agreements and community benefit schemes?

ROBERT BELL: Maybe I'll start. Where we are now with the department of planning is the \$850 per megawatt per annum for solar funds and \$1,050 per megawatt per annum for wind farms. Amongst the various councils, there are different ways of treating that money. Uralla is looking at setting up a community reference group to advise the council on the expenditure of that. Armidale are looking at a future fund, and I'll let Sam talk to that. But, as Sam pointed out—and as a founding member of CoREM he can take a lot of the credit for it, that Sam set up to try and get the councils not to be picked off one by one.

If you go back in history, the first developers offered platitudes and \$5,000 socket jumpers and the like. What we've seen now is genuine contribution. We have also been working with EnergyCo, who originally offered something like \$150 million as a prepayment to the access charges onto the new powerlines. We have seen that whittled down and money going over here and money going over there. I think eventually the councils in the Central-West Orana ended up with about \$15 million each. There are rules around that expenditure. From my point of view, if that was able to fund capital works for council and stopped us needing a special rate variation, I'd be really excited about the process.

The Hon. JACQUI MUNRO: What are the rules around that?

ROBERT BELL: Basically that it's got to be new infrastructure, which again comes with all of those joys of local government where it's depreciation day one and we go down another cull. We've had discussions. Again, I appreciate Sam and other mayors' leadership in this area, where developers have said to all of the people as they're doing their development, "We'll make sure all the money stays in your little area." That's not how this process works. We are then left with people who were promised monies. We were going to get a little village hall, or we were going to get all our roads bitumen within five kilometres of where it all goes. In reality, we need to see that across the whole shire. As I said, the approach that Armidale have taken—I'll let Sam talk to that. There's been much more about the whole region. We know from the coalmines that we can't expect cheap power. They've tried that for years and didn't get it. While it would be nice if we could say to everybody, "We'll take \$100 off your power bill", there doesn't seem to be a process for that.

Picking up again on Sam's point, we do need to look for economic development at the end of this. We can't have 2,000 people in Uralla shire, in a population of 6,000, and then go back to nothing. That would decimate the area. Anybody that wants to move from Sydney now to cheap housing—we've only had that one development completed. We went from 4 per cent rental availability to 0 per cent. We went from house prices being the cheapest in the region to the most expensive. For a community like ours, that's based around 0.7 to 1 per cent annual growth, which is just a steady, nice, rural environment—to be decimated. How we manage all that and how we manage that money is absolutely critical. As I say, at the end of it, if we look—sorry, I'll just get Emily to add a couple of things.

EMILY SIMS: Thank you, Mr Mayor. I just want to speak to some of the things that we've been doing proactively in Uralla to address what the mayor is talking about. What we recognised very quickly was that while there were potentially quite large community benefits coming down the line in terms of our VPA agreements—but also the access right options and community benefit program from EnergyCo—Uralla has never had that kind of influx of funding coming into the community. What we found is that we actually have to undertake some capacity building with our community to essentially co-design or, through a participatory process, help people understand what the benefits could potentially be and then talk to our community about what they might like to see at the end of the process. That, for a small shire with only a few planning staff, is actually quite a resource intensive exercise.

We've been working with a not-for-profit organisation called The Next Economy. We were very lucky to receive some philanthropic support to undertake a 12-month community engagement process called Striking a New Deal. That has allowed us to do, at this point, about 25 hours of stakeholder interviews and four in-depth, two-hour community workshops with 125 participants from over the shire to allow the council to receive insights as to what the community would like Uralla to look like in terms of regional economic benefit. Lifting the community's gaze to essentially see some of the opportunities has been a key process that we've worked through at council.

SAM COUPLAND: The Armidale approach—it's probably worth having a brief summary as to how we got here. Back in 2022, councils were allowed to, with a VPA, charge up to \$200 per megawatt, which is laughable. It's through CoREM that we dragged the State, kicking and screaming, into something meaningful. That was a really interesting process. Where we've landed now—as Robert pointed out, \$850 for solar and \$1,050 for wind in 2023—is fine. It also needs to have something for storage. In Armidale we've done that. We're charging the same for storage that people do for solar. We've had three VPAs, or heads of agreement, along those lines signed off on that, so it's entirely doable. We need the REZ—certainly this is the Armidale view, anyway—and it needs to be able to deliver intergenerational benefit.

Any of these VPA moneys need to lift the community, and they need to lift it long-term. The approach that we're going to take is via a future fund. We'll effectively live off the interest. That money doesn't go into council's consolidated revenue. It is to be spent on amenity that we otherwise wouldn't have. The thinking at the moment, as yet to be finalised, is that the council will have a say over where 70 per cent of that income stream goes. That will allow us to do things such as to borrow for significant amenities, whether it's an aquatics centre or doing up the parklands. Thirty per cent will be decided by the community. Doing that responsibly will mean that this benefit lives well beyond all of our time. That would not have occurred if the councils hadn't grouped together and forced this. We just would have been left in the dark with the promise that the State would deliver, and it's turned up with a turnip.

The Hon. JACQUI MUNRO: How did you determine that that was within the rules of the expenditure? How was that worked out?

SAM COUPLAND: We've had SC advice, and we've framed our VPA agreements so that we are able to consolidate all of the funds together.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Thank you all for being here today and for your evidence so far. Both of your submissions—and I'm happy for any or all of you to answer this—talk about the concerns around loss of social cohesion and the impact on your communities while there is this uncertainty. That's certainly something that we picked up in our time in the Central West and also up here yesterday. In terms of the consultation process, or lack thereof—and, again, we've received evidence that it has been fairly poor, to use a parliamentary term—from your perspective, particularly as the two mayors, what should have or could have been done in terms of that initial consultation? Is there scope for there to be better community engagement and awareness going forward, or do you think the horse has bolted, in some sense? That's a hard question, but I think—

ROBERT BELL: I'll go first. The horse hasn't bolted, but we need to make it now. Let's not muck around. One of the proposals Sam talked about is the upgrade of Armidale water. If that involves Uralla as well—we're in a similar situation—then we're more than happy to be part of that discussion, but that's about the money. Let's not make it pretty and try to soften it up. The issue around transport—again, we're only now seeing the bypass from Muswellbrook to Singleton. I think Singleton has started, and Muswellbrook is being planned. If you think you're going to get eight oversize/overmass vehicles through Muswellbrook on a daily basis for every turbine, we're talking stagnation of our New England Highway. It was bad enough for four days when the Taree floods were on to have heavy vehicles, and they weren't oversize/overmass. That needs to happen today—I know, as I say, they've started Singleton, to get into the Central-West Orana. That's around transport.

The accommodation bit is a dog's breakfast. I don't know how they're going to get out of that—that strikes me. Again, if we look at Dubbo, where they had land beside the town and they wanted the development done

there, I know Squadron had been working with them for that. Mudgee want them as far away from the town as they can, because they've got a tourist trade. We want some certainty in what they're going to do. We don't want a developer coming in and saying, "Yeah, we're ready to go", and we pay the company whatever number of million dollars to build something out in the middle of a paddock, and we'll get semitrailers up from Woolies each day, and we'll cart the sewage and we'll dump it somewhere. Those are discussions we need to be having right now. Let's not sugar-coat that part of it.

If Uralla's idea about having—do all the infrastructure, do the roads, the drainage, the sewerage, everything else, and then when you take away your little cabins you're left with the bones of affordable housing, that would be wonderful. We can build on that. But if you stick something out in the middle of land that we have no control over—and under the new SEPP, we probably don't have very much control, and I know there are planners in the room that would be able to add to that part of it—then that gives us no advantage.

Of course, the other part—and the bit where we got caught in our first development—is from the gravel pit to the solar farm or to the wind farm, we need control of that too. If you're going to cart over our roads with a truck and dog, then you need to be paying road maintenance. We started off as a small shire, and most of the gravel was just used on our own roads. Now we're seeing it—I think the wind turbine project is talking about 100 kays of internal roads. The amount of gravel they need and where that comes from—again, we're not highly resourced. But I think, right from Sam's comment, I agree 100 per cent that water is the strongest issue. Copeton Dam is probably the first puddle they get to, is it?

SAM COUPLAND: Probably.

ROBERT BELL: I mean, that's scary.

EMILY SIMS: May I expand on that a little? From my perspective on the ground, working with both EnergyCo and the developers, the consultation—I can't speak for the before times; I think Sam has covered that in quite a bit of depth. Within the last 12 months, since I've been in this role, the consultation that we received is excellent, but the issue that's emerging is actually around structuring regional collaboration. I think our expectation to look at a single government agency to say, "Take leadership here"—they don't have all the levers. The decision-making points are held across different government agencies and different tiers of government. When there has been an emerging regional collaboration opportunity, there is an absence of leadership.

There needs to be some organisation flow into that space and say, "We're going to take charge of coordinating." When EnergyCo talked to us about desiring a partnership, that is—I mean, at local government level, we can see a lot of things that are happening on the ground. A genuine partnership—the last thing I think we would like to see is being consulted and then decisions being made in Sydney that impact us. A motherhood statement around partnership isn't what we need. What we need is someone to lead the coordination process as a genuine collaborative framework.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Across multiple agencies, presumably.

EMILY SIMS: Absolutely, regional development agencies, skills workforce, the EPA, Transport for NSW, the department of planning, EnergyCo and industry, because there is a huge opportunity for industry collaboration to overcome some of the key sticking points around transport routes, for example, and accommodation where if industry were collaborating with councils and with the other government agencies, EnergyCo particularly, we could have, potentially, much more efficient and cost-effective solutions. But there are things where we have shared transport access routes that a first mover is spec'ing for their own project when we know that in the future four other projects and EnergyCo are going to use them. But due to timing and the fact that no individual industry proponent has a sense of a cumulative impact and nobody's in that space coordinating it, we will have an inefficient outcome. I think that's the key thing around consultation: It's actually leadership and coordination.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: I will pick up on something you said then, Ms Sims, and I would be interested in the views of the panel. In relation to the cumulative impact of a number of projects—and again this was raised with us yesterday—are councils supportive of having a stocktake of where all the projects are up to within the REZ at the moment, looking at, as you say, the different cumulative impacts of particular projects along the way? Is that something that you've looked at as councils and that you would like to see occur?

SAM COUPLAND: The short answer is yes, but there needs to be a plan about what to do with it. It's going to identify the problems, but we need to go and step beyond that. What are the mitigating factors and what are the solutions? Unless government is prepared to actually enact solutions, don't bother doing it. All you're going to do is have something half-baked that becomes a platform for people to yell from. We really need to think through the entire process. Sure, do cumulative impact; I think that's absolutely necessary. It should have been

done ages ago, but, sure, let's crack on. If we didn't do it yesterday, let's start today, but have a commitment to fixing the problems.

JAMES PRYOR: There has already been a bunch of collaborative work done, and I'll speak for Armidale council in this instance. We're engaged with the different agencies and departments on various issues. A recent and really good example is Armidale council's landfill is licensed for a particular tonnage, so we're working with the developers, working with the community, working internally to explain what that problem is, what the solution is, but it's beyond the remit of what council can act on in the immediate, also explaining that to developers that are using those in their responses for a solution to their own waste. Council is already very active in a consultation piece in a void of any centralised framework or agency to control this, but, again, it's well beyond the means and scale of council. We're talking many more zeros than what we usually talk.

The CHAIR: Mr Coupland, you talked obviously about the futures fund, and in your submission you talk about transforming Armidale into a boom town but also the perils of boom town dynamics and boom towns turning into other types of towns very quickly. How much of that futures fund are you going to put towards projects that actually drive industry, drive growth and drive employment? Parks are wonderful, but they don't necessarily create large-scale employment, et cetera. How much of that 70 per cent that you're deciding upon would go towards employment-generating projects?

SAM COUPLAND: It's hard to say, but the council needs to stand on its own two feet. In terms of the economic drivers, that to me is where some of the funds from the State should be delivered. Via EnergyCo and its transmission acceleration fund, we in the New England keep referring to the Central West and its \$128 million that just seems to have been lost in the ether. It's that sort of money the State is going to pay effectively to purchase social licence to be here, but that should be the money that funds that. The future fund really has to be amenities to make this a more liveable area, but it hasn't been structured yet. The projects haven't yet been determined.

The CHAIR: I will just touch on the water issue. Obviously what we've heard not only in the Central West but also through submissions locally is that there are all these projects cropping up that are probably outside the REZ and not necessarily guaranteed to be connected, but they're still putting stress on the community. Would you like to see a pause on some of these projects progressing before some of these key things, like water, can be sorted? Clearly, water security for Armidale residents is a priority over a potential wind farm. Would you like to see the water issue sorted, locked in, before some of these projects progress any further?

SAM COUPLAND: The water issue might actually cause those projects to pause. We won't make water available. It's as simple as that.

ROBERT BELL: And we won't, either. Can I just add to that, please, Chair?

The CHAIR: Yes, sure.

ROBERT BELL: The issue is that when we look at the original applications after the SEARs are provided, and they provide the returns from those developers, the issues around accommodation and water probably take up about four lines in their submissions. We want them to have their outcomes and how they're going to deal with those issues first-up for the department of planning to sign off on. There's no point giving four lines saying, "Yeah, we'll be able to find water", or, "We'll put a bore down", which we know won't get them water on the tablelands. And "Yes, we'll be able to find 500 houses in Uralla or Armidale", and we know they're not there. If it was at the start of the process, before they got department of planning being referred on for final review, they would have to look at that.

I take Sam's point. The other part is, they won't have the workers. We're talking about building new powerlines through the region and we're talking a couple of thousand kilometres, and we're talking about building all those solar farms and wind farms. Some of those people are very specialised, particularly running the powerlines, particularly putting the vanes on wind turbines. We're talking about a highly specialised skilled workforce. They don't exist. If we said to the local TAFE here, training people to do electrical-type work so they can work on the solar farms—they closed the course down. How sensible is that? Prepare them now. If we have to set up some sort of project that gives them guaranteed work up until they start—or we can find other jobs for them—fine. But there's no point having the solar farms being built and they don't have the workforce. I think the last I heard for running powerlines was out of Portugal or Brazil. What sort of country are we? That's just weird to me, I'm sorry.

The CHAIR: Just finally, other neighbouring councils have talked about land use caps regarding renewable energy and maybe that might be a way of calming down the plethora of renewable energy projects coming in—and speculating over properties—that may or may not ever come to fruition. Is that something your councils have considered a position on in terms of land use caps?

SAM COUPLAND: No, we haven't, but it comes to the question of whose land is it. If you try to apply caps, we're almost becoming a communist country. I don't come to your farm and say what you can and can't do with it. With the exception of transmission, no-one is forced to host a renewable energy project.

The CHAIR: Mr Bell?

ROBERT BELL: Absolutely. Couldn't agree more with Sam. It goes to that issue, and I'm sure every landholder in the Uralla shire has had an approach from somebody wanting to sign up a confidentiality agreement and getting \$5,000 while they investigate. Go back a step, though. EnergyCo provides all of the levers. EnergyCo are the ones that provide access to their transmission line. We've got a couple of projects now that will connect into Transgrid lines. But EnergyCo has 100 per cent control of that. They've just done that in Central-West Orana where they've given out those access agreements. I think 10 companies have got access agreements. If you don't have an access agreement, you don't have a project.

The bit that I would like to see out of that land bit is if you build a solar farm or a wind farm on your property, then that part of it should be rated differently as an electricity-generating business. I know the companies are prepared to pay those, if there is an increase in rates and charges, and they may well have to pay land tax as well. That should happen now rather than land bank. I think, if we looked across the shire, the amount of land actually taken out of service is minimal. The solar farm has sheep underneath it. They have lease agreements on most of it but, as Sam said, we're not telling private landowners what they can do with their land.

The CHAIR: Just finally, Ms Sims, you talked about the engagement or consultation with EnergyCo in the past 12 to 18 months being excellent. Are you referring to engagement with council or the broader consultation with community?

EMILY SIMS: We have a dedicated council team that has been excellent. Our experience with EnergyCo's council engagement team has been entirely positive, from my experience. Can I add something to the last question about land use caps? There are two potential changes that would increase the positive engagement of landholders with proponents. The first is where, in communities, landholders have been able to come together as groups of landholders and choose which proponent they wish to work with and been very informed. That has had better outcomes than when a proponent has come in and, essentially, talked to everyone and then there's non-disclosure agreements and gag orders over the landholders they've sided with. There's also a question about the incentives that are offered to prospectors that raise some concern in our community and also in the broader landscape of renewable energy—that the financial incentives for early prospecting are out of step with getting great outcomes for landholders.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: Thanks for coming along today and for the evidence that you are providing to the Committee. I just wanted to go back to this issue about accommodation and see whether councils have been engaging in any discussion in this area about providing long-term accommodation, as such. We've heard in other areas that, for example, councils have provided land where developers have then offered to build accommodation that could be used as social housing after the project is completed or, for example, there could be a plan, if you've got a couple of thousand workers coming in that may work on one project, then on the next one, and then on the next one, in a few years, whether there is a plan from council to build that sort of long-term accommodation that could then be used after that work is complete. I'm just interested in your views about that and whether there is any collaboration.

SAM COUPLAND: I think the reality is that Armidale will become the dormitory for the New England REZ, just given our relative size to other towns. We have ideas on what we would like it to look like, and we are going to be preparing our strategy around that to say, if you really want to come in here, this is what it needs to be. Probably, in cascading order, we'd see something along the lines—in an ideal world, something akin to an Olympic village that can be reconfigured. I don't think we need to always go for social housing, but let's call it affordable housing or even quality housing. That's what we are missing here. That would be doable in parts of the Armidale CBD. The next step down after that would be to develop blocks that you can put a donga on and then, when the project is over, we now have developed blocks that we can build houses on. That would be good.

There's reconfiguration, possibly, and this wouldn't be all of it, but maybe out at UNE as well. I know they're keen to engage. The last thing we really want are workers' camps. That does nothing for the town at all. That would have to be the last resort. If they have to occur, we want real restrictions on what's allowed to be there—no bars, no gyms—to force people to come and interact with the region. We had plans on what could happen but, like everything with the State and EnergyCo, it's down the track. They're going to talk to us about it in due course. Is that right, planners?

STEPHEN WOOD: Yes.

SAM COUPLAND: So there's a plan to have a plan, but we need to be a bit better than that. When I say "we", I mean you.

ROBERT BELL: I'll get Emily to add to it, but I think the idea of Armidale being a dormitory and people coming down to Uralla for coffee and the pubs and clubs is a really good idea. Thanks, Emily.

EMILY SIMS: The accommodation piece is where there is a lot of inherent risk but this enormous opportunity if we get it right. We have been working on some assumptions. The first is that there is an interaction between safe work travel times and where accommodation needs to be located. That was early advice we received from EnergyCo. We have been expecting that we will need to provide some form of accommodation, and the advice that we received from our community—because it's part of our local housing strategy, which I would add was funded by the EnergyCo payments that we receive as council—was that they were quite supportive of us doing a temporary workers accommodation camp close to town.

There were a few things around design outcomes but, overwhelmingly, they want to see a positive outcome—a legacy outcome—whether that is repurposable housing or repurposable infrastructure. Dubbo has had some success in that area. The issue that we ran up against is that we are waiting for EnergyCo to release their cumulative impact study for accommodation so we can have certainty as to the numbers that are expected from their network operator. Up until this point, we've had private investors interested in working with council and working with our community to build temporary workers accommodation in a location that was acceptable to council et cetera. But without the certainty of this many numbers and this time frame, it's very difficult for the private sector to make that investment.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: Why is that the case? If you've already got a rental shortage and people need accommodation, why wouldn't private developers be interested anyway, regardless of the REZ?

EMILY SIMS: The greatest source of demand for workers accommodation is going to come from EnergyCo's project itself. When we started working through this with interested private investors, they wanted to do detailed financial modelling. We couldn't tell them how many, when, until we had more certain advice from EnergyCo. They still have unconsented—they're working through their EIS process. We're hoping that in the next month we'll actually get that advice through the cumulative impact studies. As the EIS goes on exhibition, we'll be able to see exactly how much accommodation, how many beds they're going to need and where. We have also had some really positive dialogue with proponents. Industry need a solution to this problem, and we've spoken to three proponents in our region who are very willing to go into options to underwrite that risk to enable private sector development to come through. We've also had really positive engagement with landowners. We're learning from CWO but, again, this is another example where council is kind of coordinating private investors, government agencies and industry.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: But it's got the capacity to provide that intergenerational change. If you get it right, you're going to have more accommodation for the community and you're going to have investment.

EMILY SIMS: Indeed. But, the coordinating role, council really doesn't have the capacity to do without more resources. But when we speak to EnergyCo about the coordination, there's a lot of enthusiasm but they don't have the power or they can't step into that role effectively.

JAMES PRYOR: Can I just add that I was speaking to a residential developer on this, so I've got some quite granular information. It's the commerciality of it. Land values in our region make the commerciality of a residential development really quite tight. Then it's the risk that we face considering these solutions in isolation, as well. It's the civil works that go through. That impacts on the commerciality of it. The cost of building in the regions is a lot higher, because of logistics, mostly. The materials and workforce also slow it down. So the lag effect, the uncertainty on when, how much, where et cetera—that slows down developers. That's coming from a developer himself.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: In his address, Mayor Coupland raised a very important point: the need for all the proposals to be backed up with economic development. We had a discussion about that. I think we're about to run out of time, but my question to you would have been something like, in addition to what you've already stated, are there any other specific issues, requirements or proposals that you may have in relation to that very important matter? Chair, if witnesses do have any additional information on that, maybe they could take that question on notice and provide those details to the Committee.

ROBERT BELL: Can I have two seconds?

The CHAIR: Yes.

ROBERT BELL: One of the issues for us is the end of life. We'll get to why I think that the decommissioning's not very good for the State issues—the requirements. We're working with a number of the

universities about "imagine if we decommissioned these solar panels in Uralla shire". We've got the land. We've got an industrial area set up. The technology's available. Imagine at the end of all of this—because already some of the rooftop solar is over 20 years old. Let's say, if we've got a million panels in the shire already, 1 per cent of them need decommissioning, refunding or recycling—you know, circular economy. That's our first aim. That's a project that could start as soon as we have those people—the funds to do it. After that, there's already a company who has said they'd like to be close to the battery that's being put in the New England solar farm because they're a high-power usage—they're a gas supply company. Those are the sorts of things that will come when we have access to reasonable-priced energy. I appreciate your time, so thank you.

SAM COUPLAND: Could I just have one second?

The CHAIR: Yes.

SAM COUPLAND: That's a great question. There are going to be plenty of nice-to-haves that roll through but, in short, unless the State gets behind long-term economic development here—and that's water and meaningful accommodation—the whole thing's just going to be a disaster. I wouldn't concentrate on anything else unless there's a commitment to solve those first two. It's as simple as that.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Can I maybe again ask, given how important it is, if the witnesses could take the question generally on notice. If you have any additional information, please provide it because I think it's a very important issue.

SAM COUPLAND: Yes.

ROBERT BELL: Absolutely.

The CHAIR: We have quickly come to the end of our time with you guys, but thank you very much for your evidence today and for your candour. It's very much appreciated. You have taken the last question on notice. The Committee secretariat might also come to you with some supplementary questions that we have for you. You will have roughly 21 days to get them back to us. Thank you once again for your time.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

Councillor ERIC NOAKES, Mayor, Walcha Council, affirmed and examined

Mr ALAN BUTLER, Acting General Manager, Walcha Council, sworn and examined

Mr SAM LOBSEY, Manager, Development Division, Tamworth Regional Council, affirmed and examined

Mr JORDAN KIRK, Renewable Energy Project Coordinator, Tamworth Regional Council, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: We now welcome our next witnesses, from Tamworth council and Walcha Council. Starting on my left with Councillor Noakes, would you like to make a short opening statement?

ERIC NOAKES: Yes. I had a bit written down here, but a lot of it has been covered already. In the interest of time, there is not much use in me going over and over the issues that these projects are bringing, and that this whole transition is bringing, to the small community of Walcha. We are a community of only 3,100 people but with a big land area. We don't have the resources in council that are required to do as much work as the big councils have got to do at the moment to bring these projects in to cover all of our bases as we move along.

We have massive issues around accommodation already. We have issues around our road infrastructure and the water, which has been mentioned. All of these things impact us. We struggle within council to have the time to do this. The \$750,000 given to us by EnergyCo has been fantastic. Sometimes proving how we spend that is costing us more money than we're getting back out of that. It's very onerous, the reporting of all of that work. We're learning constantly from the Central-West Orana REZ. I went to the launch of this in Armidale in February 2021, where there were a lot of promises made about the way this would run and how our roads would be looked after.

At the time, EnergyCo were going to take over our roads and charge it back on a pro rata basis to the proponents. We were told that all the proponents would be culled before they came to us. They're just coming at us. The roads are being left to us. We are trying to work around projects that aren't in the REZ and are in the REZ on the same roads. I think if we need something here, we need a body like Emily Sims spoke about last time to oversee all this and to bring all of this together. We are dealing with all of these people in silos. It's very frustrating for us that the Government, at some stage, has not pulled all of this under one umbrella to make it easier.

I'd just like to comment on one thing that's quite often said about the Central-West Orana REZ—that it's like building an aeroplane when flying. I guess the Government designed this aeroplane, and EnergyCo are trying to make it fly. I feel like the communities that I represent are sitting in that plane and actually flying without staff, like the hostesses and that, on the plane. All our communities are in this plane that everybody else is sitting and watching. I think that we deserve a little bit better than that. Some of the other people need to get in, from the Government and EnergyCo, and help us in this process a lot more.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Is there anything additional from you, Mr Lobsey?

SAM LOBSEY: From Tamworth Regional Council?

The CHAIR: Yes.

SAM LOBSEY: The TRC local government area is situated largely outside the formal New England REZ boundary. However, we have at least 15 fast-moving State significant developments that involve wind, solar, battery and hydro. Together these represent three gigawatts of capacity, approximately \$6.5 billion in investment and up to 5,000 construction workers. This project list is not exhaustive, however, with many other projects either at pre-lodgement stage or located further north of Tamworth but that still impact our region, with the New England Highway being the major haulage route from Newcastle port through to the site. The challenges we face at the moment are twofold in terms of the planning and resourcing capacities and the cumulative impacts. We do receive a welcome annual contribution from EnergyCo to support our planning and coordination, but this funding falls short of covering the significant strain that this is having on Tamworth's infrastructure, workforce and internal resources.

At the local government level, we have felt the brunt of the impacts resulting from the manner in which the REZ was established. We are not convinced that, when it was established, the typical planning occurred. In a normal rezoning planning proposal process, council would be required to address essential infrastructure and service capacity issues to ensure that the right outcome can be achieved. If council had attempted to rezone land in the fashion in which the REZ was adopted, it would have received a very strongly worded letter from the department requesting more information. The current approach here, however, we believe is retrospective and causing the confusion, the angst and some of the mistrust.

In terms of the cumulative impact, our concerns can be broken down into the five key areas for Tamworth. These are economic, transport, housing, food production and environmental. From an economic perspective, Tamworth's economy is based on events that practically occur every single weekend of the year. We are not just known for the annual country music festival, and motel accommodation is scarce. Transport: Despite assurances of long-term legacy benefits and promises to "do it once and do it right", few have materialised. The latest Tamworth bypass route proposal to facilitate the movement of heavy components is an example of this. That's just three months ago. The bandaid proposal involves detouring heavy vehicles along existing rural roads and temporary closure of critical public roads, including the New England Highway, to allow reversing manoeuvres of the OSOM vehicles over hundreds of metres. We ask: Why is this critical component only in the preliminary design stage, so long after the New England REZ was declared?

In terms of housing, this has been discussed already so far, I believe. We also have housing supply and production concerns relating to the lack of workers and labourers to build housing and the lack of raw materials. We are also concerned about our own housing issues that we already have in Tamworth. Food production: Tamworth's role as a food bowl and protein producer is critical to long-term economic growth of our region. It relies on protecting our highest-quality agricultural land. Tamworth's value to the State economy in terms of meat production may be at risk, and major protein producers could move elsewhere should prime ag land continued to be consumed by renewable projects.

Environmental: Environmental impacts have been perceived on occasions to be largely ignored or dismissed, with decisions citing the greater public interest of approving a renewable project over environmental concerns. This has set, from our perspective, an "at any cost" tone in the decision-making process. We ask: Why does every project relating to renewable energy basically need to be approved? We would argue that they don't. Site selection and good planning assessment considerations should be able to determine the outcome of any particular project on its merits. We ask for stronger collaboration with local government, as has been discussed already, better strategic planning across agencies and continued resourcing to ensure communities like ours aren't left to absorb the costs of an energy transition designed to benefit the entire State.

ALAN BUTLER: The only other thing I'd like to add to Mayor Noakes, or reinforce, I guess, is just around how there should be a better coordinated effort, looking at not just individual LGAs but the collective of the LGAs in water, waste and accommodation.

The CHAIR: Sure. Mr Kirk, do you have anything to add?

JORDAN KIRK: No, in the interest of time, I'm happy with Sam's comments.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: You probably heard the question I asked the panel last time. We spent a lot of time talking about the importance, as one of the mayors said, for proposals to be bundled with economic development. How would that happen? What are the priorities et cetera? Can I ask for your general comments from your councils about how you would want that to occur?

ERIC NOAKES: Do you want to lead with that, Sam?

SAM LOBSEY: In terms of the economic benefits from the developments, yes, we're obviously discussing things like VPAs from developers. This has been occurring for at least the last 10 years, and they have been in varying forms. One of the issues that we've had up until the more recent guidelines that set voluntary planning agreements and the amounts that are to be paid to the community from the developer is that we had a big variety of options and offers from developers and it was really hard to get a grasp on where that money was going to go and which regional communities within the Tamworth local government area—where that money was going to be spent.

Often a lot of the areas that these projects are in don't have large communities. We do have some examples of places like Nundle and places where you have communities that do not necessarily have the facilities in the area, so then the question is: Where is that money going to be spent? Tamworth has been in the process of looking at a regional fund where some of that money would be spent on regional areas, so outside of the urban environment. At the moment, as it has been for the last few years, we are still grappling with what to do with those VPAs because they are so different each and every time.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Can I ask, and I obviously invite other witnesses to comment as well, what would you do differently? Given that we'll be making recommendations, if I give you a magic wand and you could change things, what would be different?

ERIC NOAKES: Walcha Council as yet does not have a renewable energy project that has gone through and got its DA yet. We have a VPA with a fairly large wind farm, and I guess, from an economic development point of view, we've got to tie that in to sustainability of our council and our community. It's not going to

necessarily bring factories or these sorts of things, but it's going to make what is basically a rural and timber community which is trying to work through—tourism is another thing—to enable these to operate better and under a better environment than we are. We've been through an SRV with the community, and we can't do that again, so if these projects are going to come, we need to leverage that to make us financially sustainable.

From a VPA point of view, they're very complicated when you first go to do them, and most of the proponents seem to want them to represent something that represents them in the community. We need them to make our community better, and those things aren't always seen and they don't always have a big sign on them saying that "so and so wind developer did this project". They want the buildings, they want the community centres and these sorts of things or the swings and the barbeques—all these things. Councils need a better ability to direct where that money goes so that we can have the things that sustain our community. There is not much use these projects coming and pouring so many million dollars into our community and at the end of it we have just a far bigger thing to depreciate.

SAM LOBSEY: Yes, I think consistency from day one would have been really helpful. I've had a lot of meetings over VPAs, having arguments about what we should be getting or what they should be providing—years and years worth of discussions over these issues. Whereas I think if we had a consistent approach to how VPAs should have been handled and where that funding should be spent, prioritising things like local communities and having almost a list of things that it potentially could be utilised for, and an approach to develop policies that are almost similar across the board—we get examples from time to time where State government requests councils to develop a policy over a certain thing.

A good example is the council-related DA policy that was introduced a couple of years ago. We had basically been mandated to develop a policy and we were given a set of guidelines over what should be in that policy, and then council goes through and formalises that. I think if we had something along those lines from day one, all that time we've spent discussing VPAs with different developers with different priorities and different ideas on how to do it—it was really difficult, and it was really difficult from the staff's perspective because we don't work in banks. We do have a banker now with us, but at the time we didn't have that experience or even the capacity and the resourcing to sit down and spend a long time working out what is the best outcome for Tamworth. That made it very difficult, then, to be able to discuss that with our group of councillors to explain what is the best outcome for our community.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Can I ask Mr Butler or Mr Kirk, do you have any additional comments?

ALAN BUTLER: Yes. I guess, to add on the comments so far, us, particularly, we're a small council. We don't have the big levels of expertise within our organisation that others may. So having greater guidance when we are developing VPAs, following from Mayor Noakes's comments around having all the new and shiny things is great, but you've got to be able to afford to operate and maintain those going forward. Having great flexibility in where the funds can be spent would be crucial to the successful outcomes overall.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Mr Kirk?

JORDAN KIRK: I guess all I'd add is that there has been a lack of certainty—I know it's been brought up previously—around the REZ and if any of these projects are actually going to go ahead. Talking to a lot of our local businesses, they've been hesitant to scale their operations because they haven't been given that leadership from the State Government that this is coming. The communication from the State hasn't been sufficient enough for them to want to invest in growing their business, or the support for their business to be able to grow so that local workforce can be activated. As well as that, there hasn't been the activation as far as training and education. The REZ was announced in 2021. That would have been a great time to invest into the community to train school leavers then that would now be working in the REZ now. We haven't seen that to this date.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: I might come back to this issue of temporary accommodation. Really in Tamworth only a small part of the local government area is in the REZ, as I think you say in your submission. But you also say there will be an effect: people taking up spots in motels in competition over construction workers. Why do you think that's the case? Why would it be any worse because of the REZ? They're the sort of problems the whole State is facing at the moment.

SAM LOBSEY: Yes. We do have all those projects that are outside the REZ. We do have a couple that are in the REZ. One has been approved. The accommodation strategy that we received post that consent does talk about where they're going to potentially house their workers. They include suburbs like Kootingal and they provide details around what the rental market looks like in Kootingal at the moment. That is really concerning for us. Great for that project, because it's probably the first project that we'll see, from our perspective, underway. But that's the first project. If we do get that cumulative—if we get another project up and running a couple of months

or a year later, those people are more likely to be still in those houses. So then where are they going to go after that? We've had those discussions around potential workers' camps or other legacy projects for housing in places like Kootingal, Bendemeer or the outskirts of Tamworth, but none of that has materialised to date. It's all been a lot of good chat, a lot of really positive stuff. EnergyCo has also approached us around looking for areas, but we haven't formalised—

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: Are there any opportunities to build that long-term housing that could be used effectively to house workers, but then afterwards becomes housing that's there for the community for generations?

SAM LOBSEY: Yes, absolutely. From Tamworth's perspective, we are very open to having those discussions and getting an understanding on what commitments the council will need to make for that to occur. Obviously we don't have the funds to go and build an estate. We need that private investment. We need that other government investment to step in and support it, and it needs to be done in the right way in terms of planning, like we talk about in terms of the right infrastructure, the right sewer servicing, the right road connections and all those sorts of things. As previously mentioned, where are the facilities for these people? Are we plonking them in an area where, if it is going to be legacy, is that going to be a problem in the next 20 years or 30 years time, or longer?

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: Is there an active process where council has identified sites, land that it could make available?

SAM LOBSEY: We have identified some areas, but none of it has been set in stone. We haven't found a site and said that's the one, so we're very much still in the early days and still discussing that.

The CHAIR: I might just go to the issue of water first, Mr Lobsey and Mr Kirk. Obviously, Tamworth has had its history with water security—quite dire in the millennium drought. I know there are a couple of things on the table at the moment that you guys are considering. You've got your water security draft plan that's coming down. From the State Government's perspective, you've got the Tamworth intervalley pipeline projects that are being considered, which I know is quite vexed in your community, to put it bluntly. How is this renewable energy rollout intersecting with some of those key things that are happening in water security within your council, and what would you need from the State Government to make that process work more efficiently and effectively?

SAM LOBSEY: I'm not sure how best to answer that question.

The CHAIR: I am happy for you to take it on notice.

SAM LOBSEY: I could take some of it on notice; I'll have a go though. The majority of the projects we see are relying on existing scenarios, so they're utilising their stock and domestic licences, and they indicate that in their application. They say, "We need this amount of water per year." Perhaps it's at the start of the construction stage or during production to clean the solar panels or what have you. That's the point they put across. We also talk about where, if there are bores being put down—if there are new bores—who is doing the work around determining what the groundwater impacts are for these developments? It's not council's responsibility. A lot of the time the bores are the option for a lot of these developments, from our perspective, and that's not our area to approve those bores. So it's an interesting discussion with WaterNSW around who is controlling how much water is coming out of these bores for these projects and what the realistic requirement is for these projects. We don't know what they're actually going to need because we haven't seen a lot of them yet.

I guess that's one of the big issues with a lot of things with all of this is that, apart from a handful up this way, we actually haven't seen a lot of projects on the ground, particularly not in Tamworth, of that scale. So there is still a lot of uncertainty around what those impacts are. But in terms of the other policies and other projects that are underway in terms of water security for Tamworth, Tamworth is absolutely certain around its need for water security, particularly for—not just the residents. We've got our meat production, which I mentioned earlier, which takes up more than our residents on a daily basis, and we have to make sure that that water supply is there in whatever form it is, whether it's out of the ground, water out of the dams, or whether it's other ways such as recycling. We are absolutely concerned about water security in Tamworth. It's yet to be known what impacts renewable will have though.

The CHAIR: Going back to your comments about WaterNSW, did you actually get a clear response or answer from them in terms of whether they are the agency that will coordinate this or whether it is someone else? Did you get a clear response from a State agency as to who is going to coordinate the planning of water use when it comes to these renewable energy projects?

SAM LOBSEY: Not that I am aware, no.

The CHAIR: On housing, I note that, obviously, you've already got housing stress with your meat production and your poultry production. Plants are ready. You've got share housing cropping up in Tamworth

quite regularly. Has the council done any work in terms of a figure of what housing you would need outside of what you are already planning for under your Blueprint 100 document?

SAM LOBSEY: Yes, our Blueprint 100 document indicates—it's an aspirational document that looks at 100,000 people in the Tamworth region. At the moment, we release around 300 lots a year. That's been pretty standard for the past decade or so. To meet that aspirational target within a certain time frame, we're looking at doubling that to 600 a year. We have already seen that that is fairly unachievable in a lot of ways—from an economic perspective for the developers and from a labour perspective. The demand isn't necessarily there, at this point in time, for that number.

Throughout the *Tamworth Regional Housing Strategy*, we certainly see that there is a need for a more diverse range of housing, and housing that's not necessarily in the outskirts. We're looking at housing within that existing urban area, so looking at changing the morphology of some of these housing types from the four-, five-, six- or sometimes seven-bedroom houses to the one- or two-bedder units that are absolutely required. Whilst Tamworth, again, is trying to do its bit, we still need other support in order to get affordable housing. I think that's the same with a lot of government areas in terms of how we can all contribute to resolving the issue.

At the end of the day, with renewable projects and our blueprint aspirations, there is that concern that some of this housing stock being used up will then impact us being able to attract other employees and staff for other services—our essential services and other commercial and industrial uses in the Tamworth area. I know from experience it's very hard to get a planner to come to Tamworth and then find them a house. Often they have to sleep in a caravan park or something like that for a few weeks or a month before they actually get somewhere. So, yes, it's a concern.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Thank you for your submissions and evidence so far. I wanted to take you to the challenges around community engagement and consultation. I think, Mr Lobsey, in your opening remarks you talked a bit about some of the stress and anxiety that it causes when people are uncertain, not knowing which projects may or may not be approved. In the Tamworth submission, you make a recommendation where you say, "real engagement with landowners rather than just the statutory minimum". Could you just talk a little bit more about what you think that best practice should look like in terms of community engagement? I'd be interested if you wanted to add to that as well, Councillor Noakes—whoever wants to go.

SAM LOBSEY: I'll keep going. There has been really good engagement, and I think it was mentioned earlier by Emily at Uralla. EnergyCo and some of the proponents have done really good engagement more recently. I think we're seeing a shift in the way they're actually getting out there. They're acknowledging that there's a lot of work to be done with the neighbouring properties, particularly, and then the broader community. So we're absolutely seeing a change. It goes right back to these original decisions that were made that created that anxiety and that confusion about what was going on.

The whole concept of this REZ, without having the actual transmission line and being aware of where this transmission line would actually go, caused a lot of problems for a lot of people, obviously. Now we're seeing this on the ground, and it's very hard to come back from that. It's going to be almost impossible to get everyone—it is impossible to get everyone on that page, but it's about just producing evidence to show that you've actually dealt with concerns. Often there's a table, and here's the list of submissions, and here's what we addressed. The way they address it is sometimes they'll just say, "This is in our report. This has been acknowledged in our report on page 468." That requires the neighbour, someone who isn't familiar with any of this stuff and doesn't know which document is which—I mean, I often struggle with which document is which.

It's about how you communicate, obviously. That is the clear message. I think it needs to be very simple, looking at each individual's concerns and taking it back to them in some way. I know it's not going to be easy for the larger scale issues and the bigger problems that are more widespread, like the bigger public interest issues, but there are projects where there are individual property owners—only a small handful—and they're being given that document and just told, "It's in there." They haven't even received it from the applicant; they've received it via the department through the response to submissions process. So there is that disconnect. They've gone through that process, which is the statutory requirement, but you just need to do that extra bit more to actually get people to the table so they can get a clearer picture, if that makes sense.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Absolutely, yes.

ERIC NOAKES: I think, from Walcha Council's point of view, EnergyCo has been quite open to engaging with us and through CoREM on a regular basis. I think the offer has been there for the community, but community are quite often slow on the uptake of this—people who aren't directly affected and haven't been directly approached. All of a sudden, it has built up to where it becomes a problem to them. I think that we just need to probably have it explained better to the community right from the start. It's too late now. We're well into

this point now where, anecdotally, Walcha is probably one of the most divided communities in New South Wales over this whole transmission project. I think that comes through lack of knowledge of it because, as the councillor said, we get to engage with them regularly, but there are so many questions taken on notice. And we all know what happens to questions on notice: They never come back.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Couldn't possibly comment on that, but yes.

ERIC NOAKES: What I'm finding is that we want answers to these questions—and it's around our roads and all this sort of thing—so that we can give the community some confidence that we know what we're doing. At times I think we can't really give them confidence in it because we don't know the answer. And if we tell them, "Yes, it will be all right" and it's not all right—because, as I said earlier, from what the promises that have been made right through this transition, a lot of them have been lost in the process. I don't know if they were promises or commitments or what the difference is. There was money coming to all the councils early on as legacy money and all of that. All of sudden, it just disappears because it doesn't fit the grant programs. As I'm saying, it's hard to give your community confidence when EnergyCo appear not to have the confidence in what they're telling us.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: I have one more question for Tamworth. In your submission you talked about a mandatory limit on permissible amendments to DAs. I was interested in that because one of the things that we've heard, particularly in the Central West as well, is about how long some of these projects can take to even be approved or not approved, and that other level of uncertainty. I wanted to check my assumption that that recommendation is about streamlining the process a bit so that people know, one way or another, whether projects are going to go ahead. Is that where that has come from?

SAM LOBSEY: Yes, that's right. We do have communities that are divided as well. They have been divided for a long time. A couple of years of division is 20 years of trying to fix those problems. I can see this being a big issue for some communities for a long time. I guess the point is the fatigue. It is assessment fatigue. It's getting amendment after amendment after amendment. People who initially start out the process really excited and really want to contribute, they slowly, every time—it's just like death by a thousand cuts, almost. You get that fatigue in the process. It gets to a point where you just put your hands up. That's what the proposal is: to try to streamline that process and get the issue resolved as soon as possible. It's something that we entertain at a local or a regional DA level, so there's no reason why it can't be entertained down to the State significant development level either.

It goes back to one of my comments earlier around the merit: Why do we need to keep trying to get this thing over the line when we have had failed attempts over many, many years? Why do we keep giving them that? It's a bit strange that we just keep letting it happen over and over and over again. One particular project we've had, we have spent hundreds of hours across our council trying to go through all the documents over and over and over again. It's not just the documents that you get through the department of planning; you also get separate emails from the proponent with separate pieces of information that they're going to utilise to put into their document. From the council's perspective, we just don't have the capacity or the resources to fully understand what is in front of us. Often things have been missed because we don't have that time to just keep going over it over and over again.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: And again and again and again.

The Hon. JACQUI MUNRO: Thank you so much for coming today and for your submissions. I wanted to ask about something that you refer to in the Tamworth submission around post-determination actions by the proponent. Could you expand a bit on what that might look like? This is to help remediate some of the division that you've been speaking about, I understand.

SAM LOBSEY: Yes, it's basically showing the community that they care, I think, and getting onto it pretty quickly. A consent is issued, but it may not be for a long, long time before, say, the turbines start moving and potentially a VPA injection of funds comes in. There could potentially be more certainty for the community about what might come before that, like what is this company going to produce for our little community, and to show that they are in the community—they are not just here to take their wind or take their sun and take it elsewhere; they are actually in the community. I think it's all around building that relationship. I think there are probably examples of conditions with consents, or even in a VPA, where they have agreed to put something forward earlier. It could be sponsorships or whatever, but potentially there could be something engraved in the conditions about providing that earlier.

The Hon. JACQUI MUNRO: Would that be part of a condition that the council mandates, or is it something that is mandated as part of a broader framework?

SAM LOBSEY: I'd be happy to see it in part of a council policy—in a VPA policy—that this is also in addition to that, as a way to show the community.

The Hon. JACQUI MUNRO: Just quickly, we haven't spoken much about decommissioning bonds. I wondered if you could speak about the importance of that to the community and why it has been failing so far to produce any sort of certainty—or that there hasn't really been any certainty because there is no framework for decommissioning bonds at all?

ERIC NOAKES: I think for our community it's one of the biggest concerns, because we're actually passing it on to the next generation or the generation after that. It's easy for us not to want decommissioning bonds and just get on with the hard work we've got to do to bring these projects in, but it is extremely important. We need some framework, as you mentioned there, around that. It's hard for us to go out and get a decommissioning bond. I've spoken for a long time about how it seems to work in the mining industry, and yet there seems to be no appetite at all to put it into the renewable energy projects. I would like, out of this, for something to come there. Whether we can make that retrospective in VPAs that we have already written is another thing.

SAM LOBSEY: I absolutely agree with that. There are examples. The mining industry does do this; why are we not doing this here? This is effectively replacing a lot of that. How are we going to expect landowners to deal with these significant pieces of infrastructure should these companies just pack up and go home? Putting it onto the company in some way—I don't know how we do that. We need to look into that. But it's absolutely something that our council is concerned about. We have been flagging that for a number of years with the department. To put it with all the sentiments, something needs to happen there.

ALAN BUTLER: It provides certainty and an assurance for the end of life. It's one of the biggest concerns, I guess.

ERIC NOAKES: Surely there is a provision there somewhere, like—as I understand—it works with mining, where it is so much a tonne. Surely so much a megawatt, kilowatt or whatever we export out of these projects should be sidelined and quarantined for this in the long term.

The Hon. JACQUI MUNRO: I have been a renter. I had to pay my bond.

ERIC NOAKES: Yes.

The Hon. JACQUI MUNRO: Hopefully I didn't do any damage—but the concept is clear.

The CHAIR: I might fire off one question in the last minute. Going back to Ms Mitchell's comment around consultation and going beyond the statutory requirement, perhaps on notice, can you come back to the Committee on whether you'd want any changes made to the statutory requirements to make them more explicit and prescriptive about how consultation should be done so some of these developers can't sidestep or do it in a tokenistic way, which is what we've been hearing quite clearly has been going on? If you could take that on notice, that would be great.

ERIC NOAKES: Yes.

SAM LOBSEY: Yes.

ALAN BUTLER: Yes.

JORDAN KIRK: Yes.

The CHAIR: That concludes our time with you this morning. Thank you very much for your time and your candour and your evidence. You have taken a few questions on notice, and there may be some supplementary questions that come through as well. The secretariat will be in touch with you for that.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Short adjournment)

The Hon. BARNABY JOYCE, MP, Member for New England, Parliament of Australia, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: I welcome our next witness, the Hon. Barnaby Joyce. Would you like to make a short opening statement before we go to questions?

The Hon. BARNABY JOYCE: Thank you very much, Chair. I appreciate the participation and attendance of all those on the Committee. Mr Chair, might I start by saying the whole intermittent power issue is a swindle. It is a swindle, and it is nomenclature. They mention farms; there is nothing like farms. They are future obsolescence. They say "renewable" when we all know in the end they end up as landfill. It is an environmental swindle. It's the biggest industrial metamorphosis that the New England has ever seen of their landscape and the nature of the area. Even in this environmental swindle, in our LPA agreement—which I am part of, as a beef producer—we have to sign that we have a management plan to restrict stock from grazing near wind towers and near solar panels. I presume this is on the same premise as the concerns they have with such things as PFAS, but in this issue it will be such things as microplastics, bisphenol A, cadmium and lead. It's a swindle as far as the decommissioning goes. It promises a virtue, but it doesn't tell you how they're going to get rid of it.

Labor Party Senator Murray Watt from Queensland was quite precise when they asked at a Federal inquiry who was responsible for the decommissioning. He said, "That is for the farmer to contend with in their lease agreement." It's a swindle environmentally in regards to birdlife and nature. We believe that one raptor per year per tower will be killed by wind towers. Mr Chair, it is a swindle in economics. What other part of our economy in the New England has a subsidised Capacity Investment Scheme which basically underwrites you even if you make a loss and even if you don't produce enough electricity? We would love that in the cattle industry—where we get paid even if we didn't produce cattle.

It has government paid transmission lines, EnergyCo being a classic example of that. It has a policy where it is compulsory for a section of that product to be purchased. It has provided policy that basically bans its competition in removing other things, such as base load power. Most importantly it is a swindle in virtue. Hospitals are virtuous, but you see them in cities. Roads are virtuous, but you see them in cities. But intermittent power precincts, which could quite ably be built off the coast of Sydney or off the coast of Melbourne, are not built there, because apparently the virtue runs out when you are inside of the city.

It is an issue that the virtue doesn't go as far as getting an ironclad promise that any of the solar panels will have anything to do with the slave labour that constructs solar panels in Sichuan province or that the cobalt in the solar panels doesn't come from child labour in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. These are things that, in the virtuous and smarmy presentations we get, are distinctly left behind. It is a swindle, Mr Chair, in the fact that so many promises are made to local communities and so little is delivered. Let's look at Glen Innes as the classic example. Basically, billions were invested in intermittent power precincts, but what's happened to the town? Has its population grown? Are there new industries there? Are there new jobs there? There are only probably a handful—maybe one or two. There is no car park at the intermittent power precinct, because hardly anybody works there. Yet they promise so much.

So why is it happening? It's happening because there is a massive pecuniary benefit that goes to a select few. We can see those proponents out there at the moment. Mr Forrest, overseas companies and multinational companies from China, from Singapore, from France, from Holland—these are the real benefits of this swindle on the Australian people and the swindle on the people of New England. As we see in our community, bad policy makes bad politics. You've not just divided our community down the middle; you have divided them 90 per cent to 10 per cent, with 90 per cent in some sections politically furious at the lack of representation, politically furious at the low volume that should be played out on their behalf, and furious because they feel that they're being completely run over, and 10 per cent who may be in support feel isolated and intimidated. But this carpetbagging approach is to be seen.

Small country communities and country halls are going through this micromanagement, so they're not properly heard and pushed to separate corners of the rooms, basically told that everything is going to be fine, making sure that they do not get their community right to speak as one community and until you enforce it on those—especially from EnergyCo—coming to so-called "consult" with them. I have been invited to Woolomin hall and seen this in process. I've been invited to Limbri hall and seen this in process. These are good country people, who've had limited experience with the highest levels of government or with the highest levels of corporations, and they're being run over. This is salt in their wounds, when I see them turning up in their hired SUVs, with their double-pocketed shirts and their first-purchase RMs, as they basically make their way trying to look as having the clobber of the bucolic. Then, as they've got over the people and as they've had their way, they go back to the lounge at the airport, fist pumping and saying what a great job they've done because they've basically belittled and rolled over people.

At Gowrie, I saw landholders—I think it was Energy Corporation saying to landholders that their actual land will increase in value when they're encircled with solar panels. When I reproached them on this and said, "That's a warrant that you have now given. So do you now promise that if a valuation is taken now and a valuation is taken later, you will pay them the difference?" of course, they said they wouldn't. I said, "Well, you're lying." We are over the emotion. We don't care if as a proponent you start crying. It means nothing to us, because you are hurting us so badly. I would also note that our family was offered the chance to be a site for a proponent, and, as the Joyce family said, we're not interested in that. We produce meat. We produce food. We produce fibre. We don't rip off pensioners with an exacerbation of their power price. So I declare our interest in that we said no.

In the discussion, other people have intermittent power precincts. We've been given, on a personal level, representations that they will change where the corridor goes so that it doesn't go over the best of our farmland, so that it doesn't go over our airstrip, which I'm about to start using right now, and so that it doesn't go over what was clearly noted in our areas as an Aboriginal place that we can clearly prove was historically of Aboriginal significance, but they don't care. Laws like that don't matter for them, and they continue on. Even though they've given multiple representations, "We're going to change", I've just checked the map right then and it's going exactly where it was always going to go. That's emblematic of the arrogance of this process. We have seen people in EnergyCo turn up and say, very sillily, in front of my wife that we cannot allow the media there. Well, that's a bit of a problem, because she's a senior columnist for the Telegraph.

The final insult for this is that it doesn't work. What we are seeing with intermittent power and its process as part of apparently net zero is that the vast majority of the GDP and the vast majority of the population of the globe, whether it's fortunate or wrong or whatever, are not participating in it. The efficaciousness of this process is null and void. It doesn't have effect. It is not going to do anything. So why are we continuing on with it?

We now have local governments. There is no real promise of help for local governments. I don't go to areas and see that new dams are being built or new precincts are being built for the apparent flow-in of industry that's going to happen, because it's not going to happen. What will happen is oversized, overmass vehicles will wreck the roads. What will happen is that we will have fire risk delivered into our area. No-one has any plan for the decommissioning of these, and might I state that the Labor Party ombudsman Andrew Dyer stated clearly about two years ago that for a structurally sound one, it was \$600,000 a tower, and for structurally unsound ones, two years ago, \$1.6 million a tower.

That means if the farmer is responsible for it, we are heading towards—and I used to value land for a company called QIDC—negative value on farmland. You will not be able to borrow against it. No-one will want to buy it, and that's what we have created. No government with all their virtue has come out and said, "Like a coalmine, we will underpin the rehabilitation and recommitment of that land to its former state", because it knows it costs too much. They're fobbing that off to the farmer, and we've stood by and let that happen. We have done nothing about it—no private member's bill, no speech in the Parliament. Nothing has been happening about this.

My job in politics is to stand up against the powerful on behalf of the powerless, and I mean that—the powerless—because that's what we are creating. We are creating ultimately a society where people cannot afford electricity. We have in the area where I live, which is one of the poorest schools in New South Wales—you can check that up—people who've been pushed out of their house to live in a car because they just can't afford to live anymore. What is the virtue of that? What is the moral of that? Where is the benefit of that? How do you justify that and that a billionaire becomes wealthier or that an overseas company makes its money out of a government-underwritten guarantee where the ultimate side of that is poor Australians put into destitution? Is that what the virtue of this product is? Is that what the virtue of this process is? It's a disgrace. It should be scrapped, and let's see if after this Committee—and I wish you all the very best. I bless you with all the motivation you can have. But let's actually see, just like everything else, whether anything actually changes.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Thanks, Barnaby. Thank you for coming and for your very passionate and, as always, eloquent submission on behalf of the community. I just wanted to ask a little bit more—you touched on it a bit—about the impact. Some of the councils talked about that earlier too around broader impacts on your electorate, housing and transport. We talked about the New England Highway and if you're going to bring wind turbines up and what that would mean. Can you just elaborate a bit more on that from your perspective as the local member?

The Hon. BARNABY JOYCE: I believe, Sarah, I have, after 20 years in politics, unfortunately, developed a sense of cynicism. I see now that after the money, to be honest, that the previous Coalition got, it was delayed in the construction of the Muswellbrook bypass and they're now going forward with it. That's nothing to do with helping the people in Muswellbrook. That's to get blades up; that's what that's about. That's why they're paying overtime, double time to get Singleton finished—to get the blades up. The blades have more benefit than

the people. What we have, Sarah, in areas like here is we have small councils. They do not have the resources of Sydney. They're on a stringent budget and they have restricted expertise.

If there was honesty, if everything that was offered as a warrant to the people of the country areas was true, then they'd already be fixing up the roads, Sarah, to take these in, but they're not. They'd already be fixing up the bridges, but they're not. They'd already be double-sizing and gravelling the roads to where these precincts will be, but they're not. They'd already be coming up and allocating areas of new industrial area for the new industries that are going to be absolutely mobbing in to Armidale and to Tamworth, but they're not. In fact, they've removed our funding for such things as Dungowan Dam. They've never promised any upgrade of Malpas Dam. They've stalled things such as the Tenterfield bypass because the wind blades don't need to go past there.

What we have are councils—and they're good people. But I believe on this section, there's a lot of naivety because they're not going to get anything but the future prospect. We have one million solar panels here, Sarah. They don't last forever. Everybody knows that. Where are they going? Where are they burying these things? What happens if some of the cadmium and the lead gets into the groundwater, or is that a problem that we'll leave for our children to fix in 20 years time? Where's that plan? Under regulation 2.8 of my LPA assessment, I'm not allowed to graze around wind towers or solar panels. I have to show my management plan to restrict access of stock to them. If there are wind towers next door, what's the recompense to me? I can't graze cattle in that area. The Joyces are beef producers. We sell cattle and we're very proud of what we do and what we've done basically for generations. On an environmental basis, we're going to bring poison into our pastures. It's amazing.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Do you want to make any comments about the housing issues for locals here who represent Tamworth and Armidale as well? What are people raising with you around that?

The Hon. BARNABY JOYCE: Sarah, we know what happens. I saw something very similar in the coal seam gas issue in south-west Queensland when I was there. This is rinse-and-repeat of coal seam gas, only this time it's wind towers: virtue, issues, carpetbaggers, deals being flipped and flipped and flipped, and the ultimate beneficiary is those who get the DA through. There's tens of millions of dollars being made by just people who've scratched the paper and got the paper working. What's happening on the housing issue is they need temporary accommodation.

They don't want to wear the cost of permanent accommodation. What you will get here is what you get in mining camps. You're going to get "dongaville". They'll be bringing in dongas on the back of a truck. There'll be fly-in fly-out contractors. It will not be locals, but you will get a temporary exacerbation of any accommodation locally as they come in, gobble up all spare accommodation. For that, once more, who is affected, Sarah? It's the poorest people. They're the ones who can't find a house. They're the ones who get pushed out into the street. In my office, I have people both from the Aboriginal community and based in the local community saying, "We can't find houses." We're going to exacerbate this situation for a period of years. Where's the virtue in saying, "We're going to deal with that. We're going to build for it now"? There is none because it's a lie. It's a lie.

The CHAIR: You sort of touched on the issue of foreign ownership. I'm wondering if you could expand on your concerns around sovereign risk for a lot of these projects and what that means for local communities?

The Hon. BARNABY JOYCE: Chair, the first thing is that it shows the domestic benefit is limited. In fact, all we have is a domestic cost. There is no domestic benefit. I don't know whether it's the same at a State level but, in politics, the geniuses in this wear orange lanyards. They're called lobbyists. They've done an exceptional job of being heard at the highest levels for a deal that there is no downside on. The benefit of this, as a person who's worked in banking or was an accountant and a person who worked in banking for four years, is the paper it's written on. When you say, "It's not worth the paper it's written on", oh boy, this one is worth the paper it's written on—a guaranteed rate of return that's hidden—commercial-in-confidence in the budget papers; NFP, not for publication. All I have to do is have that piece of paper and I'm guaranteed money. I'm guaranteed loot. We have overseas companies. What happens is that one person buys it, they flip it to another person, and clear their risk so they're not indebted to the farmers. All the guarantee's gone. The next person buys it, and the next person buys it. It is total carpetbagging.

Even if you had some solace or some modicum of joy, you would see the local community of Armidale being the beneficiary of this—or Wagga, or Dubbo, or maybe Glen Innes. But it's the towns or villages of Shanghai, of Singapore, of Amsterdam, and of billionaires—God bless him and good luck to him; he's a great businessman—such as Andrew Forrest. That's who the beneficiary of this is. You know we've got the department of the environment at a Federal level. We haven't got so much as one office away from Canberra, yet this is apparently to help the environment.

The CHAIR: Obviously, part of the job of this Committee is to make recommendations to the Government. Outside of scrapping the whole bloody thing, which I don't think I would get up as a recommendation, what would you recommend if you were in my shoes?

The Hon. BARNABY JOYCE: The reason it stands up on economic feet is because there is no economic cost, or risks are taken away. I would say recommendation number one is changing nomenclature. They are intermittent power precincts, not to be referred to as renewables or farms ever again because it belittles what farms are. We run a farm. This is not a farm. The nomenclature is to be changed to the honest expression of what they are. Number two is that all agreements pertinent to that are to be open for the public to see—nothing in secret. No more secret agreements. If you believe it, if it's virtuous, and if it's true and just, then stand behind your documentation. Stand behind your figures.

Number three is that there's to be a cut and paste: All the guarantees that are given to people in the mining industry for the construction of a coalmine are to be given to those living within intermittent power precincts. Then the Government will make sure the documentation stands up for the rehabilitation and reclamation of land, because that's what they do in the coal industry. On our place, we also have a mine. When the proponents disappeared—and we hated the mine—the State Government had to come in and clean it up. On these, no; they will fall over in the paddock. That's exactly what happens in other countries. So there must be a cut-and-paste, and everything that is offered to areas with coalmines is exactly what is offered in regard to underwriting the legacy of these projects to communities.

Number four is that there be a massive investment project to actually deal with such things as the wear and tear to roads and the damage to towns—that you invest in actual housing projects prior to the contractors turning up. I suppose number five is that, if you truly believe in this, there should be no discrimination as to where they go. If these things can be viably built off the coast of Manly Beach, then that's where you build them. And if the transmission lines can go to Mosman, that's where they go.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Thank you, Mr Joyce, for coming in today.

The Hon. BARNABY JOYCE: I don't think you mean that, Peter. Anyhow, go on.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: I'm always happy to see you, Barnaby.

The Hon. BARNABY JOYCE: Thank you, Peter.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Back when you launched the White Rock Wind Farm in April 2016—I just quote briefly from your press release:

The White Rock Wind Farm will put New England on the map as a national leader in renewable energy production and drive local jobs and economic activity through the construction phase ...

The 175 Megawatt generating capacity of the project will make it larger than any operating wind farm in NSW.

...

This and other clean energy projects proposed for the region will ensure the New England is a major player in the field and sending power to the New England and beyond.

Clean energy is essential to meet our emissions reduction targets.

Were you wrong then?

The Hon. BARNABY JOYCE: Absolutely. As John Maynard Keynes said, "When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?" The facts have well and truly changed. Peter, even in intermittent power—we'll call them intermittent power from now on—you get to a level of about 30 per cent, and then physics wins the argument because it just doesn't work. Peter, since that time, what have we seen happen to our power bills? Have they gone down or gone up? They have gone up. In fact, they have gone through the roof. In fact, now they laud themselves, saying, "We are at 42 per cent intermittent power." But our bills, since the period of time, basically, where this started, have more than doubled. So, Peter, you have to get to a point where you say, yes, I was wrong. You asked me, was I wrong? Absolutely, 100 per cent, I was wrong, Peter. But now I've changed my mind and I've changed direction. I will fight for the people and correct my position, and I hope that other politicians decide to correct their positions.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: Mr Joyce, I just have one question. I was reading that you were intending on bringing a private member's bill to Parliament—

The Hon. BARNABY JOYCE: I am bringing a private member's bill.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: —which was, in essence, going to abandon net zero—

The Hon. BARNABY JOYCE: That's exactly what it is going to do.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: —and the move to a low-carbon economy.

The Hon. BARNABY JOYCE: One hundred per cent.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: I just wanted to know, does the Coalition party room support that?

The Hon. BARNABY JOYCE: No, they don't.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: So you're on your own with that one.

The Hon. BARNABY JOYCE: I am happy to be on my own. I've been there a number of times, Cameron, and I'm back there again. I think people have got to understand just how alone I am prepared to be.

The Hon. JACQUI MUNRO: Thank you so much for coming today. It's good to hear your submission, and obviously you have a lot of supporters in the room. I'm curious about what you say to landholders who are actually bringing these solar panels and wind turbines onto their properties and how you respect their right to use their land.

The Hon. BARNABY JOYCE: Jacqui, that's a very good question. My neighbours, who we've been basically generational friends with—and I intend to stay that way—are having an intermittent power precinct there. We were offered, Jacqui, the same opportunity. We didn't believe that it was an opportunity; we believed it was a rip-off of pensioners that was morally incorrect, in our view. This is one of the most divisive things that have happened in our communities. If you take just a normal point of engagement, which might be the local football game on the weekend, people will walk up to someone and say, "There's that effing C", and say it to people's faces.

We've done this to our own communities, and it is because there's so much to lose on one side, to be quite frank. There was a property sold just lately, Jacqui, called Dungowan Station, and we believe there was a huge impairment on the value of that asset by reason of the proposed transmission lines. We've seen, we think, a 20 per cent and more diminution in the value of our asset by reason of these here. They pay us \$10,000 a kilometre. They say \$200,000 but it's actually over 20 years. Jacqui, the reason they get in on this is you find people who are under stress—this is how swindlers work—and then look into their eyes and say, "How much can I get away with to rip this person off?"

At the start, Jacqui, people were getting paid \$3,000 a tower or \$2,000 a tower. Now they're up to \$45,000 a tower. Are they going back to the other people and saying, "Oh, we kind of ripped you off, so we're going to pay you a little bit more"? No, they're not. So what's happened is people say, "This is a great management plan so that I can hand the property over and get an income stream for myself and retire to the coast." What they don't see is the obvious obsolescence that's coming their way, and they will be responsible if there's an order put on them for the reclamation of the land. Their kids won't have a property; the kids will have a problem—a massive financial problem.

The Hon. JACQUI MUNRO: How have you maintained your relationship with your neighbours?

The Hon. BARNABY JOYCE: By being straight, by being open in my position, but never going argumentum ad hominem. It's hard, Jacqui, because our families, as I said, are generational friends. People are decent people, and we don't think there is a nefarious aspect of their personality. We believe they have been ripped off, and now we're finding that—guess what? They have been ripped off. One is saying, "I've got a \$100,000 bond." I say, "Mate, that won't cover the decommissioning of one tower."

The Hon. JACQUI MUNRO: If there were decommissioning bonds, for example, and there were programs that put in place a more robust framework and there was improved financial compensation, would you feel more comfortable with the decisions that these landowners make?

The Hon. BARNABY JOYCE: What I'd worry about then, Jacqui, is maybe I'd feel okay on a personal level and on a family level. You take a simple thing like, for instance, a transmission line goes right over the front of our place. In fact, they bifurcate it. They really don't like us. They split it into two at the top end of our place and take it back to one at the bottom end of our place, and I think it's only because we own the place. We said, "Why is it there?" They said, "It just needs to be there." We say, "You're going over our airstrip. You're going over an Aboriginal site, basically. You're going over our best farmland, which we can't operate on after that."

I said, "Why don't you just go to the other side of the hill? We'd hate it, and it'll still be on our land. But on the other side of the hill, it's not going to worry us and it's not going to worry our neighbours. It's not going to worry other good people." They said, "We're not doing that." Why? "Because we're stronger than you. We can do what we like. We can hurt you any way we want." Going back to the substance of your question, Jacqui, okay, so I feel better. What do I say to the pensioner who's been pushed out and put in her car? What do I say to that lady,

who's at a vulnerable time in her life? I'm thinking exactly of a case, in her late sixties, and saying, "I'm okay, but you sleep in your car—sucked in."

The Hon. JACQUI MUNRO: We spoke to the councils about those issues, so there's obviously an awareness that this is a real problem.

The CHAIR: Unfortunately, that takes us to the end of our time with you, Barnaby. Thank you for coming and giving an honest and frank appraisal of the situation. You haven't taken any questions on notice, but there might be some supplementary questions. The secretariat will be in touch. Thank you once again for your time and your work.

The Hon. BARNABY JOYCE: I really appreciate that you're here. Thank you very much.

(The witness withdrew.)

Ms ANNETTE KILARR, Convenor, Climate Action Armidale, Sustainable Living Armidale, affirmed and examined

Dr SANAZ ALIAN, Convenor, Renewable Energy, Education, Advocacy and Community Health [REEACH], Sustainable Living Armidale, and Lecturer in Urban and Regional Planning, University of New England, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: I now welcome our next witnesses. Would either of you like to make a short opening statement?

ANNETTE KILARR: Yes, we will together. Good morning and thank you for inviting us to speak. I'll start and then hand over to Dr Sanaz Alian. We represent Climate Action Armidale and Sustainable Living Armidale and our action group, REEACH. We acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet and the traditional custodians of all country where renewable energy is being developed. I have lived, worked and raised children in the New England region for over 30 years in Uralla and Armidale. In 2019, during drought and bushfires and an impending unprecedented water shortage, our community called on Armidale Regional Council to declare a climate emergency. This motion was unanimously passed, and climate actions have since been included in our council's community strategic plan and council's ongoing delivery program.

In 2022 we formed our REEACH group—standing for Renewable Energy, Education, Advocacy and Community Health—to engage with the newly announced New England Renewable Energy Zone and support an equitable renewable energy transition. REEACH advocates for supporting energy literacy and action that resonates locally, facilitating community engagement from ordinary citizens in public policy, local planning and community benefit, and strengthening the perspective that attention to environmental health in all decision-making is the bedrock for achieving community health. In our learnings over the past three years, we support a strong social licence and a fair energy transition.

We want to see the following: first, prioritise early and meaningful consultation by adopting a "with us, not to us" approach and culture, and valuing local knowledge. Community engagement must go beyond informing to include consulting, involving and collaborating. We want to see coordination across government departments beyond planning for both impacts and opportunities; a focus on legacy—REZs need to be about broader community and regional development, not just infrastructure—and a continuous learning approach in the rollout. For example, in the New England REZ, lessons learnt from projects like Central-West Orana need to be actively applied and applied now.

Secondly, we want to see support for the local energy hubs concept by providing independent, local information on energy choices; empowering residents to make informed decisions and cut energy costs and bills; helping the community navigate large-scale renewable energy projects and developments and the complexities of the evolving energy landscape; participating in local community and/or council-owned mid-scale renewable energy projects and smaller community storage options; encouraging electrification of homes, businesses and farms; involving and collaborating with the community in benefit decisions; and providing reliable information, research and resources to call out misinformation. The facilitation of community participation and support in the energy transition that is accessible to everyone is crucial for garnering social licence and a faster transition to renewable energy.

Third, take a nature-positive approach to renewables and raise the planning bar. Improve planning regulation and siting for renewables. Normalise dual and multi land use approaches like agrivoltaics and conservoltaics. One urgent task here is to work with the New England regional community to identify ecological protection and restoration priorities for this renewable energy zone. Use this knowledge for directing site choice to promote renewables on degraded land to prospective developers and prioritise such projects in the planning approval system. Require developers to contribute nature-positive regional environmental outcomes.

SANAZ ALIAN: Thank you for the opportunity to speak to this inquiry. As a background to these points, and to help focus on solutions, it is relevant to acknowledge the history of the establishment of the REZs in New South Wales. I present this in my capacity as a lecturer in urban and regional planning at UNE and the convenor of REEACH. Here I would like to table a summary of a research project that I am currently working on, titled *Renewable Energy Zones and Engagement*, focusing on New South Wales. Let me begin by acknowledging that the energy transition has the potential to be a positive change for our environment, economy and communities if it is done well. To date, the reality on the ground has been mixed and there has been a glaring absence of strategic, up-front planning in regions like the Central-West Orana and New England.

In New South Wales, the declaration of renewable energy zones began well before many of the guiding policies and frameworks were finalised. This has resulted in an accelerated planning which resulted in planning

for the regions rather than planning with the regions. Locations for REZs and some developments on them appear fragmented and rushed, lacking in good governance and community engagement processes. Here, we are emphasising involving the community and collaborating with them and empowering them, rather than simply informing them. Environmental impact statements, or EISs, for many REZ developments routinely fail to consider cumulative impacts meaningfully, leaving gaps in planning around workforce accommodation, infrastructure capacity, water, waste management and community services. Stronger, integrated regional planning mechanisms are urgently needed to ensure that renewable energy transitions benefit, rather than burden, local communities.

A key example of this is water security. Armidale Regional Council is currently listed as a category 5 risk and faces a significant water supply deficit in the event of drought. Securing water underpins both the viability of the REZ and the region's broader future in the face of climate change. Without resolving issues like this, the REZ development presents a significant risk. These matters affect neighbouring councils like Uralla, indicating the need for regional-scale solutions and coordination. The key message here is that REZs must be co-developed with local communities and councils. REZ development needs to be aligned with councils' ongoing medium- and long-term regional sustainable development goals and be meaningfully responsive to their communities.

The Hon. JACQUI MUNRO: Thank you so much for your submission and for coming today, and for your additional evidence. I haven't had a chance to look through this properly yet, but I look forward to reading it. Ms Kilarr, you mentioned that you are on the community reference group for the New England REZ. I'm curious about how that is going, what kind of engagement you are working on and if you see any problems or opportunities in that space.

ANNETTE KILARR: The community reference group started this year. The New England REZ was announced in 2023, I believe, or in late 2022. There has been a good deal of time. We've had three meetings since then. It has started well. We have to learn a lot and then move forward. We've been given presentations on the New England REZ cumulative studies and on the biodiversity offsets—changes to that. That is two things that have happened recently. We're working out how best we can get questions to EnergyCo in a way that can be transparent for everyone. That mechanism hasn't been worked up, which is interesting because we are second to CWO. You could say, "Why hasn't that already happened?"

In terms of opportunities, my view is that we should be working as a region to try and find solutions in this space. We're working on clarification around this community participation policy—the "inform, consult, involve and empower" point. As a community reference group, we are being told we will be informed, consulted and possibly involved. We're working through that, but not to the other two levels. Picking up on that point, I would say—in contribution to our point, the community reference group is one avenue. That is different, I would say, to a community engagement process for a whole of community. I would think that a whole-of-community approach would need to actually go to those other higher levels.

The Hon. JACQUI MUNRO: The submission recommends that the Government address misinformation about the energy transition. Is that something that works within this process of—what was it—inform, consult, empower, involve?

ANNETTE KILARR: That's just standard public participation. I think in our submission I was probably putting that in the concept of the local energy hubs concept. I guess that's around being able to go—if people say, "Offshore wind farms kill whales," then you can go and say, "Where is the evidence for that?" The evidence is that the most thing that kills whales is whaling, and the second most thing that kills them is whatever else it is. Possibly one of the overarching things that kills lots of creatures—potentially bats or birds—is going to be climate change—anyway, things like that. That misinformation piece is around the community being able to have some space where those questions are facilitated. Obviously they are facilitated in lots of different organisations trying to work towards making some clarity there.

The Hon. JACQUI MUNRO: Having that physical space is an important consideration. Is that right? Rather than having a hotline, for example, or a website, actually having a physical space where people can go.

ANNETTE KILARR: I think in this context it is actually around the renewable energy itself, because we're talking about—in this case, some people are stating things that just aren't the case. The pollution from coal, for example, is quite significant from coal ash—much more significant than pollution from a solar panel on your house at any rate. Yes.

The Hon. JACQUI MUNRO: On the community benefits aspect, which is something that we've obviously spoken a little bit about today and heard from different stakeholders about the way that they're trying to bring community benefit to be broader than just a couple of different landholdings. How do you look at community benefits and the opportunities for better sharing of community benefits?

ANNETTE KILARR: We haven't seen that process roll out yet. I think it's been noted by other speakers that the community generally, as opposed to landholders say, aren't necessarily aware of the opportunities or what could be happening. There are two different things, and they are the transmission lines, the REZ and the VPAs. The VPAs sit on a local government situation. They're upright through there, whereas the REZ is through EnergyCo. When EnergyCo first announced its inquiry and started coming to us, they wanted to just say, "We're just the REZ. We're just the transmission lines. Those other things are other people's business."

In the three years that we've been in this space, that has shifted, and they recognised that that language and that thinking is not correct and that it is a whole-of-REZ story. With respect to the community benefits, though, as I think you've heard from our mayor and the mayor of Uralla, there are two different approaches, but they're not incompatible. One of them, through Armidale council, is still working through the details. The same principles are involved, as would involve anything that is going on with the State-level government, that the community has capacity to feed in. I suppose in this case, I think it's quite important, so it needs probably a lot more than a 28-day draft document "see what you think"—definitely a more engaged approach.

SANAZ ALIAN: May I please add to that? Just adding to what Annette mentioned, there are at least obviously two different streams about community benefit. The one for the State Government—it would be good to learn from what happened in Central-West Orana and learn good things about that, and trying to learn from some of the things that happened in the last year or so there. In terms of our VPA at the local government level, Sam may have mentioned that, and we trust that they're working on it and it will be good for our community. We'll leave it to their capable hands that it will be managed well.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Thank you both for your submission and for appearing today. I just have two questions related to some of your recommendations. The first goes to recommendation 2, where you talk about that dissemination of information out through the community, and you've touched on that a little bit already. But I thought it was interesting where you said that there should be an emphasis on involving the community rather than simply informing them. I know you talked about having models like local energy hubs, where people can go and discuss any issues or concerns. How important do you think it is to get that balance right about involvement rather than just information? How could that be done better than is currently occurring? I'm happy for either or both to answer.

SANAZ ALIAN: I guess Annette started talking about the IAP2 model of community engagement, which ranges the whole spectrum, they call it. It starts from "inform" and goes to "empower". I'm going to say that what we saw at the beginning of the declaration of REZ in New England, and even before it, we haven't really had "inform", let alone empowerment or involvement. This has been getting better, and EnergyCo is only one part of the whole REZ. I would say at the beginning even the informing about the REZs wasn't good. Sometimes I wonder if I use some of them as bad examples of community engagement for my students, because I teach community engagement. I've been thinking about that.

Also, in terms of the EISs, there are different developments, which are obviously happening. Some of the EISs that they've provided and their social impact assessment, as I mentioned, and some of the engagement that they've done, I would also consider using those in my material for the students as bad examples of engagement. I'm not going to mention any, but in terms of your question about having the balance, I think it's about giving the opportunity to people, whether it's landowners or community or local government or anyone that is involved or anyone that is part of the community. It's about giving that opportunity to them to be involved early and not just going and declaring the REZ and put some circles on the map and say, "This is where the REZ is", and then going and doing your consultation, and having that before a lot of these decisions are made. As I mentioned, this is getting better. Annette mentioned that she's part of the reference group, but there's still a long way to go.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Did you want to add anything?

ANNETTE KILARR: With respect to, say, that local energy hub idea and information—and your question is the balance about involvement—there's the higher level, the REZ infrastructure, all that kind of thing, but ultimately this is about energy transmission, right, and a lot of people don't understand what that change might mean or what that might mean for their house or how that could lower their bills or that sort of that thing. I guess that does need to be practical. If you buy solar, if you're lucky enough to have solar on your roof, you need to learn that maybe you need to use your energy in the daytime and use your energy differently. That's something that's not really easy to understand just by having a written sort of something here. That's sort of something to be shown and shared. So definitely the shown and shared, and the same applies to any kind of distributive network idea, rather than just this kind of idea that, yes, there are these developers that are coming in but there are other options that are opportunities within the grid that would be helpful and that are even being trialled out, like pole

batteries with Essential Energy or community battery ideas or that sort of thing. So discussions and tangible things. People learn through doing.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: A couple of your recommendations touch on—seeing this is a regional development project—broader community benefits. You might have heard earlier evidence that we had around trying to have someone who can kind of pull this all together and look at all the issues and impacts but also I guess potentially benefits for community through housing, infrastructure, transport and the like. Would you agree that having a key driver to look at the whole cumulative impact but also some of these challenges would be a good step forward?

SANAZ ALIAN: Yes, definitely, and we're looking forward to seeing the cumulative impact document in the next couple of weeks, which is being prepared. In terms of the regional development, having that coordinated approach, which was mentioned before, and also working closely with regional councils, the department of planning, EnergyCo—all of them to work together and not just one government agency to manage those. So, yes, definitely, it would be great to see the cumulative impact assessments being done well and to see the report that is going to be released in the next couple of weeks hopefully.

ANNETTE KILARR: Could I add to that in a different context and give a little bit of an example around the environment. You might be aware that the biodiversity offsets or the way in which they're going to deal with the fact that there will be damage to the environment is changing from a responsibility inside EnergyCo and, I believe, individual landholder stewardship to moving it to DCCEEW and having them have responsibility for this under this idea of strategic offset development. I could get more information. The point here, though, is we internally in the last three years have worked very hard with Community Power Agency and other groups, ecologists and so on, to get in EnergyCo's ear around local-grounded knowledge about the biodiversity here. That went through the normal channels, and you just got an automated response of "thank you very much".

But then there was advocacy done to EnergyCo and we've set up the New England biodiversity reference group, which actually is able to sit at the table and is making some leeway with that or good work together because it's local work with EnergyCo. But now all of that good networking work is still there but the responsibility is shifting now to DCCEEW, which probably at an upper level is a good plan. It's better sourced there and we look forward to it working. However, what happens to all of that networking work that went on? Yes, the person at EnergyCo who is the environmental person is going to push up, but there isn't a someone upstairs who's going, "Oh, yeah. I see that." That on-the-ground work is happening in that community. That's already happened for two years. We want to use that and keep that forward. There's not an eye on that.

The CHAIR: I'll throw a few questions first before passing to my colleagues. In your opening statement you talked about, obviously, the need for these developments to be in the right place, the right land. They're not damaging the environment too much. Would your group support strengthening protections around where these projects can go—not just environmentally sensitive land, but also strategic agricultural land as well?

ANNETTE KILARR: Absolutely.

The CHAIR: In terms of that, has your local environmental group done any local work to understand where those suitable areas might be or not be within the New England REZ area?

ANNETTE KILARR: Yes. I think that I was trying to describe before some of the work that some of our members have done with that New England biodiversity reference group and then, with EnergyCo, have done some work in that space, yes, and there's knowledge there.

The CHAIR: Is there anything physically, in terms of a document or a map, that could be provided to the Committee on notice that would show that?

ANNETTE KILARR: Yes, probably not a map, but I can definitely follow that up and give some clarity on the work that has been done there.

The CHAIR: That would be very helpful. In terms of the local hubs, I wonder if you could expand on that a bit more. We've had EnergyCo's local drop-in centres, which—I wouldn't be paraphrasing in saying that they've been quite poor and basically someone sitting in an empty shell of a building with a laptop. The local community goes there, asks a question, and they refer them back to the website. How would your idea of a community hub or a local hub differ from that so it's actually engaging, actually informative, actually providing clarity and answers, and having that empowerment that you speak of with the community?

ANNETTE KILARR: I would like to answer that question by using an example of another action that has happened in our community, and that's the Electrify Armidale partnership with Sustainable Living Armidale, the Community Power Agency and the UNE SMART Region incubator and a grant that we got with the Foundation for Rural and Regional Futures this year. It's called Armidale Community-Driven Shift to Renewable

Energy. It's eight workshops around both the REZ, businesses and renewables and then all those earlier things I talked about around home electrification, batteries, the grid and all that kind of thing; also some outreach to Aboriginal community and migrant communities.

That's just one small, little bit of money, but that's driven by another person, Trevor Brown. He's connected to the Uniting Church. He also has ideas further for—he's connecting to Saul Griffiths' Electrify Armidale scenario and he's discussing with our local council around some funding around this. How would I see it differently? I would see a partnership. Somebody in another thing said that "partnership" is not the best word, but at any rate something that's a real thing between EnergyCo, council and the community that utilises the community as the base, goes laterally across to the community strategic plan in the council sense, and from the EnergyCo also comes in from that space, so a co-designed space in that way.

The CHAIR: I might press you a bit further, because I'm a pretty practical person. If I can't envisage how it looks on the ground, I struggle with it. You talked about bringing all these different groups in—the councils, et cetera—but, physically, what does it look like when a community member walks in there? What are they taken through? What are they shown at what level of detail? Who's working there? Who would be staffing it et cetera? Would there be a mix of people? Would it be run by EnergyCo?

ANNETTE KILARR: Well, I think I was just trying to say—I was saying just try to be a partnership, and that would probably involve a partnership of EnergyCo, council—I'm just thinking on the hop here. There's all different ideas out there. But some people would be paid, and you would try and engender—a volunteer assistant as well. That might also include volunteers with some things that they might get for that, like a lunch or other thing—anyway, some support or a resource support for that sort of thing. But you would probably begin—yes, it would be front facing, and you would be beginning with understanding energy. Maybe it would be a citizen science kind of thing and a kids kind of thing and a family thing. It would be around "developers and the REZ and this place and this space are doing this because"—not just coming in and doing this so that the energy goes X-where, which is one reason, but it's also building community. So it would encompass all of that.

The CHAIR: Your submission obviously makes a whole series of recommendations, some around the local hub, some around regulatory reform, some about biodiversity networks, workforce training and education. Which do you think should actually be prioritised, if budgets are tight? I'm looking to my right, and they will tell you that budgets are tight. If you had to prioritise some of those recommendations, let's say, in the next six months, what do you think should be prioritised out of those recommendations that you've put forward?

ANNETTE KILARR: We might have two different opinions.

The CHAIR: I am happy for you to take that on notice.

SANAZ ALIAN: We might both talk about that.

ANNETTE KILARR: You go ahead.

SANAZ ALIAN: For me, as a planner, planning, planning, planning and strategic planning, which is something that hasn't really been seen, and aligning a lot of the developments with the plans that are already available at the local level and at the State level, rather than just coming up with something that has not a lot of connection to what's available there. I'll just give you one little example in there—and I'm just going to leave it for you to read that later. The objects of the EP&A Act, the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act—there are quite a few objects for that, and I would see that these developments align more with the objects of that Act. Have they been aligned or haven't they? It would be good to find out. I guess that answers that from my perspective. There is a whole list of objects, and have they been done by the developers or not? That's the question to ask, and that alignment with those plans, strategic planning, and starting to plan early and not leaving it late.

You might want to look at the SAPs—special activation precincts—which have been done. They have done a lot of strategic planning before declaring them and before working on them, so that would be something to keep in mind for the REZ as well. And the coordinated approach is another thing—the energy hubs is an example of that—working together, as I said before. We went to so many meetings with the department, and the department would be like, "No, this is EnergyCo's job." Then we'd go and talk to EnergyCo and they would say, "No, that's the department's job." Then, in the middle of all of that, local council has to deal with a lot of these issues. So the coordinated approach—that's me.

ANNETTE KILARR: I don't know if you can take it on notice and answer it, but—

The CHAIR: You can take part of it on notice if you would like.

ANNETTE KILARR: I'll take part of it on notice. I guess, in the first instance, I really think, amongst many other people's concerns, the siting is really important. It is essentially important and it covers off on a lot of

concerns. So I think that is number one, and the other ones will follow. Obviously, we have to have good community consultation. The energy story, that will follow too, we would hope. Biodiversity siting first-up.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: I was just going to go back to this issue about the holistic approach. I note that in your submission you say that EnergyCo has really improved in terms of the way it deals with its more holistic approach to, you say, the cumulative impacts of numerous developments. You say that it has stepped up in a positive fashion, in your submission.

ANNETTE KILARR: I think we just said they'd improved in consultation, not necessarily in concrete.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: One of the recommendations you make there is about "the strategic coordination or aggregation of benefit sharing programs in REZs" and that regional benefit sharing. Can you elaborate and explain how you think that's going to work? Is it a similar model to the one you've just talked about in relation to consultation, or is it something else?

SANAZ ALIAN: Partly, yes, but also—I mean, when we said it's getting better, I think we were thinking about the first meeting that we went to, and it was a town hall meeting. Again, I would say to my students that was the bare minimum of community engagement which we had. We all went to the town hall, and there was a whole lot of maps and documents. There was no explaining what they were about or anything like that. Comparing that to what they're trying to do now in having these reference groups and, at least to an extent, involving some part of the community in the "engagement", that's probably what we were talking about—not really comparing apples to apples but comparing apples to pears, if you know what I mean.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: Yes, it's got a long way to go before it achieves perfection.

SANAZ ALIAN: Yes, there's a long way to go. Just engage very well. Again, I'm just emphasising this. Each of those EISs, each of those community impact assessments—they have a list of the legislation and policies that they had to look at, and strategic plans that they had to look at, to come up with the 900-page document that they've produced. Actually go and read some of those strategic plans, not just say that you have read them, maybe. But, yes, there is a long way to go still in terms of getting better.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: What about the strategic coordination or aggregation of those benefit sharing programs? How do you think that would work? What's the model?

SANAZ ALIAN: I think I mentioned that before. Learning from what didn't work in Central-West Orana, working with the actual local council and the community to see what's needed, not just to say, "Okay, there's money. Come and grab the money." Work with the documents that are available. Work with the experts and the community to find out what is actually needed, not just to say, "Okay, this money is being spent and we're spending it just for the sake of spending it." I don't want to give any examples but, again, learn from what didn't work in Central-West Orana. That's something that I'm actually working on as part of this project that I'm working on, so hopefully I'll have more answers in six months or so.

ANNETTE KILARR: Can I just add something there, and that's around the language of regional benefit sharing. In the legislation, I don't think that's a thing. We have community benefit sharing and we have regional development. We have regional benefit sharing—like, the Community Power Agency has it. There are lots of different ways you can do that; there isn't one way. That could be one council or two councils from a region, and two other councils do something else; or one council does one thing and one does another, but it benefits the region in a different way. We still need to do that "with us" part.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: In your research proposal, which I understand is more than a proposal now, you mention the concept of social licence. Indeed, that is something that you suggest appears endlessly in documents, guidelines and programs. At this early stage, can you comment on whether you think that's actually a viable term that should continue to be used in these documents, or is it too amorphous to actually mean anything?

SANAZ ALIAN: That's a great question. Social licence is a concept that is being used more and more in academic research as well as other documents that you would see—reports et cetera. It might change, but I would say yes, to an extent. We would like to see social licence and having the acceptance from the community as part of any development, not just REZ. The thing with REZ is that it's huge and affecting a lot of people. I would say any development would have an impact and any development would need to get social licence. I might change that, but I will keep you posted.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: To follow up—and this is from a legislator—if it is going to be used as a justification as opposed to something that's nice to say, would it be valuable and viable for it to be included, as in the definition, in the appropriate Act or the planning legislation itself?

SANAZ ALIAN: No. If it's just being used, as you said, as something "nice to say", no—meaningful social licence, yes, but just "social licence", no. That's what I would say.

The Hon. JACQUI MUNRO: To follow up on my questions about community benefits, are there specific community benefits that you would like to see?

The CHAIR: If you'd like, you can take it on notice.

The Hon. JACQUI MUNRO: You can take it on notice—or even frameworks that you think would be most appropriate. I know you've said that different councils can choose the ways they want to deliver a scheme—maybe in tandem with one another—but are there any specific desires that you might have?

ANNETTE KILARR: Inside a council space, you have your community strategic plan. Ideally, your community strategic plan should identify the kinds of things where you would be looking for long-lived community benefit. If you have a good strategic plan, then you're going to have at least a good template from where you're going to look for your good community benefit—definitely. Also, I would note that the state of the environment—our environmental laws, the kinds of ways in which we respond to our environment in terms of rehabilitation and caring for it and so on—is a lack. It's a lack in the way in which those kinds of plans are pushed to the kinds of things that they direct. Rehabilitation of landscapes and riparian zones and all that sort of thing would be great, but they are included in our strategic plan to some extent. That would be where I would be starting, but the community may have other aspirational things that they want. Obviously we should also be agile. If different things change—because things are changing—we should be looking at what are those new opportunities and so on.

SANAZ ALIAN: I would take some of it on notice, but I want to just quickly say: something that is not just for now—something that is for the future—and something along the lines of the intergenerational community benefit-sharing model that ARC is working on, I think. That's just my personal view, again, as a lecturer—not just thinking about now but thinking about the future and the next generation. But I will also take the rest of it on notice and get back to you.

The CHAIR: That concludes our time with you. You have taken a couple of questions on notice. The secretariat will be in touch with you regarding those and any supplementary questions we have for you. Thank you once again for your time.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

Mr CAMERON GREIG, Member, Voice for Walcha, affirmed and examined

Mr DAMIEN TIMBS, Member, Voice for Walcha, sworn and examined

Mr TIM WHITE, President, Valley Alliance, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: I welcome our new witnesses. Mr White, would you like to make a short opening statement?

TIM WHITE: Thanks, Mark, and thank you for giving us the opportunity to speak here today. As I mentioned, I am the president of Valley Alliance. We are a grassroots association in the New England area, based around Tamworth. We've got over 300 members, ranging from Walcha in the north to Wallabadah in the south. We represent farmers, families and rural communities whose lives, livelihoods and landscapes are being fundamentally threatened by the current approach to renewable energy transmission development. To be clear, we are not opposed to energy transition, but we are opposed to the way it is being rolled out. It's being rolled out without social licence, without meaningful consultation, without any thought to the burden on future generations and without any genuine regard for current communities expected to carry the cost.

The proposed above-ground transmission infrastructure in our region brings serious and unacceptable impacts including increased bushfire risk, environmental degradation, declining land values, mental health strain and deep visual scarring across some of our most productive and scenic farming country. These are not theoretical problems; they are already being felt and are completely evidenced. EnergyCo has failed in its duty to consult transparently or competently. Valley Alliance and others right across New South Wales have made repeated complaints to EnergyCo, Minister Sharpe, Minister Scully and the Ombudsman. We've raised serious concerns, and in return received vague responses, technical deflections and, in some cases, false claims.

A clear example of this is a case that we raised regarding Chaffey Dam. EnergyCo initially claimed at a community meeting in September 2024 with over 200 residents of Woolomin that the transmission lines would not affect aerial firefighting around Chaffey Dam, and that Chaffey Dam wasn't a water bombing site. The attendees at the meeting exploded in disgust at the lack of expert knowledge that was being espoused at this meeting. That knowledge was potentially resulting in life-threatening implications for our community. Between Christmas and the new year in 2024, the Tamworth region had eight bushfires that were substantial. Two of those fires were in the actual planned transmission corridor route.

At that stage, Valley Alliance raised the issue with the media. It was revealed at this stage that EnergyCo was incorrect. Chaffey is, in fact, a critical refilling point for the RFS. Under media pressure, EnergyCo admitted that they had not consulted with the RFS or the aerial firefighting companies that are involved with firefighting in our region. EnergyCo has since committed to rerouting the line, but yet again they have gone and done this without any community consultation with any of the impacted landholders. Incidentally, the meeting we had in September last year, in 2024, was the last community meeting we have had with EnergyCo. There have not been any since. They have refused to have community meetings. Valley Alliance has proposed a better, less damaging route as a result of this. That has been rejected by EnergyCo on questionable grounds.

More importantly, we've partnered with Syncline Energy to explore undergrounding HVDC options. Syncline's proposal is estimated to be \$1.3 billion cheaper than the overhead plan that is currently being touted by EnergyCo. More importantly again, it has a 100 per cent support of all impacted landholders in our area, and yet EnergyCo continues to ignore any of these suggestions. They are relying on outdated government reports claiming undergrounding is more expensive. They seem to lack expertise and a willingness to evaluate modern HVDC technology despite a private company not only contradicting their assumptions but also offering to tender for the job.

The underground solution meets the test of the four Ps of environmental project management. Purpose—it delivers on the renewable energy transition. It is expandable and has the added advantage of being dual purpose. You can run other cabling, such as data, at the same time as you are putting cables down in the trench and as a result provide a better communication network to rural Australia which is badly needed. People—it is supported by local communities and landholders. Price—it is cheaper and easier to maintain over time. Planet is the fourth P, as it reduces environmental and landscape impacts throughout the life of the project. It allows farming to continue as is. It obviously doesn't have the impact that overhead would have on the losses of our environmental inhabitants like koalas and the rest of our endangered species that we're carrying in this area.

Yet, incredibly, the recent Transmission Planning Review interim report, which has just been released, looks to reward EnergyCo with increased authority and a broader mandate while reducing budgetary oversight. This is despite their track record of cost blowouts, poor planning and a massive social outcry from rural Australia. How can any government justify granting greater powers to an agency that has failed so profoundly? If EnergyCo

were a private business, it would be financially bankrupt and publicly derided for its continued moral and ethical failures. Surely it is time to tighten the oversight, not loosen it, and ensure that politicians, the departments and public officials are held accountable for the decisions that are being made on behalf of our communities.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Timbs or Mr Greig?

DAMIEN TIMBS: If we could speak concurrently that would be fantastic. Could I please table our supplementary submission?

The CHAIR: Yes, sure.

DAMIEN TIMBS: Thank you very much for coming here to the New England. I am here as a representative of our community group, Voice for Walcha. This group has 350 endorsing members and some 500 subscribed members from our small community of 3,000 people. Excuse me, Chair, could I also table a small video that I think I emailed to you earlier this morning, just to give you a bit of a landscape overview? Is that possible?

The CHAIR: In terms of a video link? Yes, we can have that.

DAMIEN TIMBS: Thank you. The impacts of the REZ on our community to date have been huge. Our community has informed itself. Whilst accepting of the renewable transition, it has strongly advocated for projects to be of the right size, in the right place and developed by the right developers. In regard to large-scale wind projects, we have demonstrated in several different ways now that around 75 per cent of our community do not support these developments. Biodiversity impacts—with the current project, Winterbourne Wind, as an example, we can assume that large-scale wind projects on the Walcha plateau will cause devastating and irreversible impacts to the natural environment.

As a result of an unqualified, uncapitalised and overzealous developer, the community of Walcha has been burdened by the impact of some 660 proposed wind turbines. This proposal was conceptually developed by Walcha Energy. The developer came from Sydney with no experience and certainly not enough money to build and operate the multibillion-dollar dream. When the REZ was declared, the first project of 40 to 50 turbines—with the support of eight local farmers—grew to over 500 turbines and a pumped hydro system. Walcha Energy have since left the district, taking \$1 million in an emerging market grant and the dollars from the sale of their projects—Winterbourne Wind at EIS phase and Skye Ridge at pre-scoping stage—but their legacy certainly remains.

EnergyCo have proposed and will include the south central hub in their upcoming EIS. This hub has the capacity to connect 4,000 megawatts of projects, the amount that was proposed in the 2018 developer expression of interest. The bulk of these projects no longer exist. The remaining project, Skye Ridge, has a low probability of being built and a low priority by its current owner, Origin. So we have a situation where our community of 3,000 people continue to be strangled by developers, EnergyCo being the worst. As an example, three of the four proposed transmission hubs are within 36 kilometres of the Walcha CBD.

We could overlay that with the south hub that was on their original plan that subsequently has been delayed, but we could end up with an example of four of the five proposed transmission hubs being within 36 kilometres of the Walcha CBD, a small town of 3,000 people. The impacts of this disproportionate amount of developer interest on the Walcha plateau have been generational. We have friends no longer speaking to each other, social structures falling apart and what was once a tight-knit community in distress—all this while projects may never get up due to unique build constraints, costs and social impacts. How can this be deemed to be in the public interest?

The proposed south central hub could be like a honey pot of change to our district. We could see more short-term construction workers saturate our labour force. There could be some 2,000 workers that come to our town if the south central hub is built. What would this do to our families that currently work on our farms or on our council or have long-term secure employment in our trucking industry? What would it do to our rents? How could the teacher or nurse currently paying \$300 per week rent be able to stay in Walcha when this complete social imbalance happens? Demand and supply models would suggest that rents could soar above \$1,200 a week. What happens when the REZ is built? Will Walcha ever be the same again?

In the public interest is an independent cumulative impact study request. We need to understand where projects will be built—strategic land use planning. We need to understand what the impacts of 4,000 megawatts of projects will have on a small town of 3,000 people. We need to understand what a fiscally responsible rollout from EnergyCo in the State's transmission rollout is. In conclusion, we have a situation where the negative impacts of the REZ are of little benefit to the local community and create State budgetary impacts for New South Wales and taxpayers. Walcha is being strangled by EnergyCo, and EnergyCo continue to waste the public purse without

a commensurate return for the people of New South Wales. In my opinion, the REZ is broken, and we need brave politicians to pull the concept up and revisit the planning table.

CAMERON GREIG: Thank you for conducting this inquiry and for the opportunity to present at it. I am going to focus on Walcha. It's a lived experience that we've had. We've all heard about the impacts of the renewable energy rollout on communities and industry in the Central-West Orana REZ. These impacts have been overwhelming the towns and cities throughout the Central-West Orana REZ. We expect to see similar impacts in the New England REZ, because EnergyCo do not seem to be addressing any of these issues. Our concern is that EnergyCo are proposing the central south hub at Walcha, with the capacity to connect to 4,000 megawatts of project. For perspective, this is almost the same scale of development seen across the entire Central-West Orana REZ but concentrated into the area of the Walcha LGA. It is just totally out of balance.

The Central-West Orana region has a population of over 50 times the Walcha LGA population. Central-West Orana REZ includes the city of Dubbo and the towns of Coolah, Dunedoo, Gulgong, Mudgee, Gilgandra, Wellington, Narromine and many more. Central-West Orana have already encountered serious concerns with healthcare coverage of workers and their own community. Walcha has a single multipurpose facility, with very limited hospital services. The Central-West Orana have already cited concerns with crime and adequate policing levels. Walcha doesn't have a full-time police presence. Central-West Orana have cited major concerns with worker accommodation, trying to house 5,000 workers across the region, in their cities and towns. Walcha has an adult population of 2,000 to host the same workforce.

There are many other widely reported concerns of waste, water, traffic, roads and biodiversity, to mention a few. There is a complete imbalance, with EnergyCo expecting Walcha LGA to absorb the same scale of impacts as the entire Central-West Orana REZ. EnergyCo has claimed that it will build infrastructure where there is developer interest. On balance, this concept makes sense—where there is genuine developer interest and where there is a practical ability to pursue the design.

The case of the central-south hub at Walcha is different. There was only ever tokenistic generator interest, which has now totally disappeared. This is detailed in the document that you have. Walcha Energy had a dream in 2019 of building the Walcha energy project, a four-gigawatt collection of wind projects on the Walcha plateau. This was never justified, never researched and never prospected properly. It was a greedy dream. Yet EnergyCo saw this as generator interest. It was never real. It has evaporated. It is not happening. It is never going to happen, but they have refused to revisit the design. The Walcha plateau was never suited to four gigawatts of wind. EnergyCo must recognise that this resulted from a complete lack of proper planning and consultation with the community, and revisit the planning table. We feel it is a broken, wasteful and burdensome design that needs urgent reconsideration.

The CHAIR: Mr White, you've spoken about the environmental concerns and some of you—Mr Timbs, in your submission. I know, Mr White, you sent a letter to the environment Minister Penny Sharpe regarding the transmission routes and their impact on koalas. Did you ever receive a response from the Minister regarding that concern? Can you detail what the response may have been?

TIM WHITE: We didn't actually get a response. The response we got was that they were passing it on to EnergyCo to respond, and EnergyCo basically said it would be covered in the EIS. To put that into a little bit of context, we did a lot of work with an ecological firm up here in Armidale on koalas in our vicinity, and we had two ecologists come down to do a report, and they believe that they've found a very significant community of koalas in our area. It could be the largest inland community of koalas in New South Wales—healthy community in New South Wales. It's a significant community and it's a significant concern that we might lose them, because they're talking about bulldozing a 250-metre clear channel through the middle of it.

The CHAIR: Mr Timbs, you've spoken about how some of these projects butt up against World Heritage areas, and you think that mapping wasn't done or wasn't done properly. This is probably a question to both of you. Do you think it's the case, not that the mapping wasn't done properly, but that it was done and it's more a case of wilful blindness just to drive this renewable energy zone target?

DAMIEN TIMBS: If I may, I can only offer up our lived experience during the Winterbourne Wind EIS process. We're now about 10,000 pages in four years later. As an example, in the amendment report that we received about six months ago, all 118 turbines were described by the environmental consultant ERM and signed off by ERM as very high risk. We had a response to that amendment report released only about two weeks ago. Somehow, without those turbines being moved or removed, those very high-risk classifications are now low risk for bird and bat strike. It's a self-reported assessment that has been undertaken. To quote the planning department and now head of large-scale renewable wind projects, we have been implored to take a point where we have faith in the planning system, but when you see things like that without any justification, without any change go from

very high risk to low risk without any explanation, how could a community have any sort of faith in the planning system that's currently in operation?

TIM WHITE: I'd add to that just by saying we're at the pre-EIS stage and I don't think that there was any consultation done at all with regard to mapping any of the environment or the ecology in our area. I think it was done, basically, on a desktop in Sydney off old State maps that are currently on the SEED website. A lot of the ecology in our area has not been reported. It's there, and it's been there for generations, but it's not been documented.

DAMIEN TIMBS: Could I also add, too, during the Winterbourne Wind EIS, it was claimed that there's a \$64 million offset penalty for the biodiversity impacts that will be incurred by the construction of those 118 turbines. How can that be in the public interest?

The CHAIR: Or the environmental interest, if it's going to cost that much. Mr White, in your submission you've spoken about EnergyCo's engagement with community and you've spoken about "aggressive bullying tactics". I wonder whether you can provide a bit more clarity of what that looks like on the ground. What's the lived experience of what EnergyCo's "aggressive bullying tactics" look like?

TIM WHITE: Yes, definitely. I'll do this through examples. One instance would be we've got a 94-year-old widow living alone. EnergyCo arrived on her doorstep, knocked on the door unannounced, and said, "Look, we're putting powerlines over your place." She said, "Look, I don't know who you are. Could you please leave?" That person refused to leave and actually refused to let her shut the door. She's 94. She got quite irate. He finally left, but she called the police. We filed a police report as a result of that. I mean, to come on unannounced to a 94-year-old is ridiculous. It's terrible.

Other examples of the bullying was one of the calls to us. We've made it very clear that none of our members will have an individual meeting with EnergyCo. They wanted one of our committee members involved. One of those meetings was with an engineer who basically came in and said, "Look, you've got the line. It's coming over your property. It's not a matter of where it goes. We might move it 250 metres one way. We might move it 250 metres the other way. If you disagree with us, we'll go to compulsory acquisition and you won't have any say in where it goes. It's that simple." This community consultation is not actually consultation. It is that we're being told where it's going and what's happening. Any feedback we give is being completely forgotten. It's not even forgotten. The words "taken on notice" is pretty much the most used phrase that we ever hear.

The CHAIR: Us too.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Can I ask a follow-up? You talked in your opening statement about not having large community meetings anymore. When we had EnergyCo appear on the very first day we had a hearing in Sydney, they talked about being open to re-engaging with community in that more public way. What has been your experience with that? I'm happy for any or all of you to answer.

TIM WHITE: I'll start on that and then I'll let you get onto it, Cam. We were first told in March last year. We had a community meeting in Tamworth, where there would have been 80 people at it, I think, and it was a very, very emotional meeting. EnergyCo was unprepared at that meeting and didn't handle it very well at all. We then got together. We formed Valley Alliance. We had another meeting, which was then in September, in Woolomin, which Barnaby was at. It was, to put it bluntly, a disaster. I mean, there were a lot of very angry and unhappy people there. EnergyCo didn't handle it very well. They were again unprepared. That was where they came up with the bushfire expert thing and told us that we didn't have a bushfire problem.

From that moment on, they've refused to have a group community meeting with us because it doesn't suit their narrative to see what the community wants. They want to do what they want to do. They don't want to hear what the community wants. When you've got an angry community, they think that it's not to their benefit, so they don't have it. Now they have pop-up meetings. We have two pop-ups in our community—well, not in our community. The pop-up meetings are 30 kilometres away or 150 kilometres away. We had one pop-up meeting for our transmission lines at Gunnedah. It's 150 kilometres away. What good is that?

CAMERON GREIG: I'll just continue that. That's their preferred method of engagement. I think they're avoiding the truth. They're avoiding hearing from the community because it's uncomfortable. That's, I think, the reason, but their validation for it is that they feel these pop-up meetings are a more useful way of distributing information. We contest that really strongly. Those pop-up meetings require someone to have a fairly good understanding of the project to come in and ask specific questions. They ask a question and one person hears the response. In the town hall style meetings, you have people on the committee who can ask questions, and you've got the entire room that hears that response. It's a far more efficient way of disseminating information to the community. But it's just a refusal to attend those sort of meetings, and I think the lack of doing that increases that anxiety and the anger in the community. So we've requested—

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: And that hasn't changed in recent months.

CAMERON GREIG: No. We've requested for the past two years to have meetings where they'll talk to a community group. Our Walcha Council has passed a motion to request—as you said, it was referred to in the Dubbo inquiry. Ash Albury states openly that, where it's requested, they'll facilitate that. Well, that's simply not the case. Our council has been refused that opportunity and it's just not happening, so it's just a bald-faced lie.

TIM WHITE: It breeds a large lack of trust within the community. One of the pop-ups that they did—we then met with them later on and asked them about that pop-up. We actually had someone sitting in Tamworth. They did it between 11 o'clock and 2 o'clock on a weekday in a shopping mall in Tamworth. We queried about it later on. We said, "How many went?" "Between 50 and 60 people." We had a person there watching them the whole time. There were five people there. One of them was their friend; they did selfies. It was a ridiculous waste of time to fly people up from Sydney to do this and not get any community feedback whatsoever. It's farcical and it's tick-a-box.

DAMIEN TIMBS: If I could add to that—you talk about social resilience, and I believe that's really important, particularly in small communities and small rural communities. In our request to have a community hall style meeting, which was brought about with a degree of excitement after Ash Albury at the Dubbo inquiry said that EnergyCo would facilitate such meetings—it was refused, and then an offer was made to the Voice for Walcha to bring up to 12 of its members. We are a 350-member endorsed community group with 500 subscribers out of our small town, and they said, "We'll give you the information for you to then disseminate with the rest of your membership base."

At a local level—and you talk about the divisions. Our mayor alluded to it: Walcha is probably one of the most divided communities. It was one of the most united communities when I first moved there. One of the things there is that, if we take that information out to community, and not all people believe in the same things—and that's their entitlement—as a committee of Voice for Walcha, we've been accused of lying, of being spreaders of mistruths, of community division et cetera. That actually facilitates such a statement to be made because it's us taking their information—it's our interpretation of their information. It's their story. They should be out telling it to community

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Rather than trying to make you the messengers.

DAMIEN TIMBS: One hundred per cent.

CAMERON GREIG: They're facilitating division in the community. They're setting up a situation where we start distributing information, and all of a sudden there is a divide because there are those who believe and those who violently disagree. They are facilitating and creating this culture of division, and it's from the top down. It's not good.

The CHAIR: I might just touch on the fire issue. Mr White, you put in your submission that the RFS won't fight fires near the Hunter high-voltage transmission lines. Have you had any conversations with local brigades or any confirmation from RFS on this?

TIM WHITE: Yes, our three local brigades—I've got letters which we've submitted to the Minister and EnergyCo saying that they will not fight fires within the powerline corridor.

The CHAIR: Are you able to table those or provide those on notice?

TIM WHITE: Yes, I can send them on. For sure. No problem.

The CHAIR: Have any of these developers or speculators that have come forward wanting to build these projects—have any of them offered to contribute to the emergency services levy, given the increased risk of fire that their developments pose for the area? Have any of them offered to contribute to the emergency services levy like we all do as ratepayers?

CAMERON GREIG: I'm certainly not aware of it. There hasn't been a conversation about it, and we're certainly not aware of any offer like that, no.

TIM WHITE: Definitely not in our situation either. There's never been a conversation about it. Really, there's only been, from EnergyCo's perspective, denial that there was any impact. They've finally come around to actually saying that there is an impact after they were caught out in the media. The only way we got any response from them, and any change, was due to media pressure.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Thank you so much for this document, because it's really good to see the history of what's happened around Walcha and where you are now. I wonder if you could expand a bit more—and I'm happy for either or both of you to comment on this—on how you feel what's happened in Walcha has

impacted the overall design of the REZ. You were talking about some of the impacts on Walcha if some of this goes ahead. Do you think the anticipated size is ultimately going to be good for the New England communities, from your perspective and what your members are saying?

DAMIEN TIMBS: I'd love to, and if I could reference that I was on the CCC committee for Winterbourne Wind. I'm also on the CRG committee up here with EnergyCo. What our lived experience is, Sarah, is that Walcha Energy and that dream of 4,000 megawatts—the developer expression of interest in 2018 has led EnergyCo's plan. There is no doubt about that. Barnaby talks about carpetbaggers. We have the very best. They came into town with a dream, developed it and put no money on the table whatsoever. In actual fact, the Federal Government gave them a million bucks to facilitate that dream. Those projects have since been onsold. If we look at the timeline of Winterbourne Wind as an example—and I think it is tabled in that document—within the last six months, CIP, Copenhagen Infrastructure Partners, have withdrawn their financial backing of Winterbourne Wind.

Essentially, Vestas, which are a turbine sales company—their financial performance worldwide has been pretty mediocre, to say the least, over the last five years. They're left with this project that they are continuing to progress, clogging the planning system—it's not costing them a whole lot of money—with the dream that they could maybe turn \$10 million into \$100 million. That \$100 million ownership, if it is constructed, turns it into a \$3 billion project. CIP haven't left the renewables space. They've left the Winterbourne Wind project because the financial viability of the project is highly questionable. That financial viability is around access, biodiversity and social impacts. If they're not going to build it, why is that project still in the system and still strangling our community? It has been in the planning system now for 4½ years. It's been on paper with the original owners for 20 years. It's not in any interest for New South Wales at all.

CAMERON GREIG: Extending from that, these projects were slated to be a major series of projects across the Walcha Plateau five years ago, and that formed the design for EnergyCo's transmission. None of them exist anymore—they've disappeared; they've evaporated—so the justification for the three hubs around the Walcha township disappears. There is no design justification for their existence. The problem we've got is that EnergyCo refuse to revisit the design of that transmission layout. You've got developers who have tested the idea. CIP are 30 per cent owned by Vestas. If they don't want to participate in that project, who on earth will? If they're walking away and there doesn't exist any viable opportunity for these projects to progress, why is the New England REZ so stacked at the southern portion of it, with four hubs, where developers have tested the ideas and walked away? It seems illogical to waste taxpayers' money on those white elephants that are going to be built and not utilised.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Just one question, if I can, and that's looking at the issue of Thunderbolts Way and the issue of roads generally. You mentioned it in particular, and it's been raised with us in the past. Can you outline the particular issues? What has been put to you by EnergyCo and others, and put to the council, when these concerns have been raised with them?

CAMERON GREIG: It's a major concern on a number of fronts: design, for a start. The Thunderbolts Way is not designed for heavy numbers or for heavy vehicles. It's not a road that has a pavement design suitable for project access. It's not owned by the State; it's owned and maintained by the local government. There has been no support. Walcha local government has approached EnergyCo and the State for support to transform that to a State road so that they can get support for that maintenance of the road. That has been completely ignored, so Walcha Council will be burdened with a road that is not suitable or designed for heavy traffic and will fall apart. Clearly that small council doesn't have the resources for maintenance and repair of that road. That's the maintenance issue.

Our commerce issue in Walcha is dictated by the fact that that road is crucial for north-south-flowing traffic for businesses and tourism in Walcha. If that road is clogged up or is jammed up with roadworks, there's a massive and major impact for commerce in the town of Walcha, as well as agricultural industries getting trucks north to Queensland—processors and feedlots, buses to Armidale and so on. Walcha is located on a crossroad of two roads: Oxley Highway, which is clearly unsuitable—it's a mountainous, winding road—and Thunderbolts Way to Armidale, which is a crucial access road. If that's clogged up, that impacts all aspects of the Walcha community and business. Did you want to add to that?

DAMIEN TIMBS: I don't have anything to add to it.

The Hon. JACQUI MUNRO: We've heard a bit about cumulative impact studies. It sounds like there's going to be one about housing coming up soon.

DAMIEN TIMBS: This is just my perspective, and Cam might have a differing one, but I think that—and this is the way that EnergyCo are operating. Essentially, if you look back in the '80s, they'd almost be in jail

for white-collar crime. They walk into a local council with a bag of money, saying, "We will pay this retrospectively if you use it for studies to progress our project." When I look at that, one of the things that they've said is that they're doing a cumulative impact study. What Barnaby said—we can do all the studies in the world but, unless they make demonstrable change or have impact, what use are they? Each of the councils have been given \$250,000 a year for three years. One of those things is to look at housing.

Why couldn't we simply say to a developer—these are multibillion-dollar developments—"If you've got a housing issue, you sort it out"? That's not for the State to sort out. It's not for government. It's not for local government to sort out. It's for the developer to sort out. They build it, they own it, they operate it and then they create the legacy or have to decommission it when it's all over. I live in a small town because I want to live in a small town. I come to Armidale to visit a regional centre. I go down to Tamworth if I want to see a bigger one, but I choose to live in Walcha. I don't want Walcha to go from 3,000 people to 6,000 people overnight and then back to 1,000 people when it turns into a ghost town. And there are many examples. I think we've tabled one of those about Miles in Queensland—what happened up there.

The Hon. JACQUI MUNRO: We have heard from some community members that they think that a cumulative impact study would be helpful. I think you mentioned that in your early opening statement, Mr White.

TIM WHITE: I don't think I did.

The Hon. JACQUI MUNRO: My apologies.

DAMIEN TIMBS: It might have been me.

The Hon. JACQUI MUNRO: Sorry, Mr Timbs.

DAMIEN TIMBS: If you look at it—we've heard from Tamworth today that they've got slated 3½ gigs. They're outside of the REZ. The New England REZ is at eight gigs, which is twice as big as any other REZ in New South Wales—half the population. You don't have to be Einstein to see that the New England is lifting way too much of the State's energy burden.

The Hon. JACQUI MUNRO: What would you like to see in the study if it were going to be useful?

DAMIEN TIMBS: The New England sits on top of the Great Dividing Range. You've got access issues. You're going from sea level to get all of the kit up to 1,100 metres of altitude. Our ridgelines are biodiversity rich. We're going to have impacts. What would I like to see? The advocacy of right place, right size and then right developer. We had Tony Marxsen—now the chair but, previous to him, Andrew Dyer—put his nine-point recommendation. We as communities all participated in that. What has happened to that report? Bowen came out and said that in principle it all looks great, but none of it has actually been adopted or enforced. That is what I would like to see: those nine-point recommendations picked up and actually implemented to work with the change.

The Hon. JACQUI MUNRO: On social licence—I know this is in your submission, Mr White. There has been zero social licence shown in this process. What does social licence look like to you? What would look good?

TIM WHITE: What does it look like to me? Right now, it looks like it's non-existent. Social licence is a political term, and it's not based in any law at all. For us, it's very hard to fight against a political term. If there was some sort of legal framework around it, then that would give us something to fight against. Right now, I don't see it being useful in any way. It's a nebulous term and it means nothing. As such, EnergyCo can trot it out and politicians can trot it out as much as they like. Penny Sharpe is a specialist at it. We met with Penny and we talked social licence all day long. She promised a lot of things and nothing changed. What I would like to see is something that we can actually fight, and not take it to an IPC but take it to court and actually get a result from it—and not an ombudsman. Basically, an industry-funded ombudsman would be stacked against us.

CAMERON GREIG: "Social licence" was a phrase that was used early on in the piece because there was an assurance that projects wouldn't burden a community if the community didn't want them. It totally lacked definition. As Tim said, there was no way to say whether it existed or not. We asked a question in this very room to the planning department and we were given a 15-minute answer which left the room totally confused about what on earth the Minister had spoken about for the last 15 minutes. They've walked away from any assurances. They still use the phrase because it gets nice sound bites on a news grab, but there has been no ability to connect fact with this fictitious term. It shouldn't be used if they can't define it.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: You mentioned before, Mr Timbs, that you are on the community reference group for EnergyCo. I'm interested in yours and the others' views about whether or not you think that process is beneficial. Does it work? Is it fit for purpose? Should it change?

CAMERON GREIG: Easy.

DAMIEN TIMBS: If my wife was sitting next to me, I would be having a big high heel right on my foot right now.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: I don't want to cause any trouble at home. I'm just curious as to your view.

DAMIEN TIMBS: I think that they are like social licence, to be honest. They are tokenistic tick-the-boxes. I get eternally frustrated. As a farmer, and living in a rural community, we live off-grid. I think that we are pretty frugal. I look at EnergyCo as completely wasteful, and part of that CRG process is contributing to that State budget spend. They turn up. There are six or seven or more EnergyCo consultants at the CRG meetings. They put up a PowerPoint presentation. Conversation from the so-called independent chair is stifled. I think that they should all be about conversation. What does the community have? What input does it have?

To date, under our northern CRG, in my opinion, I think that there's been a lot of talking and very, very little listening—to the point, like, we have taken facts and we've demonstrated to them that the Walcha energy hub that was proposed back in 2018 is no longer in existence. They just flatly refused to listen to that. What they are doing is they are proposing at least one redundant hub, maybe two if you added the south-central one. But the reality is that you've got three hubs that are all going to cost around \$1.5 billion to build each, all within 36 kilometres of the southern portion of the New England REZ. The New England REZ is 400 kilometres from tip to toe. What does a REZ mean? It's just a line that is drawn on a map, and that map was developed out of Macquarie Street. It wasn't done because of good site selection or a good planning process.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Did you want to add something?

TIM WHITE: Yes. We are members of the CRG south. They have split the project in two, and I think that's probably because there are some outspoken people in the north and there are some outspoken groups in the south, and they don't want us in the same room.

DAMIEN TIMBS: I agree with that.

TIM WHITE: What the CRG is—it's a really nice term to say, "Okay, we're actually involved with the community. We're listening to them, and we're dealing with them." That's not the case at all. The CRG is basically a mechanism for EnergyCo to tell us what they are doing. There is no way for the rest of us to give feedback back to EnergyCo and to complain about it or to make recommendations or suggestions. It is a one-way traffic channel. That is all it's good for, and that is all it is. We've tried to change that. Both members of north and south wrote a complaint letter about the chair. We feel that she is not impartial. She's employed by EnergyCo, and she is conflicted. She is a consultant to EnergyCo. She won't deny the fact that she will not work for EnergyCo in the future or has in the past.

It just feels like the deck is stacked against you when you come into a room and they're not interested in hearing what you've got to say. They won't take minutes, but they'll take notes. Those notes are generally very vague, incorrect and there is no follow-up items on them or anything. It is a tokenistic group. I know that CWO has had the same problems. Anyone that has been on these boards usually resigns after four or five meetings if they want to get into it, and if they're trying to get some feedback into the meeting. There are other people on the CRGs that are trying to get other things out of EnergyCo, like employment opportunities or whatever they're trying to get. They stay on it. It might have some value for them. But as a landholder and someone that's trying to make a change and get their community interests heard, it doesn't work.

DAMIEN TIMBS: I could actually add to that as a member of the Winterbourne CCC. Early on in the piece, traffic numbers were given to our group. They were impactful for our community. I took those traffic numbers out to community and was threatened with expulsion from the CCC by the independent chair in a private meeting with the then general manager of our council because I was taking that information and disseminating it without her permission. I cannot see that the EnergyCo CRG meetings have moved into a space that is any different to any other CCC that has worked. They have all failed. I cannot name one CCC that has worked throughout New South Wales.

The CHAIR: That takes us just slightly over time. Thank you very much for your evidence today and for your candour. I don't believe you took any questions on notice, but there may be some. There may be some supplementary questions as well that will come to you. Thank you once again for your time.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Luncheon adjournment)

Mr PETER DAWSON, Property Owner, Salisbury Plains, affirmed and examined

Mrs KAREN ZIRKLER, Regenerative Agriculture Grazier, Kentucky District, sworn and examined

Mrs SELENA SYLVESTER, Hills of Gold Preservation Inc., sworn and examined

The CHAIR: I now welcome our next witnesses. Starting with you, Mrs Sylvester, would you like to make a short opening statement?

SELENA SYLVESTER: Yes, I would. As well as being part of the executive of the Hills of Gold Preservation Inc., I'm also a grazier. Our family farm and business borders the Hills of Gold project for more than 20 kilometres. We're direct neighbours. We have lived experience in this area. I'm also a member of the ARLP, which is the Australian rural leaders, cohort 31. I'm really passionate about protection of rural communities. Thank you to the Chair and the Committee for the opportunity to speak today. Hills of Gold Preservation Inc. represents landholders surrounded on three sides by renewable energy zones: the New England zone, the Central-West and the Hunter. Yet the ENGIE-owned Hills of Gold wind farm project we have been fighting for over six years sits outside any designated REZ. This raises a fundamental question: What is the purpose of a renewable energy zone if large-scale projects are routinely approved outside them without appropriate safeguards? Hills of Gold has been approved, and at the moment sits in the Land and Environment Court.

Throughout this process, our community has experienced what can only be described as the Wild West of planning. We have faced highly resourced developers, supported by consultants and lawyers, and a government intent on fast-tracking renewables, while our rural community was left to navigate thousands of pages of technical documents with no meaningful support. Despite repeated engagement, including meetings with the former Energy Infrastructure Commissioner, the Prime Minister and senior advisers, commitments to improve transparency, consultation and accountability have not been delivered. In particular, Andrew Dyer's report and recommendations remain unimplemented. We strongly urge that his recommendations—being the licence to prospect, developer rating schemes and a compulsory decommissioning fund—become mandatory requirements.

The Hills of Gold project required four public exhibition periods and over six years of assessment. Yet approval was ultimately granted based on flawed and misleading information. There are limited neighbourhood agreements in place or proposed, and no recognition of risks to water security, biosecurity and biodiversity. There is inadequate assessment of Indigenous impact and no genuine social licence, which we define as authentic support from affected communities. The cumulative impact has been profound. Our community has borne the psychosocial burden of a flawed process that prioritises project development over fair consideration of environmental and social consequences. The divisive nature of these developments is eroding trust, not only in the planning system but also between rural and urban Australians.

Consultation without action is not genuine consultation. Communities are increasingly aware that no matter the evidence, poorly sited projects are waived through. This undermines faith in government and, ultimately, damages public support for renewable energy. We ask the Committee to ensure that the lessons of our experience are acted upon. Stronger, enforceable standards and genuine community protection are essential if renewable energy development is to proceed in a way that is socially, environmentally and economically responsible. We are looking for brave politicians to make a difference. I would also like to table a supporting document.

The CHAIR: We might have someone come and grab that. Mrs Zirkler?

KAREN ZIRKLER: Good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity. May I request a slightly longer opening statement as I didn't make a submission?

The CHAIR: Yes, sure.

KAREN ZIRKLER: This is my submission, and I'm prepared to table this as well. I also have some other supporting documents that I will table towards the end. My name is Karen Zirkler. We operate a regenerative grazing enterprise adjoining the Thunderbolt Wind Farm. This is a project that has been developed so far by Neoen. We also adjoin the Voice for Walcha group area, and we're in the Walcha postcode—some of us are; we're in a very grey area between Uralla, Armidale and Tamworth regional councils areas. We're on the edge of all of those. I personally have a passionate interest in nature-positive agriculture, and I have worked for a community not-for-profit for the last 28 years, supporting Landcare communities across three local government areas in this REZ.

I came to the REZ process with a professional perspective of community development, agricultural extension, a Landcare philosophy and a solid knowledge of how to work with the community to get good things done. This is our unique perspective. The Thunderbolt Wind Farm is the first project approved in the REZ, and

we have participated fully in this whole process, from the early days of developers trying to sign up landholders in secret through to the EIS process and the IPC process and the final approval, so I'm here to share a very personal lived experience of that whole process.

What we've discovered is that the REZ is and always has been a corrupted process, as in a broken process. First, we were impacted by a serious lack of regional-scale land-use planning, so that when developers came scouting in 2017, we formed a community group to negotiate with a developer. That group quickly became a hosts-only group, and while this was very useful, after hours of volunteer time over several years, there was still no neighbour negotiation process, so the host group weakened and it ended up splitting in half. This put huge stresses on neighbour relations.

Next, we had no opportunity for input into the SEARs. This project involved three local government areas, and engaging them all was very complex and time-consuming for us as community members. We experienced no good quality community engagement by the developers, so by February 2020, we'd formed an action group to raise awareness, Friends of Kentucky Action Group, or FOKAG, with some 42 member families—this group is also a sub-group or a member group of ReD4NE, who you'll be hearing from later on—more volunteer time doing what the State Government and the developer should have been doing, meeting regularly, using local knowledge and resources from groups that were further along in the process, creating social media presence, forming a communications team, making petitions, writing to State and Federal MPs, preparing posters, brochures, memes, raising awareness everywhere.

Next was the EIS preparation stage, where the community was placed under massive strain because of an inadequate community engagement plan; consultation during COVID lockdowns; a community consultative committee that refused to meet with the community, stating, "That's not our role"; drop-in sessions outside the key impact area; a Zoom session where participants were muted and unable to ask questions or speak; denial of requests for public meetings—you've heard this before today; I've heard this myself—and non-existent neighbour negotiations, and all of this occurred during the worst drought on record and followed by the Black Summer bushfires. It truly was a very horrendously stressful process and time.

Once the EIS went on public exhibition, our group encouraged our community to prepare submissions by the due date. The work we did during this period put another amount of significant strain on mental health and community members and their families. As you've heard, EIS documents are thousands and thousands of pages long. We had 28 days to digest it all, get advice, prepare submissions. Because no-one else was prepared to do it, our group members volunteered to help other community members—those people who were less able because they were older, they didn't have internet access or not even a computer—to submit.

We contracted an independent noise expert, at our own expense, who recommended the project be rejected on noise alone. We uncovered shoddy work, inconsistent standards, non-compliance and horrifying suggestions in the EIS about shaking wildlife out of their trees with heavy machinery. It was written in black and white. We fought hard to get more than 50 objections so that we could trigger the IPC and buy us more time. This whole process was just another mental health nightmare. From January 2020 to May 2022, volunteers in our group spent an estimated \$252,000 of our own time and money on this broken process, and this does not include the lost opportunity costs on-farm. Then we waited and we waited. Fast forward to March 2024 and the IPC visit—suddenly, with just days of notice, we were asked, or were expected, to prepare submissions and present to the IPC. We made a range of recommendations in front of some 200 community members in a packed hall at Kentucky.

We were shocked when a departmental staffer spoke in strong favour of the developer during the introduction to this session. Surely, the department, as the regulator, should be an independent party showing no favour. That wasn't the case, apparently. In April 2024 the IPC reopened submissions after requesting further information from the department and from Neoen, the developer. At that time, we made a further 17 recommendations. I have all of those recommendations that I am prepared to table at the end, if you want them. We know that the developer provided the department and the IPC with false and incomplete information to counter the concerns that the community had, particularly about endangered Bell's turtles and the Pine Creek dam. Despite taking multiple days of leave from my job to research, write and submit to the IPC, and despite the EPBC Act being triggered, none of our recommendations was adopted and the project was approved. The whole process felt really sleazy, corrupt and, at best, incompetent.

Another year has gone by. It's 2025 and we still don't know if Neoen has made a start on the project. We've had no further communications from them. The company has such an appalling track record for lack of community respect, as shown by when they were driven out of the Saumarez district near Armidale prior to targeting the Kentucky district. It's no wonder there is no trust for them among the community. They really should be penalised for this sort of behaviour. What are the impacts of the REZ on rural and regional communities and

industries? I've helped many groups do good landcare over many years. I understand land use planning at the farm scale, at the sub-catchment scale and the regional scale. What I've seen in the rollout of the REZ is very far from best practice in every aspect. It's demoralising, depressing and, quite frankly, hopeless.

Sadly, despite community members being given very little time or opportunity to participate properly in the planning process, they end up spending an extraordinary amount of voluntary time and money doing it, only to have their input ignored and their own families and businesses neglected. The emotional, relationship and financial strain is a massive burden on these small communities. There will be delayed mental health impacts on mistreated and demoralised communities who are already under-resourced in terms of regular health services, let alone mental health services. There will be serious further impacts on local First Nations communities, who have been almost completely ignored throughout this process. A local Elder poured out his heart in the local Landcare office one day about a year ago, telling me that the REZ will be the largest negative impact on their community and on their country since white settlement. No-one has bothered to consult with them, let alone engage them properly or involve them in this process.

Has anyone worked out the true cost of these projects to our taxpayers, including the longer term costs on mental health, Aboriginal communities, broken rural communities and destroyed agroecological systems? I believe they have not. It is my belief that this whole process is a total waste of taxpayers' money. It is costly, disrespectful and seems to be going nowhere fast and achieving the wrong result. It's ruining healthy agroecosystems and the businesses that depend on them. The average metro person does not understand the scale of these developments and the cumulative impacts that they are creating, yet these folks form most of the population and most of the vote. Meanwhile, our agricultural environmentalists—that is, our owners of family farms—are those who are experiencing the impacts and the great personal costs. They have no voice.

Once the true behaviours of renewables developers are known and the real costs to our economy are determined, there really will be no social licence to proceed in this manner. We need a fully independent and transparent economic analysis of the real cumulative impacts of the REZ in our region, and we need a moratorium, I believe, on further proposals and further approvals until this has been concluded.

The CHAIR: Mrs Zirkler, if you'd like to just acknowledge what things you are prepared to table, we can get that sorted out now. Mr Dawson, would you like to proceed with your opening statement?

PETER DAWSON: My primary objective here today is to give the Salisbury Plains area south of Uralla a voice. For context, the Salisbury Plains area is a prime agricultural area containing black basalt soils, which are of high strategic value. Many of you saw the Salisbury Plains yesterday and its location. I think, importantly though, in addition to carrying the name Salisbury Plains, the central area of Salisbury Plains is actually a flood plain. I think that's a really important point, and the Committee should reflect on that because, surrounding that central area of Salisbury Plains, you have many developments proposed. One at Deeargee, slightly west of the central Salisbury Plains area, which is quite a large development. Further south of that you've got Hillview and, as it comes back around further west, you've got Salisbury solar and also Origin. Surrounding that central area and encroaching onto the central area, you've got many developments proposed, which can be described as overdevelopment.

To think that that sort of development would encroach on that central flood plain area—it is almost incongruous to even think that. That central area, in particular, of Salisbury Plains is an environmentally important location. Importantly also, it forms part of the catchment for the Macleay River at Kempsey. It contains biodiverse creek flats and underground water storage aquifers. It is highly sensitive to ground disturbances associated with both transmission tower action and solar and wind development, so large battery developments as well.

As I mentioned, while there are many solar and wind developments surrounding and encroaching on this environmentally sensitive area—and I've personally had many dealings with these developers—today I particularly wanted to focus on the dealings that I've had with EnergyCo, given its direct relevance to not only my property but also many of the properties on Salisbury Plains, particularly that central area of Salisbury Plains. I just wanted to run through some dot points covering those dealings and detailing EnergyCo's approach, which is pretty much substandard. I'll just run through some of those. When EnergyCo approaches a property owner, the first thing they want to do is have the property owner sign an access agreement.

On the face of it, it should be a simple operation. They'll gain access to your property, they'll come in, they'll do their survey work and then they'll disappear. But the problem is that EnergyCo refuse to provide full insurance coverage to property owners during their survey investigations. They'll provide direct coverage, but they refuse to provide indirect or consequential coverage, for consequential loss. My advice is that under no circumstances should any property owner enter into an access agreement whereby the person you're giving authorisation to access your property doesn't provide you with full insurance coverage. It's ridiculous.

One other thing that EnergyCo refuses to acknowledge is the potential capital loss of rural land impacted by its transmission corridor, specifically as it applies to rural lifestyle blocks in the Salisbury Plains area. The Salisbury Plains area is comprised mainly of smaller holdings and rural lifestyle blocks. By that I mean—the rule of thumb is that any block around that 300-, 400- or 500-acre size is a rural lifestyle block. It's governed by different market dynamics so, therefore, any infrastructure development has a particular capital value downgrade impact. This is one thing that EnergyCo seems as though they refuse to acknowledge. I've spoken to various agents in the Uralla-Armidale area, and the consistent message that I've got is that, obviously, if you've got a lifestyle block, you buy it for a specific purpose. It's got a specific market structure. If you put infrastructure on there, obviously it's going to affect its market value. That impact is significant, I believe.

We all know that EnergyCo is a statutory authority with ultimate compulsory acquisition powers, so the other issue that is of concern is that most of these blocks have been in family names for quite a while. There is a potential impact of capital gains tax on the property owners should compulsory acquisition provisions be applied. They don't seem as though they want to talk about these sorts of issues. They won't provide proper insurance coverage when they want to go onto your property. They don't want to talk about the capital loss and particular marketing structures of these particular rural holdings. They don't want to talk about issues like capital gains and that sort of impact.

Also, what they don't like to do is they're very reluctant to address property owners collectively in the Salisbury Plains area, and I would expect that would have more of a broader application as well. They seem to prefer to approach property owners individually, which only creates division and angst. If you've got a tightly held area like the Salisbury Plains, what happens to Billy Smith's property over there affects Mary Jane's property over there. You've got to approach these people collectively, not individually. It just creates division, and these people don't seem to get that. Basically, their communication strategy is really poor.

What I've also found with EnergyCo is that they're very deadline oriented. Their communication strategy, I've found—and I've dealt fairly extensively with them—is very shallow. Their objective is to meet their deadlines, and there's no or very little capacity to listen to the concerns of the property owners. It's all deadline oriented—“Let me get onto your property, let me do my survey and, by the way, by allowing us to get onto your property, the advantage to you is that we could exclude you.” But so what? You could include me. There's a lot of this doublespeak with them. I found them quite unprofessional, to be honest, and almost amateurish.

In closing, solar developments, wind developments—renewable developments—in that particular area, including the transmission towers erected across an environmentally sensitive and pristine, high-value agricultural location like the Salisbury Plains, to me, just defies logic. As I mentioned, that central area is a genuine flood plain subject to major disturbances. It's a major catchment for the Macleay River. There's lots of run-off in that particular area and, as I mentioned to the Committee yesterday when we had our site visit, the central area of that Salisbury Plains looks like Sydney Harbour at times, when you have a big flood. How do you seriously consider putting that sort of infrastructure particularly in that central area but also in the surrounding area? To me, it just defies logic. Why would you do it—because it's flat? It's just crazy stuff.

Also, that development is visible from all directions, including Thunderbolts Way, which is a major tourist artery for the New England. Visual amenity is a major issue, not to mention the community impact of the towers and the surrounding renewable developments within a 50-kay radius of Uralla—which, as we said yesterday, is quite significant. Within a 50-kay radius of Uralla, you're looking at almost 1,000 wind towers and something like 10 million solar panels. Anyway, thank you for your time.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: I begin by asking this question of Mr Dawson, but I'm interested in the views of other witnesses as well. If I have time, I would also like to ask about roads. My main question at the moment is—yesterday you raised the issue about the need to do a cumulative study.

PETER DAWSON: Yes.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Could you, for the evidence today, talk about what that is, what it would involve and what it would look at? I'll seek the views of the others as well.

PETER DAWSON: Basically, what we're looking for is independence. If you're solely relying on stakeholders like EnergyCo and the developers to do the EIS process and all the associated investigations, I think there's a risk that you're not getting a fair and balanced view, and you're not getting a view that can be considered independent. It's about arms-length guarantees.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: For the evidence, could you tell us what particular things we'd be looking at, because I know you gave us a table.

PETER DAWSON: We're looking at overdevelopment, for a start. We're looking at the flood studies, for a start. In regard to the flood studies for the Salisbury Plains, for example, I was approached by a consultant for ACEN some months ago. Flooding is an issue in that Salisbury Plains area because it is a flood plain. They asked me if I would be available to participate and provide direct historical information on the flooding patterns within the Salisbury Plains, and I agreed. But, for some reason, they've pulled the plug on that. It's that independence and that feeling of arm's length that the community would want to see.

Cumulative impact is, as it says, an array of issues ranging from visual amenity to economic impacts to social impacts—right across the full range—the loss of valuable agricultural land, for example. It's the testing of some of the fragile arguments that some of these developers are putting forward that, for example, you can graze sheep under solar panels, which is absolute nonsense. It's not so much to say that you can't push them under solar panels but everyone knows—in the rural industry and in the New England—that people are going out of sheep because they're no longer viable, particularly the wool-growing type. It's just a feeling of independence and arms-length assessments that we're looking for.

KAREN ZIRKLER: If I may add weight to that, I agree. But, really, the cumulative impacts that need to be assessed are all of the social impacts, all of the economic impacts and all of the environmental impacts. Those are the three bottom-line areas that need to be reviewed and looked at for all of the developments and all of the projects that are proposed in the area if they were all to be developed together. That's what we need to know: What will the whole impact be? And I agree we need it to be done by a truly independent and very transparent process that involves engaging the community to find out what those impacts are. Because someone from the city, sitting in Macquarie Street, doing a desktop study is not going to be able to know what the impacts are on an ultrafine woolgrower.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Mrs Sylvester, do you have anything to add?

SELENA SYLVESTER: Yes, I'd like to agree with the other two speakers. We come from a slightly different focus because we are not in the REZ, so cumulative to us really is let's look at location number one, let's work out whether the location is suitable for these projects to even be started, and not have to go through these whole processes, spending endless amounts of taxpayer money, just to decide that the location number one is wrong. We really strongly believe that the process that was put in or the commission that was done by the former wind commissioner, Andrew Dyer, came up with some great stuff. He actually had a red, green, orange light scenario.

Okay, projects that are in the right location with limited environmental impact, with limited biodiversity impact, with support from the community, they are a green. They can keep going through the system. The ones that have some of those processes that are not right, they are an orange. Let's get further information and work out where the flaws are and where the positives are. The ones that do not fit those criteria, they are a red. They just go off the table. And then you also combine that with looking at the developer who is proposing it. What is their track record? How have they interacted with community? How have they been transparent and honest? And then they also get a development rating so that they can be considered seriously for what they want to present.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Thank you all for your submissions, both written and verbal. It's very good to have that personal experience shared with the Committee. You have all touched on this, but I want to pick up on the points around—I think, Mrs Sylvester, you used the term "a flawed process" in terms of how it has played out in your community. I think both of you have alluded to that in your submissions as well. From your perspectives, if this was happening again—if you were at the beginning of where you were and we could wave a magic wand and go back—what would be the number one thing that you would change in terms of the process, if you can be that succinct? I appreciate that might be hard.

SELENA SYLVESTER: No, we've thought about it a lot, and the biggest thing for us is if we could be assured that there would be adherence to process and policy. We have gone through the department of planning. We have gone through the IPC. We have been told to trust process and policy. And what happened with us is, when the recommendation came from the department of planning, they cherrypicked from the 2016 and 2023 guidelines. They changed the rules. And then, when the Independent Planning Commission handed down their findings, then the developer went behind the community and everybody else into private discussions and they altered the project again. Now, that is not process and policy. And, from what I understand, not following process and policy builds bad culture, and that's what we have inherited.

KAREN ZIRKLER: Trust and respect, right from the beginning. You don't build trust in the community by altering processes to suit yourself halfway through. You don't build trust in the community by being non-transparent. You don't build trust in the community by giving false information or trying to sign people up on non-disclosure agreements. Right from the beginning, implementing processes; for me, personally—I've thought about this a lot too—my thing is I am a process person because I work with communities; that's my job.

I work with groups of people, and you don't get anywhere if they don't trust you and you're not honest with them and transparent. But the other really big thing that is required, if we were to start again, is time. Now, we have known about climate change for 30-something years. I learnt about it in my environmental science degree in 19—God knows what it was.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Nineteen-something.

KAREN ZIRKLER: Yes. We've known about it for long enough. We haven't done anything about it for a long time. Now suddenly we're at the eleventh hour and we're panicking. It doesn't matter. We still need to go through the right processes, and we need to give it the right amount of time. Only through the right processes and a good amount of time can we get the right result. You won't get a right result if you are taking this approach.

PETER DAWSON: I agree with Karen, to be honest. For me, it's fairness, openness and transparency. Don't approach me with a mindset that, "I want to push this project through. I've got a certain deadline. By the way, that's the only reason I'm here to negotiate with you"—not even negotiate—"to talk with you." It's almost insulting, to be honest. Have a recognition of the market dynamics at work. In my particular area, we've got certain host farms that are hosting these renewable developments. Okay, so they have made that decision. That is a commercial decision.

Don't then come to me, if you're EnergyCo, for example, and say, "We're coming through here because we've got to access these developments. These farmers over here are making a bucket of money. By the way, you're here and you're being impacted by our transmission lines. We're screwing your capital value. We're not gonna compensate you to the full extent of what you should be entitled to." It is just nonsense. Transparency, openness, fairness and due regard to the market dynamics of what you're actually doing otherwise—as I said, quite frankly, it is just an insult.

By the way, I forgot to mention earlier—and it made me quite annoyed at the time—my very first experience with EnergyCo when I met this group in Uralla. They obviously could tell that I was not in favour of what they were proposing. The comment was, "This is a State significant project, Peter. It's happening, so get used to it." How do you think I felt? That is what I mean. Be professional, be fair, be transparent, be open and have regard to the market dynamics that you're dealing with and the reality of what is happening in our particular area. You can't have people making a bucket of money on one side of the paddock screwing someone else on the other side of the paddock. It's just not fair.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Thank you. That is a great answer. I just wanted to pick up, Mrs Zirkler, on something you said. You talked about having a moratorium on further projects and proposals and drawing a line in the sand to deal with what is in front of us. That also came up at the hearing that we had in Dubbo. Can you expand a little bit more on why you think that would be a good idea?

KAREN ZIRKLER: I guess it's for all of the reasons that I have outlined in my submission today. Since 2017, the process has been flawed. The result of those current projects that are on the table, in the portal or already approved is false. The result is false. It is wrong. It needs to be righted. The only way to do that is to stop and start again properly. That is the simplest way I can put it.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: I appreciate that. Thank you. If you want to add anything else, feel free.

KAREN ZIRKLER: There is something else that I did want to add which is slightly off that topic, if that is all right. Something that sort of grates on me and just makes no sense at all is that under the NSW Koala Strategy, our region is deemed a climate refuge not only for koalas but also all the other species that are—when a koala is protected, loads of other species are protected as well. Our region is a climate refuge, and yet our region is the very same region that is going to be decimated by the extent of this cumulative impact on our agroecological systems which already support—we're a hotspot for koalas. They live here. They coexist with agriculture. It is possible, and they do. The very same Government, or the very same department even, to a certain extent is—there is this total conflict of objective that makes no sense.

The CHAIR: Mr Dawson, just picking up on your comments, do you think the poor engagement has been through incompetence or by design because of the deadline?

PETER DAWSON: I think it's obviously deadline driven, to a large extent, but I do think there's an element of inexperience there and lack of knowledge of the rural industry and how people operate within the rural industry and the particular impacts that are on the horizon for these particular people. So I think it's deadline driven, certainly, but I think a lack of education by the people that they're sending out into the field as well—not in terms of their technical skills, but in terms of their awareness of the impacts on these particular communities and these particular landowners.

The CHAIR: Sure. Mrs Zirkler, with your base and your experience with the IPC, do you think they have been compromised in this process and they have lost objectivity when it comes to these projects?

KAREN ZIRKLER: Yes. I don't know what's going wrong with the IPC, but from the many, many recommendations and facts that we put in front of them—and I have supplied, as I've tabled, the submission that we did, which was backed up by a lot of very good information from Local Land Services staff, who are particularly involved in extensive projects with, say, the Bell's turtle. Despite supplying facts, it didn't make a bit of difference to the outcome. There's something going wrong. I don't know what it is. I'm not close enough to put my finger on it, but it's a bit smelly.

The CHAIR: Yes. Finally, just quickly, Mrs Sylvester, you've spoken about how your proponent engagement with the Hills of Gold was forceful and lacked integrity. What does that look like on the ground? I think some examples would be great.

SELENA SYLVESTER: It looks like on the ground, when you have developers coming to see you and they sit down with you and say to you, "Well, if you don't sign up, it'll be all around you, and we'll just be doing whatever we like. So we suggest you actually sign." When they provide an agreement for you and you send it to your solicitor and then it comes back with the solicitor saying, "There's no detail here", and it actually says the only person that you have a complaint to is the person in the middle management in the company. If you sign that agreement, you can't go to the department of planning. You can't go to anybody else. You just have to take their recommendation.

It also looks like, when you ask them about risk management and you ask them about neighbourhood agreements, they say, "We've already dealt with you, and you're too hard to deal with, so we've just given up on you, and we've got documentation here that says that we left 25 phone messages", when we've said to them we'd prefer to communicate by email. We're in the situation where we don't want to be seen by ourselves with them. I went into a community hub office and actually felt terribly intimidated and had to leave as quickly as I could, for my own personal space. That's the sort of thing that's happening.

KAREN ZIRKLER: May I add something about intimidation?

The CHAIR: Yes, absolutely.

KAREN ZIRKLER: In our experience, we prepare—of course, the company didn't want to do any kind of public meetings or group meetings; they only wanted to meet one on one. So we organised a public hall meeting and gathered all the information that we needed. We were actually going to have a woman who's a neighbour to a particular project further north of here—still in New South Wales. She was going to come and speak and just share her knowledge as a neighbour of a project that has been built. The night before, her husband got a phone call and was bullied very strongly into not speaking at our event. It was pure, total intimidation. She didn't come and speak at our event because she was frightened.

The CHAIR: Did they tell you who the phone call was from?

KAREN ZIRKLER: This is a little while back now. I don't know that they named any names, but I do know the company that was involved.

The CHAIR: So it was a company, not EnergyCo?

KAREN ZIRKLER: No, it wasn't EnergyCo. It was a developer.

The Hon. JACQUI MUNRO: I just have one question for Mrs Zirkler, because we haven't really covered this all that much. You mentioned engagement with Aboriginal people here. I just wondered if you could expand on that. Has there really been any engagement? It seemed to indicate that there was no real attempt even to engage with local Aboriginal people.

KAREN ZIRKLER: I would suggest that there has been a certain level of engagement of what you might call contractors or people who supposedly represent Aboriginal communities to say, "Where are there significant sites?" or whatever. That probably did take place to a certain extent as part of the EIS. But I remember—and this was a while back too, so I can't remember properly—looking through the EIS for the Thunderbolt project and thinking that it was just pretty paltry, what they had done. One of the previous groups, SLA, spoke about that spectrum of engagement from inform and consult right through to proper engagement and proper involvement—

The Hon. JACQUI MUNRO: Empowerment.

KAREN ZIRKLER: Empowerment. That's the end with this sort of stuff. Particularly with Aboriginal communities, you really need to be very much at that end, and it takes a long time to engage with them properly.

None of that happened. Nothing at that end happened, and so this man sort of happened by the office one day and sat down, and I sat down and talked to him for about an hour. It is very, very concerning.

SELENA SYLVESTER: Could we add to that that we have a local land council who are really active and really respected in our community, and the engagement they have had has been extremely poor. The developer has actually published things saying that they're in full agreement; they haven't been consulted. There were some studies done on the particular project that we're exposed to, but they were flawed. We're really disappointed that that has been ignored. Also access to the project site has been not allowed to happen, and that doesn't seem fair either.

KAREN ZIRKLER: If I can add, Chair, the particular EIS that we dealt with was in black and white. If they found Aboriginal-significant cultural heritage sites or tools or whatever, it was written that they were just going to pick it up and move it.

SELENA SYLVESTER: That's the same with us.

KAREN ZIRKLER: Is that acceptable? I didn't think it was.

The CHAIR: Sadly, that concludes our time with you. We have run a little bit over time, but it was really valuable. I don't believe you took any questions on notice, but I suspect there might be some supplementary questions coming your way, so the secretariat will be in touch with you. Thank you, Mr Dawson, for allowing us on your property yesterday, and also your neighbours coming to talk to us as well. That was really valuable.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

Mr TONY MENKENS, Beef Cattle Producer and Chair, Batting for Boorolong Community Group, sworn and examined

Mr STUART GRILLS, Property Owner and Grazier, sworn and examined

Ms SUSAN NEWEY, Chair, ReD4NE, affirmed and examined

Mr MARK FOGARTY, Director, Bushtricity, and Member, Committee of Management, ReD4NE, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: We have come to our last session of today. I welcome our last set of witnesses. Mr Menkens, do you want to give a short opening statement?

TONY MENKENS: Yes, I would, thank you. Good afternoon. I am attending today as a member and chairman of the Batting for Boorolong community group. I represent over 160 members of B4B here today. I firstly thank and acknowledge Mr Banasiak and the other members of the Committee. The Boorolong community applaud, congratulate and thank you sincerely for hearing our concerns. The B4B community was formed three years ago with the announcement of the CWP/Squadron Energy Boorolong wind project. Since that time, another three projects, with more in the pipeline, have been proposed. All up, 300 turbines have been planned to be constructed in our community just over 12 kilometres west of where we sit here today.

The B4B group, right from the get-go, took a proactive attitude to these proposals. We understood that the New England Renewable Energy Zone had been announced and that we were better off negotiating the best possible outcome for our community, families and businesses rather than an outright rejection. In September 2023, we presented Squadron Energy with 13 requirements the Boorolong community wanted to see met in order for this massive wind turbine proposal to fit in and around our community. You all have a copy of that list in my submission as attachment A.

Squadron Energy has responded in such a way that the project has been completely rejected by the Boorolong community. Every meeting held between B4B and all of the renewable energy proponents operating in our area have been instigated by us. We have driven the agenda on trying to adjust these massive wind projects to fit in and around a highly populated rural community. We have been stonewalled and rejected every step of the way. EnergyCo has been appalling with their consultation and so-called leadership and have now firewalled themselves by using subcontractors and labour hire at information sessions to communicate with the community. The renewable energy proponents have tried to bully and intimidate our members into signing neighbour agreements well before a scoping report or the placement of the project on the NSW Planning Portal. Squadron Energy's behaviour has resulted in zero social licence for the Boorolong wind project. This was publicly admitted by Squadron Energy representative Alistair Smith at a recent information session held in Armidale.

I would like to leave you with three key recommendations today from the Boorolong community: firstly, all renewable energy projects and related transmission cease planning and/or construction immediately until a comprehensive, independent cumulative impact study has been completed for the New England REZ; secondly, the New England REZ be reduced from an eight-gigawatt REZ to a three-gigawatt REZ, and that three gigawatt REZ is to include the existing infrastructure already operating in New England; and the third recommendation is the reduction of the concentration of four EnergyCo hubs that are proposed to be placed in a 50-kilometre radius around Armidale and Uralla, which have attracted a huge number of project proposals. This is completely untenable. On behalf of B4B, I thank you again for hearing our concerns.

STUART GRILLS: Thank you for coming to the beautiful New England to hear our concerns about the renewable energy zone. I am a fourth-generation grazier in the Guyra and Armidale area, and I have been dealing with renewable energy companies since 2019. It is difficult to comprehend the size of this REZ. Most people in the REZ have no understanding of its scale and how significant the impact will be on their lives and the lives of the next generations. As people become more informed, opposition will continue to grow, and the fight to stop it will intensify.

After countless hours of talking to our community and organisations like ReD4NE and B4B, I believe we have come up with a viable solution: Reduce the size of the New England REZ from eight gigawatts to three gigawatts. The five gigawatts lost would be moved to the South West REZ, which is currently 3.56 gigawatts. Unlike the New England REZ, the people in the South West REZ have an appetite for renewable energy. This is in part due to the size of the holdings in the south west, with far fewer neighbours impacted. The New England REZ is made up of many small holdings and lifestyle blocks which are greatly affected due to their proximity to projects. The South West REZ around Hay has an average property size of 18,000 acres. Compare this to Armidale, Guyra or Uralla at around 500 to 1,000 acres and many lifestyle blocks much smaller than that, at around 50 to 200 acres.

The EnergyCo infrastructure could also be moved to the south west to bolster spending on the transmission lines and hubs planned for that REZ. The current transmission infrastructure in the New England REZ would be sufficient to deliver three gigawatts to the grid. Therefore, minimal extra money would need to be spent in the New England. We have discussed this idea with Tony Mahar and Brendan Moylan, who both thought it had merit, so much so that Tony plans to take the proposal to Chris Bowen and Brendan to Penny Sharpe. This proposal means that the New England REZ would still be delivering renewable energy to New South Wales and still aiding the State with its net zero goals. The New England REZ, at eight gigawatts of delivered energy and 16 to 17 gigawatts of capacity, due to the intermittent nature of renewable energy, is simply too big for this region. But it's not too late. There is still time to reduce the size of the REZ. Please add this idea of reducing the REZ to three gigawatts in your recommendations to Government, and help our communities get on with life.

The CHAIR: Ms Newey or Mr Fogarty, who is giving a statement?

MARK FOGARTY: I'll jump in. Thank you very much, Mr Chair. I've got some good news: I'm not going to read everything I had on a pre-scripted statement here, but what I wanted to do was pick a couple of important points. I've had the benefit, as many others have, of watching Dubbo unroll your inquiry there, so we've got a pretty good feel for what has been put to you. I think today there have been some really good questions coming from the Committee, so I wanted to concentrate on a couple of those, if I could, that may help. There is a submission there. There are seven points of context, and every one of the terms of reference is addressed. So I am happy to field questions, take them on notice or supply supplementary answers, as you best see fit.

The Committee well understands the absolute dearth of consultation and the absolute dearth of social licence. We've heard up hill and down dale about EnergyCo. They basically represent a hybrid somewhere between *Utopia* and *F Troop* in terms of the way they're delivering large-scale infrastructure. The simple point is that they have a lot of very well-intentioned child soldiers with iPhones—lovely people, but they don't understand large-scale infrastructure. Our concerns on that are clearly—as we will report back to an independent report that's out by the Government—EnergyCo, we need to understand what the costs are, and we don't at all feel embodied to empower them with more power and more money until we know exactly where that's going because this is going to cost us, obviously, for generations and generations.

The three questions—I think Mr Primrose offered a very good question on cumulative impact, and it's been on the table, pretty much, today. We were a little bit heartened to hear the Mayor of Armidale utter the words. We've been banging that drum for probably six years. ReD4NE predates the REZ zones, so we've got some insight into the history and where things came from, and where the bodies are buried, if you like. But what I think is important on that cumulative impact is the point Mr Dawson and Mrs Zirkler and others have said: It has to be an independent study. What the department of planning and housing came up with at one point are these planning guidelines. They drift out these planning guidelines, and they drift out like confetti. They're supposed to set and qualify, in some shape or form, what the planning rules and things say. But, clearly, a proper cumulative impact is to look at a particular area. Yesterday you saw the benefit of looking at Salisbury, Thunderbolts Way and the impact on Uralla. We feel that that is probably one of the best examples in the New England of where cumulative impact will run off the rails. You may have seen something similar to that in the Central West, with Dubbo, at the back end of Junee on the way to Dubbo, and Wellington. We've got a similar issue, I think, with cumulative impact. We've got it also down in the south, but here it's more pronounced.

I'd just like to tender a couple of documents, if I could. One is the map of the cumulative, which you may have been introduced to yesterday. That, I think, highlights a number of particular pinch points in the New England. One you saw, which is Uralla. Uralla community are heading towards a cliff face in terms of the build-up of solar, the build-up of wind and the transmission. The village will not look anything like it does today in 10 years time if all this comes to pass. Mr Dawson uses the word "overdevelopment", and it certainly is that. The other area is around the two gentlemen at the end of this table, in Boorolong, west of Armidale—that area immediately to the west, around to Uralla.

We've got four or five developers all hovering around there, with a massive number of wind turbines proposed. When you have a look at where did this all come from historically, and it maybe goes to Sarah's question about what would be done differently if you could turn back time, the REZ target of eight gigawatts—and I've done a fair bit of research on this—emanates from a desktop study done by ANU back in the day, when the previous Government was ice-skating its way to net zero. They were fast-tracking all of the institutionalisation and the road map legislation. The eight gigawatts, I can tell you, at best was plucked out of the air.

There was a belief that it was high. Yes, it was high—Glen Innes at 1,300 metres, maybe Walcha at 1,000 metres—so there was the belief that there was wind there. Yes, there was wind there, but we're now at a point where turbines have a 150-metre hub height and 300-metre blade tip. There's wind everywhere. It doesn't have to be in areas of high agricultural value or high zones. The point that Tony and Stuart made is that, in reality,

when we look at the numbers, eight was a nonsense. If you translate that to installed capacity—let's say it's five megawatts of wind, let's say the pumped hydro comes online and let's say there's two gigawatts of solar—we're looking somewhere in the order of 1,500 to 1,800 6.5-megawatt, 150-metre hub height, 230- to 250-metre turbines. Simply put, the New England cannot absorb that. It just will not fit.

The independent cumulative impact, getting back to the question Mr Primrose asked, is very much one that's going to be focused at various levels. I think it has to look across the REZ. It has to do something that was never done, getting to Sarah's question, in the first place. What would we have done differently? We'd have said, "How about you do something like land use planning? How about you look at what other energy economies all over the world have done—work out what fits where and why?" That was never done. There was never time to do that. We ask that it goes back and does that. We ask, in relation to Peter's question, that it then needs to focus on particular areas. Most of all, importantly—I think, as Karen Zirkler was saying—it has to have a baseline that covers all the important environmental issues going forward, and all the social issues. We have to develop a baseline on what that looks like. That has not happened, despite the fact that the planning department thinks that it has.

Before I get onto the second issue, I'm going to talk to Jacqui's question about Indigenous—it has been given absolute lip-service. It's in all the legislation. It's quite clearly something that has been, in thought processes, important but, in practice, it has been zero. Another example of that is the Walcha project that Damien and Cameron Greig covered very well today. The Dhanggati people are the traditional owners of that land. They have been there for as long as they've been there. Then, immediately up where we are now, we've got Anaiwan people. What the developer does is come in and look for what's the quickest way to get an Indigenous sign-off. "We'll go to the Anaiwan people, who happen to be at the UNE, and get them to sign off on a survey. Then we'll expect the Dhanggati people to accept that." We've all learned a lot about culture, and that is just not going to work. That just shows you how clumsy it is.

Moving to another question that I think Sarah asked, what would we do? We would have said to the Government at the time, "You're going to go in with a major transformation of our energy economy—one of the biggest since the Industrial Revolution—and you're going to do that with clapped-out governing legislation. You're going to do that with a National Parks and Wildlife Act—including Indigenous—1974. You're going to do that with the POEO Act 1997." There is nothing that has been in this century. Worst of all was to then put on top of us the planning Act. The planning Act was designed by a guy called Bob Carr and Bob Landa back in 1979, when we had dispatchable energy coming out of Liddell and a few other places. This Act itself is basically an ISEPP soup—ISEPP upon ISEPP. If you have a look at it, it's like an old lean-to down on the coast. It's got a shed. It's got a 40-foot container. It's got some lean-tos on it. If that's what they're expecting to effect modern energy transition, it's a joke, and it's forced upon us—and it's forced upon these communities—in a way that is more punishment than it is anything else. It punishes them.

We've heard already from Walcha today—seven extensions to response to submissions. We've heard from Mr Sylvester and what occurred down there in the deplorable Hills of Gold outcome. This legislation is not fit for purpose but they left home with it on board, and it's just exposed and exploited by the developers. It's not a planning Act; it's a development Act. I've used this analogy before, but it's like a game of snakes and ladders. But, for the developers, there are no snakes. You only ever land on a ladder, and you're processed up to consent all the way. You just keep your nose clean and you go forward. What needs to happen? We're going to ask Committee for two things, getting back to the chairman's questions and a few of the speakers today about what we want. What we certainly want from this inquiry is the independent cumulative impact. That's a line in the sand. We've taken that all the way to Bowen and we're a dog with a bone with that. We're not going to change on that. At the end of the day, we expect that the REZ will be re-declared and it's going to be re-declared along the lines of what we think is reasonable: three gigawatts.

The other thing is that we're not even afforded a seat at the table. Stuart has talked about this in Boorolong. We want to be regarded as a stakeholder. The community are not. We're downtrodden. What we've got is these developers going around land-banking. It's akin to Woolies and Coles. Essentially, they're going around looking at all the best sites, locking them down and then they're going to flip them at some important time when they can make the most money out of it. That's what's happening at a lot of these sites. I accept there are some genuine developers. We're just in a situation, I think, where we've got this legislation that requires us to look at development in the rear vision mirror. Someone comes and acquires a site, whether it be Winterbourne or whether it be Hills of Gold, and the first thing they do is wet their finger and say, "There is some wind here." Secondly, "There's a wire there that runs to somewhere. We'll just go and sign up the landowner, lock them down, give them a few shekels and we'll move and work out when we're going to develop it." It's classically land-banking scenarios.

Ultimately, the point that I think has been drawn out today and what we've tried to say is, the REZ is broken. I might, with support, tender this document. As I said, we've been watching this train wreck now for five

or six years, and we came to the conclusion two years ago that it's broken policy. It's certainly broken in terms of delivery. We've highlighted two key areas that we want developed and that we want the Committee's assistance to look at. It is economically broken, because who is going to build these windfarms? The price of turbines has gone up 43 per cent since the pandemic. If you're going to put one of those 6.5 megawatt wind turbines in, you're looking at no change out of \$3 million, and that's provided you don't have a very difficult access site, which, of course, we do on the New England.

So the cost of this has gone through the roof, and I don't think anyone can bank on a wind project. You've only got to look at the NEM market every day to realise we've got increasing curtailment because 40 per cent of our power in 2040 is going to come from the roof. Distributed energy was never taken into account when they set this target of eight gigawatts. We say it has to go back. It has to deal with the evolution of technology and the evolution of costs, and we've got to get a realistic assessment of what makes sense and where it makes sense. None of us have come to this table today and said we don't want it. What we are saying is, we want a fair go on where it's put and why it's put. I will leave it at that.

SUSAN NEWHEY: Can I steal a minute just to give a bit of background to ReD4NE?

The CHAIR: Yes, absolutely.

SUSAN NEWHEY: I am the recently elected chair of ReD4NE. ReD4NE stands for responsible energy development for the New England, which basically says, we're not against renewables, we just want them rolled out responsibly. The organisation was born in 2021 to represent and assist community groups which formed across the New England in response to what appeared to be an uncontrolled proliferation of proposed wind and solar projects, mainly on private land. It came to our attention that many renewable energy companies were using underhand, coercive and, in some cases, downright corrupt behaviour in order to land bank as much privately held agricultural land as they possibly could, tying up landholders with unbreakable contracts for possibly many years while the projects get approved or rejected. The organisation has—actually, Mark and myself—made a formal complaint to the ACCC about this behaviour by the proponents. Our brief is to support, educate and provide regional advocacy for our members, which now number about 185.

I would like to leave you with the two recommendations that the whole of the panel have asked for. I won't go into those again; they've been well covered. Reduce the generating capacity of the REZ from eight to three gigawatts in line with other REZs in New South Wales. We've already got 3.5 approved or up and running. The other is to halt the rollout until we have an exhaustive cumulative impact study done. I've added three more to that: Number three, introduce legislation to prevent proponents land banking and signing landholders up for watertight agreements years before a project becomes reality; four, tighten up legislation surrounding proponents' legal responsibilities, including that which would require full disclosure regarding due process before a project has been approved; and five, outlaw non-disclosure agreements. This simple move would remove much of the potential for hostilities between hosts and neighbours and would allow for the free flow of information in the community.

The Hon. JACQUI MUNRO: I wanted to really lock down on that cumulative impact study and what kind of metrics you think should be included. I know you mentioned economic and social, but are there some more specific things? You may want to take it on notice to provide a list.

MARK FOGARTY: I can quickly answer that. With the Committee's indulgence, we would like to set out an answer to that question. I can quickly answer it now, because—as I was saying in respect to Peter's question earlier—it has really got to be done at two levels. It has got to be done region-wide, and it has got to also be done at a specific area. The problem we've had in the past with this is that we've been beating this drum with the Mayor of Armidale for three or four years at least. His commitments today—we'll sleep with one eye open on that, but we will remind him of what is on the transcript.

What we would like to do is set out for you our thought processes on that, but it's got to go across—as Mrs Zirkler was saying, we've got a number of environmental indicators and we've got a number of social indicators. A good, thorough and independent cumulative impact assessment needs to take account of that. We're not saying this has to be the A to K of the telephone book or overdone. What it has to do is tell us that places like Salisbury and Uralla are absolute and utter nonsense from a cumulative impact perspective. That is what we want to show. We don't seem to be able to get that message forward. I better shut up, or I will—

TONY MENKENS: I'd like to add to that. It's not a simple answer; it's a huge answer. It's roads. It's the combination you've heard about. It's water, it's sand and it's gravel. Where's all that coming from? What about the Indigenous history? What about the BSAL land? There is very little BSAL land in New South Wales, and a lot if it is in New England. They have not considered any of this. It's an easy term to throw out, cumulative impact, but

it's all-encompassing and it's massive. They should have started on this five years ago, quite frankly. They haven't, and, now we're in the thick of it, they're not listening.

The Hon. JACQUI MUNRO: If anyone would like to take it on notice and provide a fulsome list, that would be welcome.

MARK FOGARTY: We'll do that, Jacqui. I think, if the Chair is okay, we'll make it a couple of pages—short and sharp. We've been across it so many times that we dream about it.

The Hon. JACQUI MUNRO: More of a nightmare by the sound of things.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: I've got a couple of questions. I want to start with you, Mr Grills. You mentioned—and I think you did as well, Mr Fogarty—the idea of reducing the size of the REZ back down to three gigawatts. I know you mentioned that Tony Mahar was going to take it federally. You have talked to Brendan. I should acknowledge Brendan Moylan is here. He has been here all day listening to the evidence and supporting the community. Thanks, Brendan. Have you had any response back from—for the benefit of Hansard, Brendan is shaking his head—either the State or Federal Ministers in relation to that proposal to reduce the size?

STUART GRILLS: No, we haven't. But, in fairness, this was probably—it would be a couple of months ago that we met with Tony and maybe a month with Brendan. To be fair to them, I know things move slowly in the political world. No, we haven't had a response back. What you've got to understand is that the New England—I know I said it in my submission and also in my speech—is a very built-up area. You would have seen it yesterday. Out at Boorolong, where Tony lives—and I'm further out—there's lots of lifestyle blocks. There's lots of people that are affected—hundreds. It's just the wrong place to have such a big renewable energy zone.

None of us are against renewable energy, but you've just got to get the right location. That is what I was saying about the south-west. With those massive big farms down there, no-one would even know. You could put a solar project in the corner of an 18,000-acre property, and no-one would ever know it was there. Do you know what I mean? You could put a wind farm on two big properties—you might see them from 20 or 30 kays away—because it is so vast. Up here, you drive 10 kilometres out of town and you've driven past 300 houses. It's so built up. It's the wrong location.

MARK FOGARTY: I'll just quickly add, technically, to the question you asked. We have asked, as Stuart was saying. I think that the normal response—what happened back in the day is Minister Matt Kean came along and declared these REZ zones, and he did that declaration off the back of what he saw as responses or expressions of interest from developers. They threw it out and said, "Isn't it wonderful? There's 28 gig in the western and there's 32 in there." These were just expressions of interest, as such. From that, they went and declared the REZ. He didn't have to declare a quantity in the REZ—there was no requirement under the road map for him to do that—but he did. We say that that can be changed. When you look at the legislation, there is absolutely no reason why Minister Sharpe couldn't go along, based on our cumulative impact study, and put that down to three gigawatts. There's no impediment to that happening.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Mr Menkens—and I'd be interested in everyone's view on this—we've obviously heard today from quite a number of witnesses about some of the community concerns around bullying and intimidation behaviour from companies and from EnergyCo. You mentioned it briefly in your opening statement as well, but I just wondered whether any or all of the four of you wanted to add to some of the evidence that others had given around how you found it, as locals, dealing with these organisations.

TONY MENKENS: Can I just add—you heard from Mrs Karen Zirkler previously, and I think she was uncomfortable about naming the company, but I'll name the company. It was Squadron Energy, because that was our second meeting. We wanted to hear from a wind farm neighbour. It was purely innocent. None of us live beside a wind farm; we have no idea what it's like. We didn't know if they were going to turn up and say, "Listen, it's great; you can hardly hear them; take the money and run", or "It's hell on earth." We had no idea. We thought it was a very innocent invitation to Batting for Boorolong. I think it was our second meeting, and Squadron Energy threatened them that they would lose their neighbour agreement money. This is the company that we've been dealing with for three years. I can trot in a dozen, mainly women, that were threatened in the early days that "If you don't sign this neighbour agreement, you're going to miss out on the money." They would wait till people had gone to work—generally the male of the house had gone to work. They'd turn up at 10 o'clock and try to shove this neighbour agreement under your nose. That's the sort of people we were dealing with.

STUART GRILLS: I can add to that. I started dealing with these renewable energy companies in 2019. Now, 2019, as I'm sure you all know, was the worst drought since colonisation over much of the eastern seaboard. These companies would come up here—it was touched on earlier, with EnergyCo—and they would visit one landholder and then they wouldn't visit the other one for six weeks or so. I think what they were trying to do is they were thinking, "Well, if we visit one and then we visit the other one, they won't talk." That was one strategy

they had. The other one was—and a neighbour of mine told me this—they showed him a map of the project and it had me shaded in green, and he said, "Stuart Grills is in on this project, because he's shaded green, so you might as well be in because your neighbour is." I never was.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Wow.

STUART GRILLS: That was CWP who did that, before Squadron bought CWP. A bloke called Richard Finlay-Jones used to come around; he was a tyre kicker that came around trying to sell the projects to you. But that's what they used to do. They come out of the city, these people, and they don't realise that we talk. We live in the bush and we talk to each other. So that's how they got everyone signed up, because everyone thought, "The neighbour's signed, so he's going to put turbines there. I want to get a crack at it, because I don't want to be looking at them." And then do you know what happened? About three years after that, I spoke to a gentleman in Guyra, a mate of mine, at an Anzac Day parade. I said to him, "I'm not that keen on these projects." He said, "Neither am I." I said, "I think I'll pull out." He said, "I think I will too." There were five other neighbours pulled out within six months, because it snowballed the other way. Anyway, thank you.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: I think it's important to get that. Did you want to add something, Ms Newey?

SUSAN NEWHEY: I'd just like to give you three quick examples of the controlling, coercive and corrupt behaviour of a proponent—which I won't name, but you can probably gather which one it was. The company planned to erect a 300-metre tower on the next-door property within metres of a conservation area that I had fenced off 30 years ago. This conservation area had already been surveyed by a team of ecologists from La Trobe University for a project called natural capital accounting. The survey method that they used for that survey is ratified as gold standard by the United Nations, so it's a pretty good survey. I gave that survey to the proponent, and I said, "Could you please move the tower away? This is a very valuable 30 hectares that I've been looking after." They said, "No, we won't. We'll disregard the United Nations standard survey. We'll send our own ecologists to do a survey, and then we'll tell you if we'll move the tower or not." They didn't.

The second thing that happened—this is pre-EnergyCo transmission line—is the proponent offered me \$6,000 to host a transmission line across my property. I said no. "How much money would you like?", and I said "Oh, \$10 million would do it. I could do a fair bit of conservation work with \$10 million. A couple of weeks later the proponents offered me \$3 million to put a transmission line across my property. It went from \$6,000 to \$3 million in two weeks. The third thing that happened when I made the heartbreaking decision to sell my property in 2023, the proponents ignored the clause that I had in my contract regarding conditions of sale and threatened me with legal action. Basically, they wanted me to sign up the next person to my contract, which was just about to expire anyway, but I'd taken that out. One of the salesmen then rang my property agent and gave them false information, hoping to get hold of the sales contract. I actually rang Alistair Smith, who's the CEO, and he was pretty shocked that this was happening within his company. But that was my personal experience with the company.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Thank you for sharing that. That's very disturbing.

The CHAIR: Just a general warning before we proceed. It's generally okay to mention names of companies, but the Committee secretariat gets a little bit nervous with me when we start naming individual people. Just be mindful of repeating that outside this hearing, though, in terms of parliamentary privilege. I have a couple of questions to wrap up this whole line of questioning around community engagement. Clearly there's a power imbalance between a local landholder and overseas multimillion-dollar energy companies. Do you think EnergyCo should be falling down on your side or working with you more as a government agency to help balance out that power imbalance, more than siding with the other?

TONY MENKENS: The very first EnergyCo meeting we had here, they said to us, "We will police the cowboys and we will direct this REZ", and they are completely separate to the department of planning, and that hasn't been the case at all. EnergyCo puts out a map of the hub and it has Boorolong and Northern Tablelands Warrane projects on that map; yet it's not on the NSW Planning Portal. So if you ring New South Wales planning, they say, "No, there's no project there yet"; yet, EnergyCo is out there doing the bidding for these companies. They certainly haven't got our interests at heart whatsoever. The simple answer to your question is no, they have not.

MARK FOGARTY: I'll just quickly add to that. I think, Chairman, way back when this road map was being put together, there was some thought that EnergyCo, as the infrastructure planner might be able to play that role. But, as we've heard story after story today, they've moved beyond that. The original proposition was that EnergyCo would not connect them to REZ transmission and they would prohibit them if they didn't display requisite social licence. We've already discovered today, through Mr White's evidence and others', that this is a

metaphor which is incapable of definition in its current format. What does all that mean? I wouldn't rule it out, but we need to go back and understand what the prohibition orders mean on connection because we've seen plenty of evidence that says people shouldn't be connected to the REZ transmission. It's a valid question.

The CHAIR: I just want to pick up, Ms Newey, that you spoke about reporting proponents to the ACCC. Have you received a response from the ACCC?

SUSAN NEWEY: Mark and I had a meeting with the ACCC.

MARK FOGARTY: No, they haven't responded. We put it up on the basis of deceptive and misleading conduct under consumer law. I go back to the analogy we used before. They were interested because of this land banking—Coles, Woolies getting into town and knocking out Aldi in these sorts of regional areas. They saw that there were some comparatives there. That's why they wanted to look at it. But we'll be definitely following it up with them because it's not isolated just to the New England. It's happening in the Central West. Obviously, it's already happened in the CWO, and it is deceptive and misleading for the reasons that Susan has illustrated. Stuart and Tony also added to it.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I think that pretty much runs us to time. Thank you for your evidence and coming today, and for taking time out of your daily lives once again to talk about renewable energy and how it is impacting you. It is well and truly valued by this Committee. You may have taken some questions on notice. The secretariat will be in touch regarding them as well as supplementary questions we may ask. Before we conclude, I want to thank everyone who has participated. I also wish to apologise on behalf of the Committee that yesterday we didn't get out as much as we would have liked for site visits. We were sabotaged by Qantas with our flight being cancelled. I thank the secretariat for quickly scrambling at 6 o'clock at the airport, trying to wrangle us and get us here. They did a marvellous job in getting us here and juggling everything. I just note that we had full intentions of getting out and seeing more, but we were hamstrung.

MARK FOGARTY: Can I respond on behalf of the community? They haven't asked me to do this but I will do it. What we want to really do is thank you for your efforts. We want to get you back up here because we think that site inspections are a very important part of it. We will follow up with a supplementary, but the refreshing thing for many of us here is that someone from government is actually listening to us. We haven't had that for six or seven years. We appreciate that. Thank you.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

The Committee adjourned at 15:05.