

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 Singleton Civic Centre, Singleton, on Thursday 25 September 2025

The Committee met at 9:00.

PRESENT

The Hon. Mark Banasiak (Chair)

The Hon. Greg Donnelly
The Hon. Aileen MacDonald
The Hon. Sarah Mitchell
The Hon. Cameron Murphy

PRESENT VIA VIDEOCONFERENCE

Ms Abigail Boyd
The Hon. Emma Hurst (Deputy Chair)
The Hon. Peter Primrose

The CHAIR: Welcome to the fourth hearing of the Committee's inquiry into the impact of renewable energy zones in rural and regional communities and industries in New South Wales. I acknowledge the Wonnarua people, the traditional custodians of the lands on which we are meeting today. I pay respects to Elders past and present, and celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their ongoing cultures and connections to the lands and waters of New South Wales. I also acknowledge and pay my respects to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people joining us today. My name is Mark Banasiak. 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 these procedures.

Mr TREVOR RYAN, Director, Planning and Environment, Dungog Shire Council, affirmed and examined

Mr JUSTIN FITZPATRICK-BARR, General Manager, Singleton Council, affirmed and examined

Mrs MARY-ANNE CRAWFORD, Manager, Development and Environmental Services, Singleton Council, affirmed and examined

Councillor JEFF DRAYTON, Mayor, Muswellbrook Shire Council, sworn and examined

Mr DEREK FINNIGAN, General Manager, Muswellbrook Shire Council, sworn and examined

Mr BEN MADDOX, Coordinator, Sustainability Strategy and Education, Maitland City Council, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: I welcome and thank each witness for making the time to give evidence. The Committee has resolved to have free-flow questions, so they'll come from anywhere, and we have a few members on videoconference as well. Mr Ryan, would you like to make a short opening statement?

TREVOR RYAN: Yes, thank you, Chair. Very briefly, Dungog Shire, located in the Hunter region, is a very unique council in the sense that it has a small population base—over 9,500 people—and covers a large land mass area. We're a growth area, as per the Hunter Regional Plan, with an expected population growth of 1.9 per cent per annum over the next few years. Contextually, what does that mean? Dungog has a small resource base, particularly to deliver its core services to the community, and certainly one of the key representations or issues we'd like to flag with the Committee is the opportunity to have further engagement at all levels of government regarding the impacts, whether it be positive or negative, in relation to renewable energy zones as they relate to Dungog Shire.

Some of the concerns that have been raised by other local government areas, Dungog would like to echo those, particularly around voluntary planning agreements having a clear framework in place to allow further community consultation in relation to developments within the renewable energy zone and making expectations quite clear for industry and council in relation to those collaborations to ensure that there is community benefit in relation to developments in the renewable energy zone.

The CHAIR: Mr Fitzpatrick-Barr?

JUSTIN FITZPATRICK-BARR: I will pass up and I'll let Mary-Anne give our opening statement.

MARY-ANNE CRAWFORD: Thank you. Good morning, Committee members. The Singleton local government area sits in the middle of the Hunter-Central Coast Renewable Energy Zone and, as a result, has started to see an increase in renewable energy projects, including the Ausgrid augmentation project, the Hunter Transmission Project, the Bowmans Creek wind farm, the Maison Dieu Solar Farm and the proposed Mitchells Flat solar farm. It is expected that the increase in renewable energy projects and, in particular, transmission infrastructure will continue as this REZ develops. Singleton Council recognises the impacts of such development in our LGA and the importance of a coordinated, transparent and consistent approach to new development. In our submission to the inquiry, council recognised that consideration of the cumulative impacts of these developments within and across local government areas is critical to the success of the REZ.

These cumulative impacts will affect housing, infrastructure, water demand, waste services, emergency response, as well as transport routes and how energy is stored for transmission. Specifically, council has called for a coordinated approach to the need for and capacity of energy transmission for new projects to ensure infrastructure is in the most appropriate locations to provide certainty on suitability and to minimise impacts on the community and council's own infrastructure, including our road reserves. This type of strategic assessment was completed for coalmining operations through the *Strategic Statement on Coal Exploration and Mining in NSW*.

Council has also called for amendments to the Resources and Energy SEPP to include requirements for site verification and a decommissioning bond. While council has received a response from Minister Scully and Minister Sharpe, that response indicates that none of these actions will be progressed by the New South Wales Government. Councils are being called upon to dedicate resources towards supporting the development of REZs. Singleton Council has undertaken analysis on the likely financial impact on our organisation for the redeployment of resources away from service delivery and into supporting the implementation of renewable energy projects, including critical State significant infrastructure and ancillary activities such as the Port to REZ road upgrades needed to support transport of renewable energy infrastructure into broader regions.

Our analysis estimates that the support required by our council's staff for these projects will cost our council and our community over \$2.7 million over the next four years. We have an existing live example of the

impact of this using the Singleton bypass. Singleton Council has deferred over \$4 million in water and sewer infrastructure to accommodate the redeployment of staff to ensure the impacts of the bypass on our infrastructure are managed appropriately.

The current legislative framework for transmission infrastructure is unclear when it comes to the construction of private transmission infrastructure on public land. There is currently no avenue available for private developers to construct transmission infrastructure within or on public land and no mechanism for these developments to connect to the network. In addition, as councils are the road authority under the Roads Act, the use of road corridors for transporting oversize/overmass and transmission infrastructure requires approval of council. This approval could form part of a site verification process. Without approved network connection obtained through a complex arrangement between State and Federal government entities, many, if not all, of these renewable energy projects will be stranded assets unable to construct the transmission infrastructure needed to connect to the broader electricity network.

Our last comment from our submission is in relation to benefit sharing. The New South Wales Government Transmission Guideline excludes provision of annual payments for hosting transmission infrastructure on public land. The Strategic Benefit Payments Scheme precludes payment for the hosting of transmission infrastructure within or on the local road network. This likely means that transmission infrastructure elements and projects will place greater downward pressure on local councils to host this infrastructure free of charge. The Benefit Sharing Guideline, while precluding transmission infrastructure, also advises the consent authority to not impose conditions requiring contributions under either section 7.11 or section 7.12 of the EP&A Act. The adoption of guidelines that prevent councils from using the provisions of the Act to secure financial benefit for the communities directly affected by the renewable energy projects is a matter that requires urgent review. Thank you.

JEFF DRAYTON: Good morning, Chair and honourable Committee members. Muswellbrook shire is at the heart of the Hunter-Central Coast Renewable Energy Zone and our role extends well beyond the REZ itself. The majority of construction vehicles and project equipment for the Central-West Orana and New England REZs will also pass through our roads. In fact, almost everything that comes off a boat or is produced on the east coast will now travel, with the pending reclassification of a "local council road", almost through the centre of town. We're not on the sidelines; our land and our infrastructure are directly involved in the renewable energy transition. For decades our land and communities have supported energy generation for New South Wales and Australia. As global market conditions shift for coal exports, we're at a crossroads. The REZ brings both opportunity and serious responsibility.

The renewable transition has so far been unplanned. EnergyCo has only recently had the resources to plan strategically, and it is now trying to catch up in a fast-moving space. This lack of sequencing creates uncertainty for project proponents, councils and communities. If left unaddressed, it may lead to higher costs because of inefficient use of people and resources, finance-holding costs and the need for urgent delivery of infrastructure and projects. For Muswellbrook Shire Council, this has caused unpredictable workloads for staff because of overlapping projects, loss of social licence as residents grow frustrated with repeated consultations, difficulty planning infrastructure to accommodate renewable energy projects, and pressure on local services to host temporary construction workforces. Our residents face similar pressures. Surprise visits from consultants or proponents cause confusion about timelines and concerns about impacts on their land and neighbourhoods.

Early in the rollout, council received little support from EnergyCo or Transport for NSW to assess the cumulative impacts. Staff had to monitor the department of planning's major projects website to estimate the number of projects, traffic impacts, and oversize or overweight vehicle movements on local roads and bridges. Councils acted to address these challenges. In 2021 we wrote to the Minister, requesting strategic planning for traffic and cumulative impact management. In 2023 we requested Wybong Road to be reclassified to a State road to facilitate oversize/overmass movements, ease of access to the REZs, increasing road standards and reducing the burden of road maintenance on our community. We hope the reclassification occurs soon; we understand it will.

In 2024 the Port to REZ strategy was progressed, but gaps remain, especially for the New England REZ. Leadership at departmental and ministerial levels is still inconsistent, making planning and advocacy difficult. Despite these challenges, Muswellbrook Shire has stepped up. We've held well-attended and productive town hall meetings at Wybong and McCullys Gap to inform residents and provide platforms for proponents to collectively meet with residents and answer questions. We've established a constructive working relationship with Minister Sharpe and continue to advocate for our priorities. In the coming weeks, I will lead a council delegation to Dubbo to learn from the Central-West Orana REZ. We are committed to being proactive and shaping these changes, not just responding to them.

We welcome the Hunter-Central Coast REZ, but welcoming does not mean passive acceptance. Our message is clear: The project must be delivered with fairness, transparency and real benefits for Muswellbrook shire. Landholders must be respected, work sequenced effectively, environmental and visual values protected, and the shire should gain tangible benefits, not just serve as a transit route. It's worth noting that Muswellbrook shire does not need more energy. And yet, as you can see, if you look out the window anywhere in Muswellbrook on a clear day, we're certainly no strangers to industry, infrastructure and the cost of generating it. This new industry, once again, brings a real risk that Muswellbrook shire will carry the load without receiving our fair share of gains. This is a cycle that needs to stop. If we keep accommodating what needs to be done for the rest of the country to keep the lights on, our community at Muswellbrook shire needs to start seeing the benefits.

Some of the key details for our shire are project status and importance. The New South Wales Government recently announced that the Hunter-Central Coast REZ has secured planning approval of major milestones, we're aware. The review of environmental factors was publicly exhibited. Feedback from councils, businesses and individuals was reviewed. The assessment found relatively low environmental impact, largely because most of the proposed works use or expand on existing infrastructure. Ausgrid was appointed network operator in December 2024. They've committed to addressing feedback priorities, including jobs, visual amenity, local procurement, traffic environment and ongoing community engagement. In the next steps for Ausgrid, they submitted a review proposal for 16 May 2025. Preliminary position papers were issued in August 2025. The Australian Energy Regulator's final review determination is expected by November 2025. Construction and early works are expected to start early to mid-2026, with commissioning targeted for mid-2028.

Turning to the relevance to our shire, our shire is directly included in the Hunter-Central Coast REZ. Some transmission line upgrades, new and expanded substations and other networks will pass through our shire. We're not distant observers to this process either; we're active participants in the project's implementation. There are opportunities for our community to benefit. One of them is through jobs, of course. Construction and maintenance phases require engineers, electricians, and skilled and unskilled labour. Local workforce and contractors should be prioritised. Local procurement—supplies, civil works and service delivery—should favour Muswellbrook shire businesses.

The economic stimulus is infrastructure spending or flow-through to our services, our accommodation, logistics and hospitality in our towns. Managing the community, environmental, and land impacts, so easement and landholder impacts: Most works are within existing easements, limiting impact. The new and upgraded sections require detailed consultation, fair compensation and environmental assessment. Visual amenity, traffic, heritage and environment: Projects must respect landscapes, heritage sites, flora and fauna and traffic conditions. Council will demand design mitigation screening and careful siting. Community engagement: Council is a bridge between residents, landholders and project proponents. Local landholders and Aboriginal communities must be heard. We're leading the way, creating the Muswellbrook energy centre where proponents can talk directly with the community and engage early with our businesses to prepare them for opportunities.

Council's community hall engagement so far at Wybong and McCullys Gap has been well attended and very effective. This engagement will continue. Council expects genuine involvement in local planning, road and civil works, approvals and alignment with strategic use. Advocacy and partnerships: We've held some constructive meetings with Minister Sharpe to ensure that the shire's priorities are understood and respected. In the coming weeks I will travel with a council delegation to Dubbo, as I said, to the Central-West Orana. We aim to bring back best practices gained from firsthand experience and apply them proactively to Muswellbrook.

Muswellbrook shire is on the front foot. We're informed, engaged and determined to ensure the REZ meets community standards. In conclusion, Muswellbrook shire is ready to take a proactive and engaged role in the Hunter-Central Coast REZ. We'll insist on local jobs, local procurement, general community consultation, strong environmental design, safeguards and a closely monitored delivery. Lastly, on behalf of Muswellbrook shire, I ask the Committee to ensure that the REZ policy and regulation maintain fairness, community benefit and local oversight.

BEN MADDOX: I do not have a prepared statement.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Mr Ryan, you mentioned in your submission the Community and Employment Benefit Program, similar to what the Central-West Orana REZ has. What types of projects or investments would provide the greatest long-term benefits for Dungog?

TREVOR RYAN: Certainly a more local understanding of what the community and infrastructure benefit needs are within the Dungog shire. Dungog is the only local government area, for example, in the State that doesn't have a State classified role. Already our ratepayers have to fund access to other State infrastructure, like national parks or Chichester Dam. I think what council would like to see as part of that benefit program as an initial starting point—and hence my opening statement around further collaboration—is really having a clear

focus and a framework for contributions planning, and that is a recommendation for the Committee to identify an independent planning and contributions expert to be mobilised within local government areas to clearly understand those exact community needs to better understand those long-term benefits.

I think a key outcome from that would be a clear list of social and community—along with physical infrastructure—needs that can clearly articulate the communities' benefits. Certainly understanding we haven't received development proposals within the designated REZ area for Dungog shire, but certainly we want to be on the front foot. We don't have a lot of resources and we don't have in-house capabilities to develop what those contributions of voluntary planning agreement policies for REZs look like, but a key recommendation we'd like to see from the Committee is that an independent person funded by the Government be placed into those councils to better understand what those community benefits needs are and what they look like in the longer term. That way, when proponents coming to council to engage, there is a clear expectation among industry and council around what those exact community benefits are, and there's less lost time over what a voluntary planning agreement looks like.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: You also mentioned that the council wasn't included at a key meeting. Do you believe that these types of things would have been addressed had you been included at that meeting? Are you now part of that consultation process?

TREVOR RYAN: To confirm, we did not receive an invitation to attend that meeting, which was very disappointing for council, councillors, the mayor and the community. We have not attended a further session but certainly welcome the invitation to give evidence here at the Committee today.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: I have a general question to all of you. We've heard from other local government representatives in previous hearings—and you've all sort of touched on this, in a way, in your opening submissions—about the impact in terms of jobs, roads, housing, community and infrastructure. I think Councillor Drayton talked about how that lack of sequencing and uncertainty plays into it. How are you, as councils, trying to get ahead of what you think might be coming? Where are the gaps in terms of the information you're getting from government to make plans around things like economic opportunities, housing and the impact on your roads? I'm happy for any or all of you to answer that, because it probably impacts everybody.

JEFF DRAYTON: I guess we've taken the approach that we've had to do a lot of that work ourselves. We've had much engagement, more recently with EnergyCo. We have pretty much adopted the approach that if we don't do it ourselves, it won't get done. I think I'm probably not speaking on behalf of other councils, but I see them nodding their heads—I think they agree. We have a group of proponents we understand that do want to, or currently are interested in, coming to our shire. In one of them, the example I gave them was the McCullys Gap meeting. That was a meeting organised by council. We had nine proponents at that meeting, with about 120 residents. That's almost every resident that lives in McCullys Gap, mind you. But those nine proponents are in an area of about 15 kilometres—on a stretch of road of about 15 kilometres with nine different proposed projects. We've had to have meetings like the McCullys Gap meeting.

I guess the extraordinary thing for me was that it probably did show the lack of cohesion. The lack of total cohesion was that a number of those proponents have all expressed to council since about how good it was to be able to finally get together and talk to other proponents who literally had a project 200 metres down the road, in some cases. As I say, there were nine in 15 kilometres, so it's a pretty intense section of development within our shire. They're not the only projects, but it's certainly the most intense area. We've had to do that ourselves. We've had discussions individually with those proponents. You know, "How big is your project? When do you plan on coming?" To date, that's where we've had most of our information from—the proponents themselves. As I say, certainly now in our much closer working relationship with EnergyCo. EnergyCo—my words—appear to be settled down, people-wise. I've spoken to probably a dozen people in EnergyCo, and that's probably only four roles, but a dozen people because those roles have changed consistently. But that now seems to have settled, so we are getting some more consistent information out of EnergyCo and have a much better relationship now.

MARY-ANNE CRAWFORD: We've got a very good working relationship with EnergyCo as well. We meet with them on a monthly basis, as well as Ausgrid. We've worked with DCCEE on their recently released biodiversity investment strategy as well. As Councillor Drayton says, if we don't do the work then we don't know who is going to do it. We've been doing some of our own baseline biodiversity assessment as well. I think the challenge, though, for the Hunter-Central Coast REZ is that it's treated differently to Central-West Orana and the New England in that it's a transmitting REZ, not a generating REZ.

There's no intention, from our understanding, for EnergyCo to create an access scheme which generates income to do those strategic assessments, to do those cumulative impact assessments and to provide the community benefits back to the community. The recently exhibited Hunter Transmission Project—which actually

sits outside the REZ as a project, which creates confusion for the community as well—is silent on community benefits from that project.

That's a \$2 billion investment in our communities that hasn't actually drawn a line in the sand or given any feedback to councils or the regional reference group around what are the community benefits that will come from that project. Going a bit further to Councillor Drayton's comment, there's a little bit of a chicken-and-egg situation going on. We agree that EnergyCo is a little bit more balanced—or "settled" I think was the word Councillor Drayton used—so we are able to have these conversations. But we're just having conversations. We're not seeing cumulative impact assessment. We're not seeing strategic assessment, and that's where we really need to be.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: That was going to be my next question, because other shires, in both Central West and New England, have raised that. Even in the Central West there have been conversations around should there be a bit of a moratorium or a pause while we work out what's going on—and that's certainly the view of some, but not all, members of the Committee—to let community know what's happening and let council and other infrastructure catch up to where it's all going. But when you talk in your submission about the further strategic and the cumulative impact studies, is that the sort of thing you'd like for this area as well?

MARY-ANNE CRAWFORD: We'd like to see cumulative impact assessment. We'd also like to see a strategic statement—similar to what was done for coalmining—to identify where is the best location for these sorts of developments to take place. Because at the moment what we're seeing are proponents that want to install generating infrastructure who currently don't have access to a network to actually be able to distribute that electricity. That's the kind of chicken-and-egg scenario that we're talking about. If you have a DA and you don't have access to the network, then you don't really have a commercially viable project.

What we want to understand is which bit should come first. We think site verification is the process that could be used to establish do you have in-principle network access? Can you actually gain access to the network? Some of these projects have tens of kilometres of transmission infrastructure from the project to network connection; that comes at a significant cost. The commercial viability then gets called into question. In the meantime, communities are divided about whether or not projects should take place in their communities. That's what we're calling for.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Does anyone else want to comment on that? There are a few nodding heads. I don't know if anyone wants to be on record.

JUSTIN FITZPATRICK-BARR: I can add to some of the things that have been said, both by Mayor Drayton and Mary-Anne. Some of these projects are just popping up out of nowhere. I'll use the Mitchells Flat solar farm as an example. We knew about that when there was community unrest on social media and also through the councillors because the proponent took the approach of going out and talking to the community before we even knew about it. Then we asked them to come in and give us a presentation. We then realised that this project was relying on 14 kilometres of council road reserve, much of which is tree lined.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: We were out there yesterday, so we've seen it.

JUSTIN FITZPATRICK-BARR: There's unrest in the community. This proponent hasn't even approached council to talk about the impact of using 14 kilometres of road reserve. The assessment for the project—if it goes to assessment—will get assessed through the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act with consent conditions, which then bring it back into the Roads Act to then talk to the local road authority about the use of the road reserve. That's where I think Mary-Anne's saying let's take a broader strategic approach about identifying locations which are more suitable for these types of projects, rather than go out and cause angst in the community when the project may never get up.

Another one I would use as an example is Bowmans Creek Wind Farm. It's approved. To actually get infrastructure into that area, you've got significant amount of roadworks to be done, across causeways, rural bridges that were built for horse and cart. That's going to come back to the local council to be part of that project because council is the local roads authority. If there are any acquisitions required for road widenings, that will be council responsibility. A council of our size, with the resources we've got, we couldn't possibly manage that with the existing resources. We'd have to grow as an organisation. That comes at a considerable cost. We have no idea who will be paying for that cost. Then there's whether the use of the road reserve is appropriate for the transmission of the power to get down to the actual network itself.

Those are some of the things that we're finding, where there's just project proponents coming—some of them have already received approvals, some of them haven't commenced that process and some are in the process of seeking approval. But, as Mary-Anne said, some of them haven't even got approved access to the network yet. It's like the chicken before the egg, as Mary-Anne called it. It's the cart before the horse. It's the wrong approach.

We're recommending in our submission to take a broader strategic approach to this. We have one solar farm project which is right alongside the transmission lines, a perfect example of an appropriate location for a project of that size to then tap into the network and provide the power. We understand it's 1 gigawatt of generation power for the Hunter-Central Coast REZ at this stage. They're the sorts of things that we're finding constantly when those projects pop up. It's unannounced, we know little about it, yet, as I said earlier, they're relying on our road reserves to transmit.

DEREK FINNIGAN: As our mayor has often said in the media, Muswellbrook is at the nexus of not only the Hunter-Central Coast REZ but also the New England REZ and the Central-West Orana REZ, so all of the oversize/overmass vehicles travel through Muswellbrook shire. Part of our discussions with EnergyCo and Transport has been that road infrastructure needs to be upgraded prior to these projects and prior to the passage of these OSOM vehicles. That's been quite difficult for us. Around this table we have encouraged a more strategic approach by EnergyCo and Transport, rather than us dealing discretely with both entities, because it's difficult to get that aligned, cohesive approach.

We would request that the entities treat us as equal partners. For example, on one of our roads, they want to place a pullover bay, quite contrary to our advice. There is no visibility of the site. It's located in a position where it would be difficult for vehicles to overtake in other areas. Also, we already have a designated piece of infrastructure that is critically important to us to provide water security to the village of Sandy Hollow. It's been difficult for us as a council to get that agreement and for us to be treated as equal partners. I think it is important that that is the case. As we've said, we are coming up with the solutions as councillors, and we need those responsible entities to engage with us on an equal footing.

TREVOR RYAN: I certainly echo those key points made, particularly in relation to the strategic blend and the need for strategic alignment for the purpose of adequate sequencing. The concept of identifying key sites or precincts at a strategic level certainly makes sense in determining what the enabling infrastructure is, what that looks like and where it's required to get the best efficiencies, particularly before development applications or proponents come through the EP&A Act and the legislative system and through council. In relation to causeways, bridges and culverts, regarding the onus and responsibility placed on council and the ratepayers to fund that type of infrastructure, I would like to reiterate my comments on having a clear framework in place, particularly around contribution to planning.

We can all see that housing developments have a contribution to plan. Or if it's quarrying, you have a haulage contribution plan as it relates to the trucks that travel on council roads every day and the long-term financial implications on council to maintain and rehabilitate those roads over time. A key recommendation, as I mentioned earlier, would be for government to work with councils around those contributions, whether it's a renewable energy zone contribution plan that's bespoke to those unique local government areas and what their challenges are and the community expectations. I think that will help increase alignment with the community benefits associated with the benefits of the projects.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: I will come back to something that was raised earlier. I want to ask all of you about your interactions with EnergyCo. As I understand it, Councillor Drayton, you were saying it was pretty appalling in the past, with a high turnover of people, but now it's stabilised. Is it much better than it was before? Has it significantly improved?

JEFF DRAYTON: It's considerably improved from when we first started. We appear to have a much better handle now on what's going on. There's always going to be a way to go. It's difficult, but it certainly is much better now. We're at the stage where we would meet almost weekly now with EnergyCo around issues and, if they haven't got the answer there, they are back to us within a day or two. It has improved considerably, and we have gotten to a stage now where EnergyCo, it appears, are going to move into Muswellbrook shire, with an office in Muswellbrook shire, to be able to continue to answer all of those community questions, in particular. Without any doubt, there has been a large improvement this year.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: That is the stability of personnel so that you are dealing with the same person all of the time rather than a constant changeover, as well as that local interaction and having the office and so on.

JEFF DRAYTON: In my view, that has certainly made a difference, yes. It has certainly improved it, being able to consistently deal with the same people, yes.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: Is that the same experience for everybody, or is it different?

MARY-ANNE CRAWFORD: Our experience is the same. We have structured monthly meetings now with EnergyCo, Ausgrid, the Hunter Transmission Project and the Port to REZ. That makes it a lot easier for all of us to be on the same page in terms of what those potential impacts are. As Councillor Drayton said, we are able

to ask questions. If they don't have the answers to those questions, they will get those answers back for us. We are also able to advocate for community that may be feeling some of the impacts associated with, particularly, EnergyCo-based projects. That's the Port to REZ, the Ausgrid project and the Hunter Transmission Project. We found that to be a really useful and valuable mechanism for us to be able to also express concerns from our community directly to those proponents.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: What about others?

JUSTIN FITZPATRICK-BARR: I support the things that have been said by both Mayor Drayton and Mary-Anne. I would just add, though, that some of the issues aren't necessarily with EnergyCo as well. While they will take the question on notice, we continually seem to ask similar questions of EnergyCo and they don't have the answers, but it seems like the other agencies haven't got answers as well. It's multifaceted—we always call it a big jigsaw—this energy transition process. We've all got parts to play, but it's getting the right people in the room to answer some of the concerns that we raise so that we have information to support and/or push back on certain aspects of it. I certainly agree with both Councillor Drayton and Mary-Anne. The relationship with EnergyCo has improved significantly given the continuity of key people and a level of understanding of what each of our issues are in each of the local government areas.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: What about at Dungog?

TREVOR RYAN: Dungog's interactions with EnergyCo are quite limited, and that's mainly aligned with probably the interest in proposals in Dungog shire at the present time. There's a small proportion of the REZ overlay to the west of Paterson township. We haven't really seen a significant interest at this present time in relation to renewable energy projects in our LGA, but certainly we would want to reach out to EnergyCo and initiate those meetings that build those relationships.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: Generally the feeling is that it was pretty poor early on but it has gotten better. It has still got some way to go, but it is significantly better than it was. Is that fair to say?

DEREK FINNIGAN: One of the improvements, as my colleagues and Mayor Drayton said, is that EnergyCo now appear to be less siloed in their discussions with us. We were concerned in the early engagement that they were not discussing things with each other very well, but certainly that has improved. We had a meeting with them yesterday, and there were representatives from different renewable energy zones. There was much more effective alignment of discussion and thought. We would encourage greater alignment of consultation between EnergyCo and Transport for NSW because their interests are often very similar and, to get the best result possible, that engagement between EnergyCo, Transport and councils is critical.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: Getting everybody in the room so they're on the same page.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Thank you all for coming along and for your very helpful submissions. It's obviously an evolving process. When it became the starting point to have to engage with government agencies and the various other organisations on the matters that you needed to deal with, did any of you have a blueprint of sorts or, dare I say, an overview of who you needed to speak to and engage with to advance your issues? In other words, the concern would be starting with pretty much a blank sheet of paper for each individual council and then trying to work out yourselves how to make your way forward. One would hope that over time there is a blueprint. It may not be something that's cookie cutter for each council, because they're different sizes, but I'd be concerned that you all had to start from scratch to work out how to progress all the matters that come into the council and start to exercise people's minds. Did you start from scratch or did you have something to work with?

MARY-ANNE CRAWFORD: I think the short answer to that is we started from scratch. We didn't know who, we didn't know when and we didn't know how. In fairness to EnergyCo, they've been really supportive in helping us bring together the right people in the conversations. I gave the example around the Biodiversity Conservation Investment Strategy. We spoke to EnergyCo to say, "Look, we're doing a bunch of on-the-ground work. It's costing us a lot of money to do that to get a biodiversity baseline. Are you guys doing anything in that space around biodiversity cumulative impact assessment or anything like that?" They put us in contact with DCCEEW and we were able to work with them on making sure that we weren't duplicating effort and that we could get some support for our on-the-ground works as well.

The short answer is that we had to start from scratch because we didn't know who to speak to. There are many different players in this net zero transition, not just EnergyCo. That's one of the challenges that not only councils but our community has in who is who in this jigsaw puzzle of people, organisations, government agencies, universities and whoever else it might be that's working in this space and how do we actually get the most effective engagement from those and with those that doesn't have an impact on our capacity to resource delivery of service to our community, which is our primary function.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Would it be a generally agreed position that, with the way it has evolved up to this point and the way in which EnergyCo has uplifted its engagement and its quality of engagement, EnergyCo will be the key to dealing with your ability to manage, resolve and deal with issues in your local government area?

MARY-ANNE CRAWFORD: I think, in short, there needs to be one agency that helps us coordinate whatever the response to our questions might be. It's a huge drain on resources to try to figure out who's who in the zoo. In the past 12 months, from our experience with EnergyCo, they've been very effective in helping us navigate who to speak to about specific issues.

DEREK FINNIGAN: We have an appreciation that it has been complex for EnergyCo as well. Mary-Anne's comments are really helpful. There is genuine goodwill and a genuine desire to do the right thing and to improve. It has been complex for them as well. We work hard to be productive partners with them to get the best results for our communities but also for the region.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: I have one more question, if I could. In terms of each council, do you effectively have to set aside dedicated resources within the council, within the administration, to deal with and field the range of questions that come in? One would imagine they're coming from left, right and centre, from the mayor down to councillors. How is that brought to a point where that can be managed in an organised fashion?

JUSTIN FITZPATRICK-BARR: We did a really thorough analysis of all the touchpoints across our organisation. As Mary-Anne pointed out, over the next four years we estimate \$2.7 million potentially of staff time required on these projects. We still don't have an understanding of what the 30-plus interfaces with our road network will mean in terms of staff resources. We've managed to negotiate a commissioning payment of nowhere near that amount. At some point, we either stop supporting the project or EnergyCo comes to the table with some further funds to support the resources needed. We just don't have an organisation big enough to absorb, within existing resources, these large projects that are coming our way. The figure of \$2.7 million was just an estimate that was sent to EnergyCo. We had it all mapped out. We are basing it on touchpoints throughout the organisation. We have been and continue to be and will be progressively more involved with these projects as we move forward.

TREVOR RYAN: From a Dungog prospective, it's clear that there is a bit of a cost-shifting exercise, particularly in relation to resources. From a Dungog perspective, we have a very small planning and environment team. We have no resources to deal with renewable energy projects. We struggle to secure positions in development assessment engineering and planning positions in particular. That is just to deal with day-to-day development applications, not even large development applications of the type and scale that would occur. In terms of your question in relation to the blueprint, one of them would have been very useful, particularly a stakeholder engagement plan or a RACI matrix around who is responsible, accountable, informed and consulted in relation to the rollout of the process. It's clear that one does not exist. Most, if not all, councils appear to have had to start from scratch.

In relation to Dungog, as I mentioned earlier, we don't really have any current proponent proposals or interests. We would like to be able to be on the front foot, particularly to engage with EnergyCo and proponents. We would like to see more engagement and collaboration, particularly with councils who haven't had that up-front engagement. It's clear to me that a lot of the EnergyCo improvements and relationships are dealing with those councils who currently have projects and are in that key spotlight in relation to post-mining transition. For other councils that are on the periphery and have mapped renewable energy zones—there has been no engagement to this point with those councils where there is no permanent project in play.

JEFF DRAYTON: Muswellbrook is the same. We are dramatically understaffed. I said earlier that there were nine projects in 15 kilometres. They're not the only projects we've got. We've also got the reclassification of these roads. I understand we might be the only council that had to reclassify local roads. We've also had all that work to do. That is a combination of EnergyCo and Transport. We have had some assistance from EnergyCo, but not anywhere near enough. When I say not enough, the other industry we have is called the coal industry. It hasn't gone away either. Currently, two of the mines are closing, but the other two mines both have applications for expansion or extension in as well. That workload has increased for our planning department on top of all this other workload. I haven't put a figure on it, but it's very understaffed.

JUSTIN FITZPATRICK-BARR: Could I just add something to that? We've spoken about resources on planning staff, but in our organisation it's also property staff, administrative staff and now infrastructure. Our engineering staff and our design team are all getting heavily involved because of what we've been told is 30 interfaces with our road network. We don't have a team to support that, but we're being asked to provide support to enable it to happen. As I said, if we haven't got resources, we can't help.

The CHAIR: Picking up on that, \$2.7 million is quite a significant amount of money for a council budget. What services or processes have either slowed or had to be put on the back burner given that significant investment?

JUSTIN FITZPATRICK-BARR: The real, live example for us at the moment is the bypass project. Some may say that the Singleton bypass project has been on the books for a lot of years. I think it's been fast-tracked because of the need to get turbines from the Port of Newcastle up to the New England REZ. Muswellbrook will experience the same, I think, moving forward with the bypass. But that bypass project has taken pretty much a large portion of the, if not the entire, water-sewer team offline for the past six to eight months to deal with all of the aspects relating to that bypass project. That's a Transport for NSW project—I recognise that—but it is supporting renewable energy zones further north of us, and that has caused a significant delay in all of our own capital works programs.

We have contractors here working with us just to keep our network afloat because all of our network guys are currently involved in what we call cut-overs of all of our water-sewer network that is impacted by the bypass. That's just one live example of what's happening now. As I've said, EnergyCo have indicated to us that we have a minimum of 30 interfaces with the road network in relation to their transmission line project. We're yet to see the scope of works required, but as the local roads authority we'll need to be involved with the approvals for a lot of those roadworks. While we won't be undertaking them, we have all of the resources required to do the analysis of the proposal, impact on road reserve and potentially be involved in local land acquisitions as the local road network, and that's all these touchpoints right across the organisation that aren't just planning. It's other aspects of our organisation.

The CHAIR: Mayor Drayton or Mr Finnigan, do you have other examples from Muswellbrook that you could share?

DEREK FINNIGAN: I support Justin's comments. It's very similar for Muswellbrook as well. In relation to planning matters, as Mayor Drayton said, not only do we have the EnergyCo and REZ projects to consider but there are other large mine projects. A strong focus is also on making sure our local community is not impacted for their local development, and it is a great challenge for us making sure that our time frames for assessment are within acceptable parameters. Our roads team, as Justin said, are impacted in the sense that projects are being delayed because we need to focus our attention on the REZ projects. Our economic development team are also intimately involved. Across council, there are considerations of demands on our staff and our project programs. Because this is such an important project for our community, we need to get it right.

MARY-ANNE CRAWFORD: If I can add, when we meet with EnergyCo on a monthly basis, we actually put a slide up to show the level of interaction that the renewable energy zone projects have had with touchpoints across our organisation so that they can see that this is bigger than just a planning matter and it's bigger than an engineering matter. It does have those significant touchpoints.

The CHAIR: And what's EnergyCo's response to that?

MARY-ANNE CRAWFORD: "Thanks for sharing that with us," is their response.

The CHAIR: So no acknowledgement, or, "We'll take this back to the Government"? No proposed solutions?

JUSTIN FITZPATRICK-BARR: We've managed to negotiate commissioning payments. The reconciliation project to justify the expenditure is quite thorough in detail and has a layer of resource drain as well. But those commissioning payments, we have continually told EnergyCo and continually said to them that as these projects ramp up, commissioning payments are going to be nowhere near the cost of the resource drain on our organisation. It does sort of fall on deaf ears. You wonder at what point do you say, "We can't help you anymore because I don't think it's fair for our communities to be paying for these projects, which in essence are being driven by a whole heap of other State and Federal policy positions." While we want to support the projects and we see the importance of them, we just think that it should be funded accordingly so that the drain isn't, again, on the local community.

The CHAIR: Have any of the councils actually identified what that breaking point is or that tipping point is where you have to go, "We can't put any more resources into this"?

JUSTIN FITZPATRICK-BARR: It won't be drastic, but we'll continue to negotiate with EnergyCo. As I pointed out to you, the bypass project is a live example right here, right now. For the next 18 weeks, our network operators are solely working on that project, doing night shifts, doing weekend works to get that project through and get all of the cut-overs finished before Christmas. That means we're having to use contractors from

down lower Hunter to come up and look after our water-sewer network—critical infrastructure. This is a Transport for NSW project.

We've managed to negotiate a cost recovery process that we have to go through, but the council had to allocate \$1.5 million in the budget to absorb this in the interim until we finalise the project. It's just an example of the cost being incurred before being reimbursed by the agency that's doing the project, so in this case, Transport for NSW. We've done the analysis. We know that as the project ramps up for the Hunter transmission line, we're going to see expenditure in the order of \$2.7 plus, just based on our analysis of resource needs to run the projects, and yet our commission payments per annum are nowhere near that.

DEREK FINNIGAN: As Justin said, similarly with us, we'll continue to negotiate with EnergyCo. To their credit, they are receptive. I just don't think there's an appreciation—unless you work in local government, you can't understand the diversity of pressures that are on councils, the many and diverse stakeholders that we have to manage and deal with in the interests of our community. But at some point, in consultation with the mayor and councillors, there may come a point where we have to reconsider our investment with managing these projects. Our director of environment and planning is very strategic in the approach of the team, and so we are managing our time as productively as we possibly can. The commissioning payment from EnergyCo assists, but the team is under considerable pressure, as is our council, in dealing with these matters.

The CHAIR: Mayor Drayton, in your opening statement you talked about how the whole process has been largely unplanned and poorly sequenced by the State Government. I note you said EnergyCo has improved. Have you seen an improvement, in any sense, in planning or sequencing to go with EnergyCo's better engagement with you or is it still largely a bit of a rudderless ship?

JEFF DRAYTON: No, I think there has been an improvement. Of course there needs to be much more improvement. But I certainly think we have seen an improvement from when we initially started, yes.

The CHAIR: Going to the conversations around site verification and mapping, I know it was put forward by Singleton, but what are the other councils' views on having some sort of site verification or process put in place before—I'm assuming you would like to see it before these projects enter the Planning Portal. What are the other councils' views on having that stepping stone in place?

DEREK FINNIGAN: It's critically important, yes. The more discussions we have upfront, the better planned we are and the better outcome we can arrive at.

BEN MADDIX: As Maitland is a satellite, in some ways, to these, we have that interaction with EnergyCo but we don't have direct transmission impacts in our council. There could be transport infrastructure impacts, but as part of the Regional Organisation of Councils, we'd like to see our partner councils be able to undertake their business in a way that's coordinated and beneficial to all the community.

TREVOR RYAN: We certainly support a strategic approach before proposals for development applications come in to our system. That gives the opportunity, particularly around that VPA policy proposal, upfront as part of that strategic alignment, as well as having clear expectations around contributions plans, so the industry that is undertaking the projects is clear on what the community and council's position is in relation to undertaking projects in the REZ in that local government area. For me, strategic planning is critical to understanding those strategic cumulative impacts on communities and the region as a whole, and then the proposals can then follow in alignment with that strategic lens, no different to how other developments occur having regard to the EP&A Act strategic planning and development assessment.

The CHAIR: A general question for you all: Do you think having that process in place may curb speculative development? Mayor Drayton, you were talking about nine proponents within a 15-kilometre radius. It's pretty intense. Do you think having that process in place may curb or slow that speculative development that's causing a bit of concern amongst your community members?

MARY-ANNE CRAWFORD: I think definitely. If there's a means to be able to identify whether a project is verifiable before it's lodged in the New South Wales planning system, it reduces a significant amount of angst. There are plenty of examples. The mining industry has to do site verification certificates. It's not a new thing. From our perspective, we just think if you can demonstrate in some way that you actually intend to commercially progress this project, then that gives certainty back to the community that it's not just a development application that will be sitting there unused.

JEFF DRAYTON: I think it is an important point. With the nine projects I talk about, two of them have been approved. They do cause a lot of angst. I talked about the community meeting we had. If you talk about a stretch of road that's 15 kilometres long with nine proponents, and a couple of them are only a few hundred yards apart, then—it wasn't until the community had come together that they realised, "I've got one only 500 yards up

the road. I didn't realise that one was there." I think some sort of strategic planning or some verification would be incredibly important. We cause a lot of angst and a lot of work, frankly, that doesn't need to occur if there was some verification process prior.

The CHAIR: I know you said there were nine, but they weren't the only projects in your council areas, Singleton and Muswellbrook. Do you know what the total number of generation developments are sitting there, speculatively?

JEFF DRAYTON: We understand we have about 15 in total. The nine I speak of is just in one area. Some of them are at Sandy Creek Road and McCullys Gap Road. But we have interest from about 15 proponents in total, only two approvals to date.

MARY-ANNE CRAWFORD: We don't have the scale of generation projects that Muswellbrook is experiencing. I'm not quite sure why, but probably land value and proximity to the urban centres may be a reason why. At the moment, we have the Bowmans Creek Wind Farm, Maison Dieu Solar Farm and the proposed Mitchells Flat solar farm. We anticipate that we'll be more of a transmitting LGA rather than an actual generation LGA.

JUSTIN FITZPATRICK-BARR: I think, with that, that alone is one way of quietening down all of the noise in relation to this. If the Hunter-Central Coast REZ is more a transmission REZ, let's be open and honest about it so that these project proponents don't come after approvals to try to then get access to road reserves and access to the network. If there is only one gigawatt of power available in the network for generation here in the Hunter, strategically recognise where the best location is for that and be done with it. These are some of the questions we ask of EnergyCo, and EnergyCo may not be the agency that has the rights over approvals of access to the network, but some of the simple things we ask is, "How much of that one gigawatt of capacity for generation in Hunter-Central Coast is taken up?" We unfortunately haven't gotten an answer yet.

I think about a project that's approved, Bowmans Creek Wind Farm, and it's part of our submission. Bowmans Creek Wind Farm relies on about 17 kilometres of road reserve, some of which goes between two parts of a mine site which—they were in the process of seeking an extension. That approval sits there as an approved project that the proponent may onsell. Taking on board the 17 kilometres of road reserve that needs to be approved by the local roads authority—which is council—that's taking out of an Environmental Planning And Assessment Act approval into a roads Act to get approval from the local roads authority, who obviously needs to support the local community, who didn't want the project to go ahead anyhow.

This project straddles across the boundary, so it impacts on Muswellbrook as well as a little bit of Upper Hunter. And then we don't even start to talk about the amount of road works that would be required for the project to even occur. These are the sorts of things that fundamentally should be sorted out prior to a project even being assessed by the planning department. The road reserve—we talk about the Port to REZ project. That's Transport for NSW looking after the State network to get infrastructure from the port out to the renewable energy zones. Some might call that—well, it is the Port to REZ project, but it's the last mile that really counts. In our case, it's the last 20 miles up into the mountains. The roadworks that are required, it just wouldn't feasibly stack up. Let's work that out before the projects even get assessed by the department of planning.

The CHAIR: I know you said EnergyCo might not be the right agency, but do you think there should be a clear, definitive statement from the State Government, and fund that through whatever agency you want to fund it through, but there should be a clear, definitive statement from State Government that this area is mainly transmission, not generation, and if there is to be generation, it's at this nominated figure. Do you think that would do?

JUSTIN FITZPATRICK-BARR: For certain. There are all these project proponents popping up around the place and we can only talk about the ones that we're experiencing here in Singleton. But if one gigawatt is the amount, what does that translate to in terms of numbers of solar farms and the number of wind farms, and be done with it—remove that angst that's been created in the community. As I pointed out, we only knew about Mitchells Flat solar farm after the proponent went and engaged with the community. The project isn't even in the planning system yet, yet there are posters everywhere all around the farmlands that were going to be impacted, not to mention the people in town who would be impacted by the transmission lines, if it came up. They don't yet know about those transmission lines, or a lot of them wouldn't even know about the transmission lines potentially coming into the urban areas, if the project got up.

But that would rely on council supporting the project and allowing that project to run the transmission lines in the road reserve. As I pointed out, it's a road reserve that a lot of it's tree lined. It's got important biodiversity elements to it that we've got to protect and maintain. These are the problems with the chicken before the egg, the cart before the horse. We need to take a strategic approach to this and be done with calling this a

renewable energy zone when, in fact, it's going to primarily be a transmission zone for renewable energies with limited input from generators. The generators are going to be Central-West Orana and New England. EnergyCo have openly said that to us at COREM, which is an organisation of renewable energy mayors that get together when we have Country Mayors. They are the most impacted from a generation point of view. We're going to be impacted by transmission as it comes into Bayswater and then heads off down to Eraring or Olney.

These are fundamentally some of the things we asked of EnergyCo and I don't think EnergyCo has all the answers because when it comes into the Roads Act, that's obviously Transport for NSW. So we have a conversation with Transport for NSW and we say, "Okay, you're doing the Port to REZ, but has anyone actually assessed, say, Bowmans Creek Wind Farm, which has been approved? Has anyone assessed getting turbines up to that Ravensworth intersection and then what's the route that's going to be taken to get to those projects? Has anyone assessed that?" All of that I see coming back to council. As we pointed out earlier, we don't have resources to do that assessment, let alone being involved in those projects if it did eventuate and stacked up from a feasibility point of view; yet this project has been approved.

The CHAIR: Would it be better if those meetings you had with EnergyCo had a Transport for NSW rep and maybe someone from Planning and someone from other agencies, so it wasn't just talking to individual silos? You could get all your answers in one fell swoop.

JUSTIN FITZPATRICK-BARR: Yes.

MARY-ANNE CRAWFORD: I think that's a very good suggestion because what we meet with EnergyCo about is just EnergyCo's projects. There may be a transport element to that because Transport is looking after the Port to REZ, but that's all they're there to talk about. They're not there to talk about these larger cumulative issues that we've raised here today.

JEFF DRAYTON: We've had a number of meetings for exactly the reason you say because we've seen the requirement that EnergyCo aren't going to be able to give us the answers here. It's Transport, so we've had a number of meetings now with both Transport for NSW and EnergyCo. We've invited both along for exactly the reasons you outlined.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: I was just going to say—and you've probably answered—but one of the things that is quite a common theme again, no matter where we are, is that community discontent when there's uncertainty for projects that may or may not go ahead. I think Mitchells Flat is a really good example. We were out there briefly yesterday. In terms of how high this issue is ranking in your community in terms of causing concern and division with that uncertainty, is that something that you're seeing increase more and more and would, as the Chair said, a better process around this at the beginning help to alleviate some of that community unrest in your view?

JUSTIN FITZPATRICK-BARR: Community unrest? Our communities up here have been open to large, State-significant projects for a lot of decades—we've got mine sites around us everywhere, both here and in Muswellbrook—very supportive. We see the benefits of all this, and the flow-on benefits over the decades. What we're seeing with renewable energy, though, and the way it's being rolled out is potentially going to have a negative impact on a community that's already supported energy production. They're seeing renewables as having further impact on a community that's already been impacted by large mine sites.

The fact that a community then has to go through significant gatherings and protests and stuff—have placards up on farmland fences and whatever—for a project that may never, ever eventuate is just not fair on this community, who has already experienced decades worth of impact from being in a power generation zone. I think, in hindsight, you'd probably approach it in a different way, but certainly it's not fair on communities to actually put them through the angst for them to find out later on that the project may have never got up anyway because it relied on 14 kilometres of road reserve, or it doesn't even have access to the network.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Yes, it's a lot of upset for maybe no outcome.

JUSTIN FITZPATRICK-BARR: A lot. And those neighbours that are immediately adjacent to these things, it's not good for their health. It's not fair for those people to be subjected to that.

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

JEFF DRAYTON: Yes, I did. I guess it's in two parts, for us. As I mentioned earlier, we have coalmine closures coming, so about 12,000 jobs, 2030. I think a lot of our community have the view—and of course probably some of it due to the rollout of renewable energy—but we've got this problem where a lot of those people in our community see that the renewable energy rollout is the reason they're losing their job. It's really difficult in an area like this where we lose the industry we've relied on for 100 years and we've got to now rely on an industry

that they know the industry itself won't replace the jobs they're about to lose. Of course, that's a separate issue we have to deal with, but we have recognised this community issue.

I might be a week early in confirming it, but we're in the process now—we have a building within our shire, a couple of floors that were empty. We're now about to fill that up with State and Federal government groups in regards to renewable energy, and all the proponents, so any proponent who wants to move in there will move in there. We estimate we might have about 10 of those proponents move in there. The idea of that is having them all in one building together so that the community can walk in and ask those questions. It is frustrating—they come to council and a lot of the time we can't tell them where to go to get answers, or certainly we can't give them those answers. If we can say to them, "Listen, here's the proponent you're talking about. You walk in and ask him yourself, or we'll guide you through it," we hope that will make that much easier.

TREVOR RYAN: From a Dungog perspective, I guess community unrest usually comes when a proposal comes into the system or enters the system, whether it's through the NSW Planning Portal and then there's a notification process. Given Dungog hasn't really seen that sort of interest in those proposals, I would say there's probably more of an unawareness amongst the community around what the REZ is and what the potential implications are, particularly for those local government areas who haven't seen that level of interest like Muswellbrook and Singleton. For Dungog, we've got other considerations. We don't have mining, but we do supply over 80 per cent of the Lower Hunter drinking water catchment. We have a lot of catchments and river catchments in our local government area. That's a separate matter that our council will need to work through, particularly with Hunter Water, in relation to these types of developments that may be in proximity to drinking water catchments.

JEFF DRAYTON: If I could just give one final example about the angst it does cause, I mentioned a number of times about the nine proponents. When we organised that community meeting, we were aware of six. We had calls from people within the community who'd been approached by a proponent who had then encouraged that proponent to come to the meeting, so by the time the meeting came about there was actually nine. Three of those, council weren't even aware of. We were only made aware of them through the community, who these proponents had directly approached. Hence, we had the community turning up to this meeting being aware of six, and all of a sudden there's nine there. In the example I gave you earlier he said, "Hang on, that's one's only 500 yards down the road, at my neighbour's. I didn't know that was going on." Again, all it does is create angst. It creates some level of deceit of, "Why are you hiding it? Why did you know but I didn't?" Those have been some of the problems we've had to deal with.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: On a slightly different topic, the other thing we've spoken about a bit in these hearings is what happens at the end of life of these projects and the decommissioning options. Particularly to Singleton and Muswellbrook, with your long history of mining where there are very clear rules about what happens at the end of life but there aren't as much with these projects, what are your views on how that should be managed? Should there be things like decommissioning bonds? How do you feel that should be approached by Government?

JEFF DRAYTON: I guess we are lucky—I'm not speaking for Singleton. But we are lucky. We've been dealing with these big companies for a long time, so we have planning departments, even for regional councils that are quite familiar with dealing with them. I'm saying that as opposed to a regional council that's never had to deal with a big proponent. Only recently, you'd probably be aware, we have the OX2 project that's on the former Muswellbrook Idemitsu coalmine site. We made a submission in regard to the conditions which should be imposed, and the planning commission agreed with those. A number of those were obviously on pre-construction and post-construction, about what they have to do.

They're conditions that, certainly, it's a policy position that our council has now taken. Conditions like waste, for instance, when they're building the project, which is that no waste will go to landfill. You need to recycle all the waste. This is a solar project. They have to come to us with a deal in regard to housing their people and local employment. They had to come to council and effectively discuss with council to come to some arrangement in regard to those. That also goes for end of life. As I say, that's a policy position of Muswellbrook council. That will be something that we'll be doing everything we can to impose on each of these projects as they're approved.

MARY-ANNE CRAWFORD: From Singleton's perspective, we've got a long history and experience with mining projects in particular. Decommissioning bonds are not a new thing. They're held for a whole range of different types of development. They're held to ensure that projects meet community standards and don't leave long-term legacy issues for future generations. They're not held because a landowner wants to hold a whole bunch of money. They're there to make sure that their future generations are secure and that what the developer is actually doing is making sure that their community standards are met. From our perspective, it shouldn't be left to

individual landowners to carry that risk that's associated with decommissioning. Given that decommissioning bonds are a State Government policy position—they're in the Mining Act—it's not a huge leap, I don't think, to incorporate something related to decommissioning bonds in the resources and energy SEPP, for example, to help support landowners in addressing some of those more technical issues of decommissioning, like waste management, contamination, remediation and those sorts of things.

It's also really important to point out that the NSW Farmers have developed a tool to assist farmers in being able to understand and navigate some of the landowner agreement processes that are put in place. Again, I don't necessarily think that that should be left to farmers' associations and individual landowners to try and navigate. Those support systems need to be put in place. I think Councillor Drayton's comment about having embedded agencies within communities to help landowners navigate the journey of this transition in a positive way does two things. It shows that you're on the journey with us and that you're committed to embedding your own resources in communities to help support the communities' transition. It also means that people have a face to go and talk to as well. We raised that yesterday when we had a meeting with the Net Zero Economy Authority, the importance of having that, particularly for our communities that are experiencing a post-mining transition. It is uncertain, it is difficult and it is challenging for them. We've got governments that are committed, but if we had agencies that were committed to be within our regions, that would send a very positive message and probably address some of the angst that we're experiencing.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Mr Fitzpatrick-Barr, in your submission you mentioned—and I may have read it wrong—that councils wouldn't be benefiting from the transmission benefits sharing scheme. What would you like to see changed—and I open this up to everyone—if that's what I understand it to be?

JUSTIN FITZPATRICK-BARR: I will touch on the transmission benefits scheme. As was pointed out by Mary-Anne, at this point in time the guidelines don't really offer any benefits for transmission lines in public road reserves on public land, certainly they help those private landowners in those REZs. For us, it's very unclear if there is opportunity for proponents to use our road reserves, how we benefit and what that would look like. We've obviously done some numbers based on what we believe it is worth commercially, but it would be good to have some guidelines around that.

MARY-ANNE CRAWFORD: To further Justin's comments, I noted in DCCEEW's submission that they endorse the use of VPAs for renewable energy projects, but they don't go to renewable energy transmission infrastructure. In our case, we have an adopted planning agreements policy, which is 1.5 per cent of the capital investment value. We also have an adopted contributions plan, which is 1 per cent of the capital investment value. From our council's perspective, that's the policy framework that we operate within in order to negotiate planning agreement outcomes. Whether or not we will see that from the Hunter Transmission Project, we don't know, because they haven't put anything on the table around community benefits for their project at all in their EIS. We've not had any conversations with EnergyCo at all about the community benefit scheme from the Hunter Transmission Project. The Ausgrid project came under the infrastructure SEPP, where they could do it effectively without consent, which means the provisions of the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act and the ability to levy contributions or to enter into a planning agreement don't exist. We've not been offered anything in terms of compensation for our community and community benefits in relation to the Ausgrid augmentation project.

JEFF DRAYTON: Without repeating anything that's been said, of course, because we're in the same position, but, again, even with EnergyCo with this transmission project, we've adopted the same principles in regard to the benefit the community can get out of it. One of those benefits, after some discussion with EnergyCo, is workers' accommodation, so temporary, village-style worker accommodation, not dongas in the middle of a paddock—I think "dongas" was a word that EnergyCo might have used initially—that are a 20-minute drive from town in the middle of nowhere. We see that some of the community benefits should be—of course housing is an issue; it's in issue for all of us. We want some legacy housing. The position we've taken with EnergyCo—and they have supported us in regard to some assistance with finance for mapping some of those areas where we might put these on the edge of town—these temporary worker villages. In the design phase, you would design them for post-use for temporary workers. They could be used for aged care, tourist accommodation or emergency housing. Again, without direct monetary benefits, there are certainly some other benefits. After some lengthy discussions with EnergyCo, they now support council's position.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: I'm also wondering whether the Government has any had any communication regarding the access fee scheme. If so, what difference would it make for your council?

MARY-ANNE CRAWFORD: It's my understanding that EnergyCo are not intending to do an access scheme for the Hunter renewable energy zone because—I think Justin touched on it—the connection is significantly less than the other zones. So we're in an information vacuum—that is probably the right phrase to use. We don't know what the community benefit scheme will look like for the renewable energy zone.

DEREK FINNIGAN: Just to support Mary-Anne's comments, we haven't had those discussions either. If I could just add to the previous question, in Muswellbrook, and I know in Singleton as well, we would work closely together around this to make sure there is an alignment of their approach and consistency for the community. Both of our councils are very familiar with the planning agreement landscape. We enter into planning agreements with mining companies; we've been doing that for a long time. Our consideration is that, with the new proponents that come online from renewable energy projects, we will provide a similar approach. We know that the proponents often like their contribution to be a legacy for their individual projects, so there is a suggestion that small parks or small discrete projects will occur.

However, from our perspective, we want to consolidate that into a community benefit fund. Council has a policy in relation to that so that with all of these proponents, including the mining companies, who choose to engage in the community benefit fund—to consolidate those funds to provide greater benefit to the community for larger scale projects, but also for a quantum of that contribution to be set aside for investment purposes to ensure financial sustainability into the future. It's not going to solve problems, but it's a contributor to council's financial sustainability.

The CHAIR: We did hear similar evidence in the New England about a community benefit fund being managed that way. Are you able to, on notice, provide a copy of your policies regarding what that would look like? That would help the Committee in making recommendations around that.

DEREK FINNIGAN: Yes, of course.

The CHAIR: Does Singleton Council have a similar policy?

MARY-ANNE CRAWFORD: Yes, we have a legacy fund which incorporates four different elements, but we can provide a copy of the legacy fund and the plans of management that support that fund.

The CHAIR: That would be great. Mr Donnelly, do you have any more questions?

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: No, that was very good evidence. I appreciate it very much.

The CHAIR: That takes us pretty close to time. I do not believe you took any questions on notice, other than the last one that you were to come back with some documents on. We may have some supplementary questions that the secretariat will send through to you within maybe a couple of days. Thank you for taking the time to have a conversation about this issue.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Short adjournment)

Mr **TIMOTHY JARRATT**, Group Executive, Market Development and Strategy, Ausgrid, sworn and examined

Mr **DANIEL SARTOR**, Head of Major Projects, Ausgrid, sworn and examined

Mr **MICHAEL JOHNSON**, General Manager, Community and Social Licence, Transgrid, sworn and examined

Mr **STRUAN WILSON**, Program Director – Hunter Transmission Project, Transgrid, sworn and examined

Mr **RICHARD POOLE**, Chief Executive Officer, Verdant Earth Technologies, sworn and examined

Mr **COSTA TSIOLKAS**, General Manager, Verdant Earth Technologies, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: Welcome back after that brief break. I welcome our next witnesses. Starting with you, Mr Sartor or Mr Jarratt, would you like to make a short opening statement before we go to questions?

TIMOTHY JARRATT: Chair and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear today on behalf of Ausgrid. I'm joined today by my colleague Daniel Sartor, head of major projects. We welcome this inquiry and the chance to contribute to such an important discussion about the future of energy in New South Wales. Ausgrid is proud to serve as the electricity distribution network for 1.8 million households and businesses across Sydney, the Central Coast and the Hunter. That responsibility means that, every day, we are not only maintaining poles, wires and substations but also supporting the economic and social lives of the communities we serve. Today we would like to give the Committee an update on the HCC REZ project—what has been achieved, what lessons we have learnt, the challenges we still face and the vision we have for how Ausgrid can be a partner to Parliament and government in the years ahead.

Since January Ausgrid has been active on multiple fronts across the Hunter and Central Coast. We have undertaken an extensive program of community consultation. We did not approach this as a box-ticking exercise. Rather, we proactively engaged with local councils, resident groups and local businesses and held one-on-one conversations with landowners. Our engagement strategy included technical and operational staff to be available in every conversation to ensure that we could work constructively through any issues raised to deliver a positive outcome for residents. The feedback has been clear: People want renewable energy, but they also want transparency and fairness. This means early information, clear communication about impacts and visible local benefits. We have taken this feedback seriously and adjusted project plans as a result.

We are proud to have been recognised for this work on the project. Recently, Ausgrid won the 2025 Energy Networks Consumer Engagement Award for our *Empowering and energising community: The Wanaruah/Wonnarua Community Energy Strategy*, which was co-designed with the Wonnarua people and Indigenous Energy Australia. Ausgrid has demonstrated that renewable energy zones do not need to be drawn-out, adversarial processes; they can be collaborative, efficient and constructive. By upgrading capacity within existing Ausgrid easements, we can connect new generation and a new load without the delays, and without impacts on cost, community and the environment that come with constructing entirely new corridors. This approach means that communities are not asked to accept vast new corridors of infrastructure. Instead, we are minimising disruption and focusing investment where it is most efficient. Ausgrid has been proactively working with EnergyCo and Transgrid to develop future stages of the HCC REZ project using the same, less impactful model. We estimate that we could deliver an additional 3.7 gigawatts of capacity on top of the one gigawatt this current stage is providing.

Whilst not the HCC REZ per se, we wanted to take the opportunity to mention our proposal for a community power network trial at Charmhaven on the Central Coast and Botany/Mascot in Sydney. A community power network is a smart, local energy solution that helps everyone benefit from rooftop solar, regardless of whether you live in a house or apartment, rent or own, or are a small retail business or large industrial customer. This proposal is currently being considered by the Australian Energy Regulator. It works by using unused rooftops and shared batteries to create and store solar energy to make clean power available to the whole community. What is powerful about this model is that it came directly from what we heard in consultation—tangible local benefits—and the cities and suburbs also doing their part to support the energy transition.

Where does this leave us? There has been a significant focus by governments on the need to develop large-scale energy generation and transmission projects. Similarly, individuals and governments have also driven investment in smaller, behind-the-meter solutions like household solar and domestic batteries. But we know from international experiences that there is more that can be done in the middle. That's where the distribution networks come in. To deliver on the renewable energy targets set by government, we are going to need to use all the tools available to us. Distribution networks like Ausgrid are a tool that hasn't been fully taken out of the box yet. Ausgrid's message to the Committee is simple: We are ready, we are capable and we are committed to delivering the renewable energy zones that work for New South Wales. Above all, we are committed to being a reliable,

transparent and constructive partner for government and for Parliament. Ausgrid is proud to play its part in that story. We thank the Committee for the opportunity to present today. We welcome your questions.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Good morning, Chair, Deputy Chair and Committee members. I would like to acknowledge the Wonnarua traditional owners of the land on which we meet here today. I pay my respect to Elders past and present. I would like to begin by thanking the people of regional New South Wales for their fundamental role in our State's transition to renewable energy. We thank them for hosting infrastructure on their properties and for working on the transmission networks as well as the generators and batteries. We thank the many regional businesses who support us in our work. We also recognise the impact our work and infrastructure has on our landowners and their neighbours and communities in regional areas.

Transgrid has been part of regional New South Wales since the first large generators were built near coalfields, on the coast and in the Snowy Mountains 70 years ago. We are deeply committed to ensuring the local communities and businesses where we work are supported—now more than ever as we shift to a renewable grid for the State. We recognise the need for the energy transition to be fair and inclusive, particularly by creating opportunities and benefits for the communities who host new electricity infrastructure. We've listened extensively to regional communities and understand their expectations. They want honest, transparent communication about projects; clear plans and timelines; and actions based on community feedback.

Communities are also calling for genuine investment that prioritises long-term benefits, including the hiring and training of locals, funding infrastructure and services, and educating young people about energy and the transition along with landowners being fairly compensated. We recognise that the Government and regulatory bodies are already making reforms in these areas. Transgrid welcomed the New South Wales Government's Strategic Benefit Payments Scheme, which has begun supporting landholders in south-west New South Wales for Project EnergyConnect. We will support the New South Wales Government on additional support for people who neighbour properties that are hosting transmission lines and addressing issues like visual impact.

Along with other transmission service providers, we are urging the Australian Government to review capital gains tax on landholder payments for critical electricity infrastructure. For over 70 years, we have supported regional and rural communities by providing essential electricity services, jobs, training and opportunities. We employ more than 2,000 people with more than one-third based in regional New South Wales, including a growing apprenticeship program to meet the challenges of renewable transition. We know that transitioning to renewables will help keep downward pressure on household power bills by reducing wholesale generation costs by 3¢ to 4¢ per kilowatt hour. Connecting renewable generators and storage to the network is essential for our consumers.

We are committed to strengthening industry-wide collaboration to deliver the infrastructure for the transition, ensure fair compensation for impacted communities and balancing these costs for energy consumers across the State. We welcome the opportunity to participate in this inquiry and are committed to supporting improvements for better planning of these vital projects and minimising impacts on our communities. We thank the Committee for your work in this area and are happy to answer any questions.

RICHARD POOLE: Good morning. Just for the Committee's interest, we are currently converting the Redbank Power Station from a coal-fired power station into a near-net-zero biomass station. Our mid-term goal is to be the first negative emission generator in Australia delivering 24/7 power. We see this as a critical part of the support for solar and wind. In fact, what we are doing is supported by the IPCC and the IEA, which believe that modern bioenergy by 2050 to obtain the less than five degrees scenarios or pathways should represent 18 per cent of global energy. Of that 18 per cent, 60 per cent, or 10 per cent of the total, is biomass generation. We think Australia is underdone in this. We think there's a clear pathway here to deliver some stability and system strength and assist the transition into green renewables.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Mr Jarratt, you mentioned it in your opening statement but I was particularly interested in that part in your submission where you talked about the role that urban centres play in the renewables rollout or energy transition. As someone who lives in a regional community, I think there is that feeling that everything's sort of happening out here. I think community sentiment is that it'd be nice to have some of that responsibility taken on in urban areas as well. I know you did talk about that power network, but can you just talk us through a little bit more what that would look like in practice, any barriers to getting that started—I think you said you're still waiting for approval from the regulator—and how you see that also assisting in terms of renewables across the State.

TIMOTHY JARRATT: Sure. The community power network is a proposal we've put forward to the AER for its sandboxing mechanism, which is a way that new ideas and new concepts can be tested out. The current stage we're at is that public consultation has just closed and the AER is now in the phase of deliberating as to what its answer will be to our proposal. To explain what the proposal is, the idea is to use lots of locally placed batteries

in a zone or two of our network to encourage maximum usage of roof space, and this is in particular aimed at what we call commercial and industrial roof space. If you fly into Sydney and look out the window, you'll see that an awful lot of those warehouses don't have anything on the roof, or if they do have solar on the roof, it's a tiny strip of about 100 kilowatts, which is just there to power the office and a few of the lights. It's quite stark. You see some major warehouses, major buildings and industrial buildings and then next door there are apartment blocks where we know there is an awful lot of renters and we know that those people are currently excluded.

Rooftop solar is a great success story for Australia. If you rent, if you live in an apartment or if you're a low-income family, you have no access to rooftop solar at the moment. The idea of the community power network is to maximise available roof space in the area, create the ability to absorb the power generated and then redirect it so that all people in the zone of our network benefit and not just those who can afford or have access to a roof to put rooftop solar on. We think that if we reached a good level of potential in a zone, we could generate about 30 per cent of what the zones would need in terms of energy. That would obviously take a bit of pressure off what needs to be generated outside of the cities and suburbs going forward.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: I think, again, that's a fairly universal sentiment when we've been having the regional hearings, particularly people feeling a bit like, as I said, all the generation is out here. If there's an urban element to be able to do it, I think that's really encouraging. Good luck with hopefully getting that up and running if that pans out. My other question is probably to both Ausgrid and Transgrid in terms of that community engagement piece because, again, that has been quite a significant theme, probably more so with proponents of individual projects than necessarily transmission networks. What does best practice look like with community engagement from your perspectives? Are there things that could be in place, even in terms of government or departmental assistance, that would make that process smoother in your opinion? I'm happy for any or all of you to answer.

TIMOTHY JARRATT: Do you want to go first, Daniel?

DANIEL SARTOR: Thank you. My philosophy when it comes to community engagement is you need to find good, engaged people that are very familiar with your business and just give them the space and the time to have deep and meaningful engagements with the people that are impacted by the projects. That sounds simple, but it's actually incredibly complex. What that means is we've actually had to stand up the team. Some people were redirected from different parts of our organisation. We did also hire some new people. But we've had to build a team that's there and based in the community that is ready to engage on the project in all the places where the community will be. It's not as simple as having a stall in the middle of town and waiting for people to arrive. We actually need to take that team to the places where the people will be.

That means we're there for all of the various community events, we're hosting online forums, we're knocking on doors, we're having one-on-one engagements with individuals. And it's not as simple as bringing just the community consultation people; we're also involving our operational and project management people in that journey as well, so that when a landowner has a question about what construction will be like or, "Is it possible to slightly change your design in a way that can be a little bit more amenable to our use of the property?", we've got the people there in that engagement that are able to answer those questions.

I might tell a story of a great example that we have on the Hunter-Central Coast project. There's a particular stretch of the project where we saw a lot of community and landowner risk, given that in the space of three properties there was a winery and a wedding chapel. What that meant was we did a lot of planning before we actually knocked on those doors and had that engagement. Our people prepared a list of different potential options for how we could have delivered the project through those properties. We had a list of about four or five different options so that when we knocked on that door and had those conversations and engaged with those landowners, we almost had a menu list of items that that landowner could select from. And because we had the operational and project management people in those conversations, when the landowner said, "Well, I kind of like this part of option C, but I also like this other part of option D," we had the people there that were able to augment those solutions in a way that we could actually deliver a great win-win both for the landowner and our ability to deliver the project.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: I'm happy to add to that. The approach, very similar to what Ausgrid is taking, is very much a place-based approach, and Transgrid has definitely adopted a very similar philosophy. We've really identified that being in line with and participating in the national guidelines for community engagement and prioritising face-to-face engagement and having people from the community in the community to really have these deep conversations creates a better understanding for us to understand all the impacts on community that our transmission projects actually do have. So we take a lot of time to engage with community on their time, in their way, by really adjusting our engagement approach accordingly. Engagement is a formal process and we're making

sure that we've got the right information for them at the right time and involving them in the process from the early design and concepts right through into delivery and then into operations and maintenance.

For Transgrid, the relationships with these landowners are integral for us because, not just through the construction period but also the operations and maintenance, they're living with our assets, they're living with our easements. We've put a very strong emphasis on the code of conduct that we will do in how we will behave in interacting with them. We're very transparent about that. We've been very transparent in our process of decision-making, understanding the reasons and justifications for projects but also how we can build those relationships effectively from the beginning of a project, in concept design, right through to maintaining that relationship with the landowner through operations and maintenance. We take it very much as a large part of our role—and the community is continuing that engagement—and adjusting our engagement through the different life cycles of the project to make sure that we are giving the community what they need to understand through that process, and they understand how they can influence and change the project accordingly to their feedback and input.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Mr Poole, obviously with your projects you're replacing one that was already there. In terms of community information about what you're doing and how that might be different, is that something that you've engaged with, that you can speak to?

RICHARD POOLE: Yes, sure. We actually contact objectors and ask them if they want to come and see us. We try to do as much community engagement as we can. Costa runs community engagement. We've talked about having open days at the power station for people. I don't know whether, Costa, you've got more to add?

COSTA TSIOLKAS: The invitation has been out there for community to come and understand a little bit more about it but, unfortunately, we didn't get very much interest. Even when we officially invited people over, we'd receive a letter saying, "No, we're not"—

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Because there was infrastructure there beforehand, maybe it's not as contentious as some of the others, perhaps.

COSTA TSIOLKAS: A different story, yes. At least for them to understand what we are trying to do and the options available to us, going forward, we need to explain how that is also a renewable option. We'd welcome—again, it's an open invitation to anybody to come and visit and understand how we do it, why we're doing it and the benefits to the community and to the grid.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Good morning to all of you. Thank you for coming along and giving us evidence today. I think we've heard a lot from the community about the importance of the "how" when we're doing these renewable rollouts. From my perspective, there's not a huge opposition to the idea of renewables. It's more about the way that renewables have been rolled out and the manner in which community are being consulted et cetera. There has been quite a lot of focus on government in relation to that, and EnergyCo, but also you play a really big role in ensuring that these things are done in a way that does bring the community on board.

In that light, if I could ask Ausgrid a couple of questions, there have been a couple of reports just this month that have been a bit concerning around Ausgrid. The first one has been in relation to the cutting of safety inspectors and cutting costs on safety inspections, which would put workers in particular at risk, as well as consumers. I understand that there was a report commissioned—that Ausgrid had—that showed that it was actually cheaper to injure workers and pay them out than it would be to conduct those inspections. That is a pretty big accusation. Did you want to respond to that today?

TIMOTHY JARRATT: If I take that safety inspector's point and give a bit of background, historically Ausgrid had a team of inspectors who would go all the way through into all sorts of buildings and actually overlapped with what the building inspectorate was meant to do. There was all this bureaucracy and duplication of who should be doing what. As part of that, we took a review of what we're doing in that space. It was clear that we were adding extra layers of bureaucracy, which was actually slowing down people's connections, especially at townhouses and other sorts of dwellings or small buildings. It was the legacy that hung over us from quite a while away.

As part of that review, we examined what other networks in New South Wales were doing. Endeavour, since about 2016, has not actually been doing this level of inspection for the smaller buildings, because that is the purview of the building inspectorate. So we had decided to adjust our approach to match that of Endeavour, and that is really the result of why we've changed our inspection program. Just to be very clear, our network inspection teams, where our critical focus is on network safety—that remains unchanged. It's just the level of inspection for connections behind the meter into buildings, things like townhouses and other small properties—that's what has been changed, and that's what has resulted in the change in the size of the team doing that work. In terms of safety

for the customers, those buildings are still being inspected but it's being done by the building inspectorate, not by Ausgrid.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Just to clarify, that report that you received, then, that has been reported in the media as saying that it was cheaper to actually injure workers and pay them out than to run the inspections yourself—do you have an official response to that? That's pretty damning.

TIMOTHY JARRATT: I'd say that elements of that report have been taken out of context. That report was used as part of the consultation to understand how we should proceed and go forward. It was one input into the decision-making process. As I said, we very much looked at what other networks were doing and matched our approach to that, rather than—so it was one input into that process. But I would say that elements of that report have been selectively quoted rather than the report looked at in the whole.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Is it your view, then, that the safety of your workers is at the same level now as before you made the decision to cut the inspectors?

TIMOTHY JARRATT: Absolutely, because we have not changed how we're approaching network safety. Our workers who are working on the network day in, day out, that element has not been changed. It's just the element that overlapped with where the building inspectorate looks at connections and safety there often. Actually, what we found was it was causing delays and problems with customers because us having duplicated inspections was delaying things with the additional forms, and so on and so forth. We feel it's got to end up with a clearer situation so everyone knows who is doing what. And the actual levels of safety, from my point of view and the network side of things, are unchanged.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: When it comes to, for example, the inspectors for when you've got a proposed community power network, that would still be something that you would have inspectors for?

TIMOTHY JARRATT: We're still working through the details. But, yes, if we're connecting assets onto the network, which is we're talking about batteries in the low voltage part of the network in a zone, that's network connections and that would be covered by our inspectors, who look at network connections.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Obviously the pace and quality of the renewables rollout is quite reliant on having a good workforce and being able to attract and retain engineers. There's been a lot of concerns raised about the rate of shocks, particularly for trainees, within a number of companies. Do you keep data on the level of shock injuries to your workers and, in particular, trainees?

DANIEL SARTOR: Yes. In short, we do. We have quite comprehensive safety statistics of all incidents that occur on our network, ranging from those that cause harm right down to those in the category of near misses. We do have comprehensive data for all sections of our internal and external workforce.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Are you able to provide the Committee with data, say, over the last five years showing us the trend of what that looks like in terms of whether that's getting worse or better, because what we're hearing, at least anecdotally, and what we're hearing from surveys of workers is that it's getting worse and that things are less safe?

DANIEL SARTOR: I actually don't have the data with me here at this moment, but we can take that on notice and provide that following this Committee.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: If I could ask both companies to do that, that would be great—Transgrid and Ausgrid. The other thing that's been in the news—I think maybe this was just today that this was reported—is the enormous Ausgrid profits and \$517 million being handed over to shareholders. At the same time, the Australian Energy Regulator increased Ausgrid's operating budget by almost 10 per cent, which the National Electrical and Communications Association chief said is adding about \$50 to annual household electricity bills. Obviously news like that, where people are looking at the massive profits that you're making and then also looking at the additional amounts that are being put on their bills, particularly when it comes to renewables rollouts et cetera can threaten the social licence again. So again, in that light, what do you say about the idea that your company's profiting too much and taking too much from consumers and giving it to shareholders?

TIMOTHY JARRATT: I can start by saying that Ausgrid is regulated by the AER. They very much determine the regulated returns we're allowed to take. We are—in the year just finished—in year one of our five-year regulatory reset that started in July last year, so we're just into year two of that. That's a process that the AER runs every five years for us. The AER is there to make sure that Australian consumers get the level of service from electricity networks that is not overcharged. Networks like ours provide customers with a cost-effective service. I think I would say that if you look back in time, the cost of the distribution network piece in our element has actually gone down in the last decade since the privatisation period, so actually the element of network charges has decreased.

The interesting issue to note, though, is that obviously we, as Ausgrid, collect all the network charges. When people see "network charge" on their bill, it's not just Ausgrid. It includes Transgrid. It also includes the energy road map and other elements in there. When people talk about network charges, you need to see it in the whole and see what else is included in that. I think the final point I would say about the ownership structure is that it's important to remember that just under half of Ausgrid is owned by the State of New South Wales. Any dividends or any profits that convert into dividends and flow through to the investors—just under half of that goes back to the State Treasury for reinvestment, wherever the State Treasurer wants to put that money.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: When I was talking about trainees before, I did, of course, mean apprentices. Apologies to all of the electricians watching who would have been frustrated by that.

The CHAIR: Can I quickly go to the issue of jobs, and local jobs. Ausgrid, you have some pretty ambitious targets there—90 per cent local workers, 30 per cent apprentices, 15 per cent across unrepresented groups. Are you able to break that down in terms of how many of those jobs will be permanent, casual, contract et cetera for this project?

DANIEL SARTOR: I trust you're referring to our industry and Aboriginal participation plan, that we essentially proposed as part of our submission to EnergyCo in securing the HCC REZ. As part of that, we looked at our entire workforce, both in the build phase and also in the ongoing O&M phase. We had bid to EnergyCo, or committed to EnergyCo and the people of New South Wales that we will ensure through our project to meet those targets that you stated. Those are both O&M and delivery phase. When it comes to the delivery phase, absolutely all of the roles that we employ within Ausgrid will be consistent with our broader workforce. For example, we will hire direct apprentices and graduate engineers as a result of winning this project, because Ausgrid has those assets to manage over the long term. Through the build phase, we do have a blended delivery approach that includes both a contracted workforce and our own internal workforce.

I think there was a brief comment earlier today that touched on some of the labour challenges within the broader industry that we're facing, and we recognise that we need a blended approach to deliver this. We have specifically chosen to take some of the more technically complex components and actually source those internally, ourselves, and some of the other parts that are less complex, but we can give out in bulk to external service providers. We've chosen those delivery partners to support us through this project. Our project will have a combination of internal and external, permanent and temporary roles, but in terms of anything that we are hiring specifically for the project, we are putting those people on in permanent roles.

The CHAIR: I might jump to Mr Poole. I wanted to get a bit more information around what you're proposing. In terms of the biofuel, what is it going to be sourced primarily from, in terms of powering the plant?

RICHARD POOLE: In the long term, where we want to actually get to is what's called a purpose-grown biomass, and actually be able to use waste from the waste stream. We finally need to EPA to sign off on that, but we believe the EPA will sign off on that once we've been able to run some trials. We should be able to take waste from the waste stream. For example, this timber floor or whatever—some of that can be used elsewhere, but a lot of that is wasted and goes to landfill or elsewhere. We should be able to take that. But what we want to end up with is purpose-grown. The key part that many people miss is the big breakthrough in purpose-grown has been from the department of primary industry, who has been running a 50,000 tree trial, and they can grow what's called a mallee, and you can coppice these mallees. What you can do is grow it for four years, coppice it, and in that way you actually get net zero fuel, because you've absorbed carbon from the atmosphere, biogenic carbon dioxide, and then you release it.

What that will do is, over time, create a carbon sink. We believe that we will be able to be the first negative emission generator in our system, the Redbank system. Initially, we are seeking to be able to use clearings from road and, of course, waste from INS. The issue around INS, when we talk to the Nature Conservation Council et cetera, is they acknowledge that INS is a problem and it needs to be resolved. But is it land clearing or not land clearing, and how do you manage it and how do we ensure that we don't encourage additional land clearing. So we're looking at caps. We probably need a whole lot less of that than people actually think we do, so we're looking at how do we do that, whether we do offsets, what's the best thing. We'll continue to do that.

That will allow us to establish the process. That will allow us to get Redbank going. Redbank, as I said, is a 24/7 synchronised generator. It's a near net zero station. The long-term move from that is that, since we started this project, groups like Sany and Volvo are now running electric prime movers, which weren't really available five years ago. We'll obviously run a plan to do that because it's obviously very logical to be able to charge a battery at Redbank and have our trucks going to wherever we need to get the fuel from at that point in time, which will eliminate most of the scope threes.

The CHAIR: Do you have a timeline for when you'd be able to transition to purpose-grown?

RICHARD POOLE: Yes. The practical reality of it is, for example, for a thousand hectares we will plan 2½ million seedlings. So the actual part is we talk to the DPI and the CSIRO about a seed bank. We have to create the seed bank and then we have to go out and plant that. The modern technology now—there's a group that has an automated machine that plants about 27,000 seedlings an hour. We know they've just planted 2.4 million, so we know it's practically capable of doing it. So we will grow that out. In terms of the timeline, I think if we really want to get to where we want to get to, we'll start to see the first crops within five years, ignoring whether we use some initial bana grass, and it will grow out over the next 3- to 4-year period after that.

The CHAIR: Are there any residues or waste products from this process that you'll have in terms of ash, slag or other by-products? How would that be handled?

RICHARD POOLE: We will have some ash. I'll hand over to Costa about we're doing on the ash.

COSTA TSIOLKAS: The ash is commonly used as a fertiliser or mixed with fertilisers and applied back onto the land. It's not a hazardous substance. But approvals will have to be approved first, and then we can utilise it.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: I have a couple of questions to Ausgrid. Thank you for the submission. On page 2 of the submission, in the third paragraph, there is a discussion about more potential than the current one gigawatt that could be provided through the HCC REZ in future stages. I wonder whether you could please elucidate on what that future potential is beyond the one gigawatt that we're looking at at the moment.

DANIEL SARTOR: Ausgrid has been undertaking a series of joint planning with both Transgrid and EnergyCo. We've developed up to 3.7 gigawatts worth of additional solutions in the Hunter-Central Coast footprint that we can deliver to connect additional renewable generation capacity beyond the current one gigawatt that we're delivering. These solutions can be delivered in a series of four different stages over the next five to 10 years. These solutions all repeat the same philosophy that we have with our existing solution, in that they take existing corridors that we currently have through the Hunter, dismantle that infrastructure and then rebuild within those same corridors higher capacity infrastructure, essentially avoiding impacting new communities or new landowners by taking new corridors. These solutions are certainly deliverable following on from completion of the current project that we're delivering. Our joint submission—the submission submitted on behalf of Transgrid, Ausgrid and EnergyCo—has been submitted into AEMO and included in their *Electricity Network Options Report* for further consideration, which we hope will ultimately lead to the development of those projects and ultimately them getting turned into a reality.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Just a follow-up question which draws on some of the content basically in the final paragraph of your submission about the community power network. It was raised earlier in a question. Would you be able to talk about the beneficial results and benefits for energy consumers? Can you explain a bit more about how it works, with a bit more specificity, and what kind of expected savings may flow from that?

TIMOTHY JARRATT: In terms of how it works, the idea is to really drive and encourage rooftop solar in zones of our network. Our network splits up into lots of different zones around the region, so we would encourage as much solar on the roofs as we possibly could. That will be soaked up by batteries that would be placed in those zones. We have those of differing size, but we'd place those in the area. They would soak up the power during the day and then redistribute that power back at night, when we have the evening peak when people get home from work, school et cetera. That's the basic concept. The idea is, because we redistribute to everyone in the region, it doesn't matter whether you've got a roof or not, whether you live in an apartment or you're a renter, everyone should get a benefit from that. In terms of saving, we've done lots of modelling and looked at how this will work. We think that when it's up and running in this pilot we're proposing, about \$150 to \$200 per customer is the approximate saving we are forecasting. To put that into context, the DMO or the standard price that gets set for our region by the AER is about \$2,000 per annum for an electricity customer, so it's in the order of 10 per cent, potentially, of bills. But there is obviously a lot more work to be done to prove it up.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: You mentioned a pilot, are you able to go into more detail about the pilot, or is that being worked on at the moment?

TIMOTHY JARRATT: We proposed two zones, two areas of our network, to the AER. One is in Mascot/Botany in Sydney where we have a lot of industrial buildings, a lot of renters and a lot of apartments, so it's very interesting from the equity point of view that I mentioned earlier. The second zone we are proposing is Charmhaven on the Central Coast, which is a slightly different mix. It's still got a very high proportion of renters but it's much more of a suburb, so less in the way of industrial buildings—more detached houses but still an awful lot of renters. Again, they are two quite contrasting zones in our network, so we believe they will give the widest range of learnings from a pilot if we're allowed to go ahead.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Mr Jarratt, in your submission you mentioned that there is no approved access scheme for the Hunter-Central Coast REZ but that Ausgrid is setting aside \$5 million for community benefit. How do you think this compares to the amount that would be retained if there was an access scheme similar to other REZs? Do you have any views on whether an access scheme would be appropriate or beneficial for the Hunter-Central Coast REZ?

DANIEL SARTOR: There's quite a lot to that question, so we might try to break that one down into a few chunks. Firstly, when it comes to social benefits programs, I think it's fair to say that all in this room agree that they are a positive thing. Of course, we have the competing priority of trying to keep a downward pressure on the cost of our projects. As part of our Hunter-Central Coast REZ, as part of our revenue submission to the AER and as part of our proposal to EnergyCo, which they accepted, we have included a \$5 million social licence benefit fund. That is approximately 1 per cent of our total capex cost of the development. It's something that we felt was—through a little bit of benchmarking of other projects around the industry—a prudent size of the social benefit fund. This would consist of essentially employing a person to manage that fund who would have meaningful engagement with the people in the Hunter and Central Coast regions to determine how the community wanted that fund to be spent. That person would then, effectively, execute the delivery of those projects that the community nominated; we deliver on their behalf.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: In the submission, or you said, that it would be co-signed with the community. Has this scheme been approved yet and has the co-design started? Are councils able to be on board with this as well?

DANIEL SARTOR: Firstly, the last one on the councils, the answer is most definitely. We do expect to engage with the councils to help inform how that social licence fund would be spent. Let me just say, we're certainly not expecting to cut a few cheques, sponsor a few buildings, get some names on football shirts and then wrap it up. We expect to do some hard work over the course of the project to administer the deep and meaningful benefits that would make a medium- to long-term benefit for the community. So definitely there will be engagement with the councils. Sorry, I have forgotten the first part of that question.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Has the codesign started and been approved?

DANIEL SARTOR: Unfortunately, the social benefit fund is probably the only part of our revenue submission that the AER have not said that they are likely to accept in full. We are just waiting for the AER to give us certainty as to whether that will or won't be accepted. We have our plans written and we have the individuals ready to commence that engagement once we get certainty that this will be funding that's made available to us.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: I have a quick question in two parts on the community power networks that you were talking about earlier. Could you give us an idea of the size that each of them would be, whether that's geographical, the capacity that's used or the number of households? How are they going to be envisaged? What's the potential in terms of how much capacity they might free up from the grid if we have these community power networks around the place?

TIMOTHY JARRATT: To take the size question, in the two areas we're proposing, the number of customers or households would be about 32,000. It's about, if I remember rightly, 17,000 in the Mascot-Botany area and around 15,000 in the Charmhaven area. So it's of that order. In terms of the potential, we think there's definitely potential to generate at least 30 per cent of local energy requirements from local rooftops. As you can imagine, that would then take some of the pressure off. You wouldn't need to pull that amount of power through the network—from the transmission through the distribution network—from other sources. But, clearly, the nature of the zones in our network varies quite considerably in terms of their load, so we would have to think more deeply going forward about that if it were successful and rolled out. But thinking about another 30 per cent, or one-third, of power requirements being met locally is a good rule of thumb.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: And it might work better in somewhere like Mascot than it would in Elizabeth Bay, where there aren't any factories but there are lots of apartments, for example.

TIMOTHY JARRATT: Yes. Again, that's why it's a pilot and why we're proposing it as a trial to the AER, because there's a lot we would need to test live at scale in the market.

The CHAIR: That concludes our time with you, but I suspect we will have some supplementary questions. You have taken some questions on notice. The secretariat will be in touch with regard to those. Thank you all for your time today.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

Mr JUSTIN PAGE, Coordinator, Hunter Jobs Alliance, affirmed and examined

Mr TOM EDWARDS, Research and Policy Officer, Unions NSW, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

Mr MATTHEW MURRAY, Member, Newcastle Branch Committee, Maritime Union of Australia, affirmed and examined

Mr JAMES MIRANDA, Policy and Research Officer, Electrical Trades Union NSW and ACT Branch, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: We now welcome our next witnesses. Would anyone like to make a short opening statement?

JUSTIN PAGE: Thank you, Chair and Committee members. The Hunter Jobs Alliance strongly supports the renewable energy zones as a cornerstone of the New South Wales clean energy future. REZs offer enormous opportunities for regional jobs, economic growth and a sustainable energy transition. At the same time, the success of the REZs depends on ensuring that local communities benefit fully and are supported through the process. We note and support a number of the Committee's interim report recommendations, particularly conducting independent cumulative impact studies to understand and manage the effects of REZ developments, strengthening community engagement and social impact assessments, providing mental health supports to affected landowners, and identifying ecological protection and restoration priorities ensuring developers contribute to nature positive outcomes.

At the same time, our submission highlights additional considerations to ensure REZs deliver real benefits, for example, maximising local workforce participation through targeted training programs and apprenticeships; building a sustainable talent pipeline in regional communities; ensuring equitable economic outcomes by supporting local businesses, regional supply chains and infrastructure investment; establishing transparent, ongoing consultation mechanisms, including community liaison committees, to maintain trust and social cohesion; and strategic coordination planning across multiple REZs to align infrastructure, manage cumulative impacts and support councils and communities. In short, the Hunter Jobs Alliance believes that REZs can deliver jobs, growth and clean energy, but only if they combine strong community engagement, local economic participation, environmental responsibility and strategic planning. By integrating the Committee's recommendations with these additional measures, we can ensure REZs truly benefit rural and regional New South Wales.

MATTHEW MURRAY: I acknowledge that we're meeting on Aboriginal land here in Singleton and pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging. The Maritime Union of Australia welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry and to appear before the Committee today. I acknowledge the 14,000 Australian maritime workers that I've been asked to represent before you today. I'm a merchant seafarer myself. I'm a proud rank and file member of the MUA. I currently work on an Australian-flagged transshipment bulk carrier in north-western Western Australia, where I work a six-week swing on a ship that loads magnetite into very large ships. I very much support our union's strong advocacy towards the establishment of an offshore wind industry for the jobs and opportunities it'll bring for our community here in the Hunter.

For context for Committee members, MUA members currently handle components for onshore renewable energy in our ports. The MUA is a member of the ITF's offshore wind taskforce, which coordinates the work of unions representing workers in offshore wind globally. MUA members will work in offshore renewable energy onboard vessels installing offshore wind turbines, on maintenance vessels and in offshore wind port terminals handling offshore wind components being prepared for installation at sea. We'll also be deeply involved in the decommissioning of offshore wind projects if and when that time comes. The MUA strongly supported the designation of the renewable energy zones in the Hunter and the Illawarra due to the potential for offshore wind in both of those areas.

We have been actively involved in the consultation processes that were part of formally declaring each offshore wind area, representing the views of the thousands of members—and their families and communities—who stand to benefit from the development of offshore wind through both the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and the billions of dollars of investments and jobs that the offshore wind sector will bring to regional areas. We support the development of offshore renewable energy in Australia, as it has the potential to create quality jobs for maritime workers that will last long into the future, especially those working in coal export ports, coal-fired power stations and in the offshore oil and gas industry. The development of offshore renewable energy must be used as an opportunity to deliver a just transition to energy workers and to our communities.

We also support the designation of renewable energy zones due to the need to take action to address climate change. Our members have been on the front lines of horrifying rescues from fires and floods. Increasing numbers of days with extreme temperatures and exposure to bushfire smoke affects us on the job. We understand the need to limit global heating to 1.5 degrees Celsius. The urgency of the climate crisis means that we must take full advantage of the opportunity to build offshore renewable energy in our regions. Offshore wind will provide the renewable energy to keep regional manufacturing and energy-intensive industries operating long into the future. This means an economic injection into regions across the country that depend on well-paid union jobs, which we all know lead to stronger local economies. Along with the current advocacy towards creating an Australian strategic shipping fleet with the Commonwealth, the creation of an offshore wind sector has the capacity to contribute greatly towards a restrengthening of our very proud Australian maritime and shipping industry.

JAMES MIRANDA: Thank you for having me today. I'm here on behalf of the Electrical Trades Union of New South Wales and the ACT. We represent over 15,000 electrical workers, including the sparkies that will be responsible for building a lot of the new renewables that we're talking about today, as well as the transmission lines and supporting infrastructure. The five renewable energy zones across New South Wales represent one of the biggest job creation opportunities for our members in decades. As such, we have embraced the opportunity of this transition with two hands. The *NSW Renewable Energy Sector Board's Plan*, developed in close collaboration between unions and the previous Government, sets out clear guidelines for how we can make sure that each REZ creates good jobs, local apprenticeships and opportunities for developing regional manufacturing and supply chains.

The renewable energy zones also present a challenge, though. The remote nature of those construction sites opens them up for all sorts of worker exploitation and unsafe practices without an active cop on the beat to make sure that standards are being followed. We welcome the opportunity to speak with the Committee today about some of the structural challenges standing in the way of regional workers and communities reaping the maximum benefit from the renewable energy zones and to discuss how we can make sure local workers get the most out of the upcoming transition.

TOM EDWARDS: Thank you, Chair and Committee. With the right policy settings, renewable energy zones could create thousands of well-paid and secure regional jobs, facilitate upskilling of the New South Wales workforce and reinvigorate domestic manufacturing. But there are actions we must take now if we are to secure the benefits for regional communities. Government procurement can be either strategic in creating benefits or stuck on autopilot. The first will deliver for working people, but the second continues to fail them. A recent example of what can go wrong with procurement is in Nowra, where in January the New South Wales Government announced 128 new buses would be made in a town with an unemployment rate almost double the New South Wales average.

Contrary to the announcement, the bus manufacturer had already applied for a DA stating there would be no welding, no cutting and no painting onsite. In reality, the majority of the buses will arrive almost fully assembled from overseas. This is occurring repeatedly in New South Wales, but we don't want it to be the story of renewable energy zones. We support the official plan from the Renewable Energy Sector Board to maximise local content in the REZs. What actually transpires on the ground is contained within tenders that aren't publicly available. We want the Government to support the local businesses that provide safe, secure and well-paid local jobs to make successful tenders.

That is why the New South Wales union movement has repeatedly welcomed the Minns Government's 2023 State election commitment to legislate the NSW Jobs First Commission as a critical step towards rebuilding domestic manufacturing, supporting local jobs and ensuring ethical and sustainable procurement practices. The *NSW Renewable Energy Sector Board's Plan*, if fulfilled, can provide up to \$1.3 billion of net economic benefits and 13,400 job years, between 2020 and 2041, for local content. To bring this to fruition, we need enforcement from a strong Jobs First Commission. We continue to urge the New South Wales Government to make good on its promise to New South Wales taxpayers and our regional communities for a properly funded Jobs First Commission which can help oversee development in renewable energy zones. Thank you.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: Thanks, witnesses, for coming along and giving your important evidence today. I might start with Mr Miranda. You mentioned the Renewable Energy Sector Board in your opening statement. How is that board going? What is the operation of it like? Is it something that has been working so far?

JAMES MIRANDA: Our branch secretary, Allen Hicks, is one of the co-chairs of the sector board. We have been very active, from the moment of its inception up to now, in participating in that. The feedback that I've got from him on the way that the board has been operating since contracts have started being signed by the State

Government is—the sector board developed a plan. It has requirements for a minimum number of apprenticeships, local workers and supply chain involvement from New South Wales-based suppliers. The way that it has been put into practice is that those are given to developers. When they apply for an LTESA or for access rights, they have to present how well they think they can perform against those guidelines.

When the reporting gets back to the sector board, though—because those end up being embedded as contract conditions—they're subject to commercial in confidence, and there isn't any real transparency with the board as to which projects are compliant with those requirements and which projects aren't. It is all presented as aggregated data with no specificity and no way to actually let the sector board keep track of what's happening. On top of that, there is no real enforcement mechanism underpinning the sector board plan. It basically comes down to what is in those contracts, and no-one knows what's in those contracts. There could be enforcement, but we don't know. It would just come down to a monetary thing in the contracts with the State Government. I would say they're probably not performing as well as the original vision that we had for the sector board. There is definitely a lot more room to get them more actively involved.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: Just on a different issue, an enormous numbers of workers, particularly from the ETU, are going to be involved in rolling out all of this infrastructure. How many of those workers are regionally based?

JAMES MIRANDA: We've had a massive skills shortage in electrical trades for about 30 years now. I think it's safe to say we're not going to find all of the sparkies that we need in these regional communities. There are going to be people coming in from metro areas and even possibly other States or internationally. The Government has developed guidelines and worked with councils on ways to get worker housing built. Although, one of the things we raised through that process of developing those guidelines is they're actually required to be temporary housing. You have to go through a whole separate process and a whole heap of extra hoops if you want to build permanent housing as part of that.

The argument we've been making is we have a housing crisis and there are lots of people moving to the region from the cities as well, so housing stock is falling short in the regions as well. If we took this opportunity to build permanent housing, house the workers in it over the construction phase and then give that housing back to communities, whether it's through the councils or some other means, you're creating a whole heap of other benefits for local communities out of the construction process for renewables. There will be hundreds, if not thousands, of workers.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: And some of those people might stay and live in those regional communities.

JAMES MIRANDA: Yes, exactly. We hope that some of those people do want to stay and continue working in those communities, whether it's an ongoing operations role on a renewables project or setting up a small business and becoming a contractor in those communities. By sort of forcing the developers to build temporary housing and saying, "You need extra permits if you want to keep this standing for longer than five or 10 years," you're just completely cutting the legs out of that.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: It really should be the other way around, shouldn't it?

JAMES MIRANDA: Yes.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: Mr Murray, in your opening statement you talked about the enormous number of jobs available from offshore wind and also in the context of jobs that are going to be lost as we transition out of coal. Do you know how many jobs we're talking about? In a typical offshore wind facility, how many people would be involved in the construction that would be members of the MUA, potentially?

MATTHEW MURRAY: You'd definitely have hundreds of maritime workers engaged in construction of an offshore wind facility and then dozens, if not also hundreds, of direct jobs for those projects ongoing.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: In the ongoing maintenance part of it?

MATTHEW MURRAY: Yes, and supporting them as well.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: What about in decommissioning?

MATTHEW MURRAY: Our union has done a lot of incredible work on the opportunities of decommissioning. I think there was a report recently released that says that there's \$20 billion worth of job capacity within the decommissioning industry for the offshore oil and gas industry alone.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: And they're jobs where you have people who are using a skill set right now in relation to coal that would be transferrable straight over to this type of work, aren't they?

MATTHEW MURRAY: Absolutely. The ship that I'm on right now is a great example. The cargo is magnetite but it has a conveyor belt system on board the ship. We can't get fitters on that ship. There are jobs out there that are \$160,000 a year to be a fitter on the ship that I work on, and they currently can't get them. That goes to Mr Miranda's comments of there being a critical need to meet these skills. Transferring from a power station—or one of those sectors transfers directly into maritime. There are certainly very transferrable skills from power stations into seafaring, definitely. There's an opportunity for thousands of jobs. If you look at the strategic fleet coupled with offshore wind and the support—you look at the work of the Port of Newcastle to diversify the port with its renewable energy projects that they're looking to expand upon. The future is very bright for the Australian maritime industry when in decades past it has maybe been less so bright. We see a really fantastic opportunity. That's why we're really embracing the idea of offshore wind.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Thank you for your submissions—they're very helpful—and for the opportunity to ask you some additional questions today. Mr Page, with the Hunter Jobs Alliance, I think it would be helpful, for me anyway, if you would provide an overview of the way in which you've been able to engage in this whole new and evolving area. Obviously the alliance has a number of affiliated organisations from the labour movement and others. How are you finding that you're able to cut through and be able to engage with the relevant bodies—agencies and departments? If you are having difficulties, how do you think they could be addressed?

JUSTIN PAGE: In the Hunter Jobs Alliance we have nine union affiliates and four environmental affiliates—so a unique organisation—which gives us great capacity, with our affiliates, for engagement. In terms of engagement with government bodies, it has been more difficult with New South Wales to actually engage. But we've had some really good engagement at a national level. If you look at the net zero economy agencies now in the Hunter working on the Eraring Power Station closure, that engagement has been a lot easier. I think there is definitely room for improvement. We had troubles initially engaging with EnergyCo, around a number of the projects that were happening, but we've since formed some better relationships in the past year and have had some good, ongoing engagement there. But I will say it was difficult in the first couple of years.

With other government bodies, we're trying to really engage now with Regional NSW. I think they've renamed that department. One of the main areas we're trying to have engagement there is around the Future Jobs and Investment Authority. We see great benefit in having an authority, but we have some concerns around the initial proposal and we have some strong views about that. We've had one consultation meeting around what the legislation might look like for the Future Jobs and Investment Authority. Again, I had to go seeking that engagement; it didn't come to us. We still have some concerns. So there's a mixed response to your question around engagement with different bodies, and that's one of the challenges where you've got Federal bodies, you've got State bodies. If we look at the transition across the Hunter, it needs engagement across all of those bodies and governments and departments to get the best outcomes.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: In your submission you have made nine recommendations. Are there any in particular that you would like to draw to our attention? Part of the work that we'll come to at the conclusion of the inquiry will be to develop recommendations. We can't predict what they're going to be, but you've listed nine. Are there any particular ones that you'd like to draw to our attention and perhaps add some information to?

JUSTIN PAGE: Yes. As these renewable energies and the transition evolves, I think one of the key things is around the community benefits. Listening to some of the evidence from Ausgrid and Transgrid before us, one of our clear views, and it's evolved over time as these projects roll out—in the Hunter we haven't got to that stage yet—but one of the things that's become clear is communities get the best benefits if we have pooled arrangements versus developers handling the community benefits themselves. I was a bit concerned that Ausgrid was saying they're going to dedicate one person to manage the community benefits.

In the Hunter we've got 10 councils across the Hunter and the Central Coast. To manage them and get the best outcomes, these transmission lines will go across Muswellbrook, Singleton, Cessnock council, down to the Central Coast. As the projects roll out, the Ausgrid transmission line is going to be first and then the Hunter transmission power project, and then the renewable projects will all come in over the top. I think we're going to get the best outcomes with a pooled arrangement where the communities have control of that versus the proponents. That'd be one of the key things we'd be advocating for. There's been a number a reports and studies done on that recently, so there's some good evidence there and some models to actually draw across. The other one is the local content. I think others, in their submissions—we kind of all have the same concerns about how do we actually maximise local content, local supply chains and those benefits.

Again, if proponents or developers are working in isolation, we're not going to get the best outcome. We see one of the key things of an authority is actually to play that coordination role about what are the projects that are coming up, what are the skills required that are in that, and that we're looking ahead out in front at what's coming, not when the project is awarded and now we're looking to try to say, "We need an X number of

electricians. We need an X number of fitters and those trades." We need that authority body to be forward looking and forward focused on what are the skills and that coming and needed, working with the developers and investors to prioritise that, and have forward thinking versus it all landing on our lap and then we can't find the skills and labour to actually address it.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Thank you all for your evidence so far and for your submissions. I want to talk a little bit about what you've all touched on, which is making sure that the jobs, the employment benefits but also those opportunities for manufacturing as well going a bit beyond. I want to start with one to Mr Edwards. I didn't quite hear, partly probably because of the connection, but you were talking about the example of the buses in Nowra and how that was an example of where that local content probably wasn't done well. Can you talk to that a little bit more, but also what government should learn from that and how they could do that better coming into, say, a renewable example, please?

TOM EDWARDS: Yes, sure. This is primarily a case study from the AMWU, who represent the bus manufacturing workers. My understanding from that—and, hopefully, you can hear me all right; if you can't, feel free to let me know—is that there was an announcement, a media release, from the New South Wales Government in January about 128 new buses to be made in Nowra. I think Nowra has got about a nine-point-something unemployment rate, which is about double the State average. Now, if we look at the development application to Shoalhaven council that was made before that announcement, that DA actually states that there would be no welding, no cutting and no painting onsite at all.

What we've ended up with is the vast majority of those buses arriving pretty much fully assembled from overseas. There have been additional media reports about the use of prison labour as well for the construction of those buses, which is problematic in a location with that sort of unemployment rate. What can the Government learn? I think what we need to learn is that just leaving things on autopilot isn't enough. We need strategic procurement policy that drills down into the local areas and the local opportunities and has a strong enforcer through the Jobs First Commission, which is a promise of the State Government, and we'd like to see that properly funded.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Taking that to the rest of the witnesses too, that guarantee around when a particular project is approved or if there's that local component, making sure that that's part of the discussion from the very beginning and that it's not an oversight, would that be an important consideration?

JAMES MIRANDA: Yes, 100 per cent.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: The issue around the skill sets—I was interested in what you said, Mr Murray, in terms of the position on your boat, which is high-paying but difficult to fill. In terms of agencies working together and that pathway for school leavers but also those who might be transitioning, say, from working in the coal industry around here into renewables, what are the gaps there that maybe we could make some recommendations around in terms of that job readiness and preparedness and also maybe getting current high school students thinking about careers in this space? Do you think there's something in there that we could look to recommend? I'm happy for any or all of you to answer that.

MATTHEW MURRAY: Yes, definitely. From my perspective as a worker on a ship and what I've seen in different sectors of our industry, I think there's this great opportunity there, but I tend to agree with you. I think there would be an opportunity, like Mr Page kind of outlined, if you could coordinate it better, to look at it more holistically more into the future, then I think that just benefits people. Something like offshore wind, if it does come to fruition and it does become a viable industry off the Hunter coast, that's going to be a big project and we're going to need a lead time to ensure that we have enough well-trained seafarers and maritime workers, particular to my sector, to be able to fulfil the construction and the running of something like the Hunter offshore wind zone.

JUSTIN PAGE: I think all the work that we've done, what's evident is the workers in coal-fired power stations and coalmines can't see what skills they need are coming. They don't have visibility of what the projects and timelines are, let alone what skills are in it. I mean, we've got our traditional trades like electricians and fitters which are still going to be needed, but for those non-skilled areas as well, that's about them—what skills do I need to pick up when a project around offshore wind, solar manufacturing, or building a solar farm comes up? That's the piece they don't have visibility of. In our view, that's the role of these transition authorities, the Net Zero one and the Future Jobs. So the Federal and the State-based ones can play a significant role in working with the developers in saying, "What skills do you need? What's the number you need, and when do you require them?" So we're giving those workers a forecast of what they can actually do. We've got now the TAFE Centres of Excellence established. We've got one in the Hunter.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Yes. We were there yesterday, having a look around.

JUSTIN PAGE: Again, feeding into the TAFE Centres of Excellence is these new technologies of offshore wind or hydrogen, whether they come at some stage—hopefully. But, again, looking ahead and developing those programs, that's the bit that the workers in these existing industries don't currently have that we need to work on.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Mr Miranda, in your opening submission you talked a little bit about structural challenges and potential worker exploitation. Can you talk to that a little bit more and what some of the concerns are and maybe some of the solutions too?

JAMES MIRANDA: It's not unique to the renewables industry. Any sort of remote construction site like that, you can run into those sorts of issues a lot of the time. For us, as a union, we've got the resources going out to do those checks. It's just about making sure that agencies like SafeWork, the Building Commission—as far as electrical licensing compliance goes, we'd love to see—like I mentioned in my response to one of Cameron Murphy's questions, there's these requirements that are supposedly in the contracts to meet certain conditions, but if we go out there and we see, for example, there are no apprentices on the site and they're meant to have 20 per cent of the trades workforce, who do we tell that to? Who do we report it to? I don't know whether it's EnergyCo or which agency needs to have that sort of function there, but having someone who's responsible for making sure there is compliance with the community engagement and community benefit side of things as well.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Maybe that's a broader package across all of the projects in terms of employment percentages, local content, the manufacturing—all of that oversight—I guess it's really who's best placed to do that?

JAMES MIRANDA: Yes. All of the requirements are there under the sector board plans. Even if you got the board itself to work out an enforcement strategy or something through that mechanism, we'd definitely be massively supportive and we think it would make a huge difference. If I could just comment on the skills portability stuff, I think having government play a role in between businesses and the workers is massively important there. You can have 20 developers setting up their little tents in a park with community info days. You're not going to reach the same number of people as you could, and you're not getting that scale that you would if everyone knows if I want a job somewhere down the line in renewables and I don't know where to go or what I need, this is a one-stop shop government agency. They'll put you in touch with someone who can get you a job and get you that training as opposed to having to go out and seek it out. You might try a few and they're not hiring at the time and lose faith or get frustrated, and you lose people with that. If you have a one-stop shop that's coordinated by the government, is accountable and is able to connect people that way, I think you'll see a real difference.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Just to alert you, as well, because I know you guys don't have any visuals, but Abigail Boyd is online, too. I think she's got her hand up as well. I've got a couple of quick questions. Thank you all for your time today. Justin Page, your submission raises concern about the structural shortage of skilled workers remaining a critical roadblock to the development of the REZs. Can you talk a bit about how you think the New South Wales Government should actually be addressing this, while also ensuring that we're making sure that it's supporting local jobs? How do we find that balance?

JUSTIN PAGE: As I've previously outlined, I think one of the key ways to do that is these authorities at a Federal level and a State level being coordinated and working together, and understanding what that pipeline of work is and the timing of the infrastructure coming online. We think those are the bodies that play that central role. But again, what I think is lagging is the Federal body. The net zero economy is up and running. It's doing its first major project around Eraring. As I said, we've had some good engagement with them, and we've certainly outlined to them our view of the role they should play.

One of the concerns with that Federal body is it only covers coal-fired power stations and the directly related coalmines. For the Hunter Valley, what that means is 90 per cent of our coalmines in the Hunter don't fall under the purview of the energy jobs plan within the Net Zero Economy Authority Bill—the Federal bill. Again, our submission around the Future Jobs and Investment Authority is that if you've got the Federal body looking at the coal-fired power stations and those directly related coalmines, it would make sense for the State body to focus on the export coalmines within the Hunter Valley, which is 90 per cent of them. But, again, it would take coordination between both of them and then other government agencies like the department of workplace relations at a Federal level, and whatever that equivalent is at a State level. It needs coordination around all those Federal and State government bodies and agencies.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Mr Edwards, I know that wasn't from your submission. But I wonder if you also had an opinion about that—about making sure we're supporting local jobs, but also making sure there are enough skilled workers to actually ensure the timely development of these REZ projects?

TOM EDWARDS: In terms of meeting the workforce challenges, I think it might be useful for the Committee to have a look into the Renewable Energy Sector Board's plan regarding gender equity. In August, the board published a new addendum for new targets for employment for women in the REZs—4 per cent of the trades workforce and 7 per cent of the project workforce in non-traditional roles. Unlocking that workforce would be very beneficial, but there are also things that need to be done to actually enable that, to make that work attractive for women workers. For example, adopt workplace entitlements and programs that support gender equity, like enforceable anti-harassment and discrimination clauses, access to flexible and secure jobs, and inclusivity and diversity training as well. In addition to that, I would refer to the recommendations of the Australian Workers' Union to this inquiry, which was to expand and protect long service leave to REZ workers. These are all strategies to try and make the work more attractive.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Back to Mr Page quickly—you highlight in your submission that there's been community opposition and that there's been recognised, significant barriers to the development of renewable energy across Australia. What do you think the New South Wales Government could be doing better to combat that opposition and actually address those community concerns?

JUSTIN PAGE: I think one of the main things we've seen was that there was no credible voice giving credible information around the renewable energy projects. If we look at offshore wind, for example, rightly or wrongly, the Federal Government basically said to the developers, "Don't go and engage with the community at this stage, until your water licence is set."¹

What that left was a massive communications gap. The misinformation was allowed to propagate and expand, and these Facebook groups grew. The proponents weren't able to give the credible information and the Government didn't give the credible information back. I think we need to give those proponents and those developers a voice early in these project stages to actually clarify what exactly they're going to do, what the project looks like, how they're going to address environmental concerns, how they're going to address local content. That needs to happen a lot quicker in these projects to have that credible information and the factual information come out. That's been the significant gap that we've seen in the rollouts so far.

The CHAIR: To the unions to begin with, there's a lot of conversations, obviously, around jobs. Obviously there's a difference between the short-term jobs in construction and then what happens to those jobs afterwards. Have any of your organisations done modelling in what the conversion rate would be? Obviously, the idea would be to try to keep some of these people in the regions, but they're not all going to turn out to be sole trader electricians; the market's not there for all of them to do that. Have your organisations done any modelling on what the conversion rate would be from the initial construction jobs to how many would be retained in the community in a permanent fashion?

JAMES MIRANDA: I'll take on notice a proper conversion rate because I'm sure we have that detail somewhere. There's going to be a lot more jobs in construction than operations and maintenance, to put it simply. We've been working a lot with some of the delivery agencies and departments to try to make sure that we're sequencing the construction phase so that you're able to have basically the same core group of construction workers going right the way from project to project and you're not having people constantly coming in and out, and all the disruption that comes with that. I think sequencing the construction projects—if you do that right, you're going to have a good five to 10 years, possibly even more, of constant construction phase, where you're keeping those workers in and it essentially becomes a long-term job. Moving forward, with operations and maintenance, I think you only get a handful of—five or 10—ongoing positions on a lot of the renewables, particularly solar. I know wind is generally more labour intensive in the ops and maintenance phase, and storage is actually one of the better ones for converting to permanent jobs.

MATTHEW MURRAY: In terms of our industry, we're a little bit unique, I guess. I don't have specific figures for you, Chair, right now, but what I would point to is the offshore oil and gas industry, particularly in WA and also in the Bass Strait. There's a requirement for vessels to be alongside oil and gas projects, so there's constantly platform-supply vessels. There's a lot of construction jobs, but we have ongoing jobs involved with anything offshore. We'll be the crews that take the workers out to maintain offshore wind, for example. There will always be waterside workers involved when we're importing components. A lot of vessels—again, we see it as a good opportunity. I think the concept that you'll put in some offshore wind turbines and leave them to just sit out there by themselves is definitely not something that will occur. There'll be a lot of maritime workers involved for

¹ [In correspondence to the committee](#) dated 10 October 2025, Mr Justin Page, Coordinator, Hunter Jobs Alliance, clarified their evidence

the entire—there will be a lot of construction jobs but there'll be ongoing maritime worker jobs for the entire lifecycle of those projects.

The CHAIR: Given some of the comments from the State Government and their agencies—when EnergyCo came before us in the Sydney hearing, they seemed to distance themselves from offshore wind. They said, "No, that's a Federal issue. We're watching the technology. We don't think it's there at the moment." Then State Government Ministers came down to the Illawarra and all they wanted to talk about was rooftop solar, once again distancing themselves from offshore wind. We know that developers have walked away from the Illawarra. At the moment, there aren't any credible developers going forward. What would that mean in terms of your members if offshore wind didn't eventuate in one or two of those REZs?

MATTHEW MURRAY: For sure, it'd certainly be disappointing if it didn't come to fruition whatsoever. Sure, we're definitely disappointed that it's advancing as—I'd love to be sitting on one of those platforms/supply vessels right now myself. I wouldn't have to travel an entire day to go and join a ship in Dampier in Western Australia. I'd love nothing more than to join a ship in the Port of Newcastle that's 10 minutes from my house and sit in the Port of Newcastle until I retire. That would be fantastic. But I think we're also buoyed by the fact that it's not completely written off. The Federal Minister has said that it is disappointing from his perspective but now we'll use it as an opportunity to explore a little bit more in depth. It's not just unions that are advocating for it. I note that Business Hunter shared our very same sentiments; they were disappointed. But where there's disappointment, there's also opportunity. Like I said before, there are dozens of jobs, if not hundreds of jobs, for maritime workers.

The CHAIR: You talked about the problem of getting a fitter and turner on your ship. Do you see that same problem happening with these offshore wind facilities or factories where you'll struggle to get the skilled workers there to do the work? Obviously that would raise the question of where would they come from if you can't get them.

MATTHEW MURRAY: Definitely. That's our union's position. That's why we're advocating before the parliamentary Committee. That's why our officials and our members will talk till the cows come home about how important offshore wind is. Mr Page's evidence before spoke to those concerns. We do need coordination. People do need to know that there are these jobs out there. My brother's here today; he's a seafarer as well. We often have conversations with people in the community, or our friends, who don't even realise that Australian seafarers are still out there, let alone that we're doing all these sorts of cool jobs all across Australia and sailing internationally still.

I take your point. There does need to be coordination between the agencies. I really like Mr Miranda's idea. I've got a 17-year-old son at the moment. To hear that there's been a 30-year gap in electrical trades, it'd be a great opportunity to have some sort of body that my 17-year-old son could go to. I could say, "If you want to be an apprentice electrician, you go and see these people and they'll point you in the right direction." I'd love to be able to send my son Noah to somewhere like that. Likewise with our industry—it's a relatively small, niche industry, but there's so much opportunity. If we could coordinate it well and young kids can go, "I see off the Port of Newcastle a ship out there that looks pretty cool. It has a good, well-paying Australian job," that would be amazing.

JUSTIN PAGE: Chair, I will supplement that. There's been some really good work done around skills mapping for offshore wind in Victoria. It was a project between the Victorian State Government, TAFE and one of the proponents. They mapped all the skills that are required to build offshore wind and if you're in an existing industry—like I'm an electrician in a coalmine—it mapped the skills, down to a skill number at TAFE and the hours it would take you to get them transferred across. I think that would be really useful for the different types of industries that are emerging in New South Wales, because we haven't done that. It's one of the things we've been advocating for.

A really good piece of work was done by the State Government on the issues paper of the Future Jobs and Investment Authority that mapped all the closure dates of the coal-fired power stations and the coalmines in the Hunter Valley. It basically said there are 15,900² direct jobs and 37,000 indirect jobs. It kind of gave a timeline of when those jobs were going to be lost in coal-fired power stations. But, again, what it doesn't have for those workers is a map to go, "How do I get into offshore wind? How do I get into solar? How do I get into renewables?" Is that a piece of work that should be done? Again, we've got agencies and TAFE and all that to do it as part of

² [In correspondence to the committee](#) dated 10 October 2025, Mr Justin Page, Coordinator, Hunter Jobs Alliance, clarified their evidence

what needs to be done to give these workers a pathway and an understanding of what's coming, how to actually get them in them and the timing for when it's all happening.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: I have a couple quick questions, given the time. I've been asking for a couple of years of EnergyCo and the Government what exactly the plan is to connect the Hunter offshore wind zone with the grid and where the enabling infrastructure is going to be built and what the plan is for that. So far, I've had no answer. Are any of you aware of any planning that's been done to connect the offshore wind zone to the grid?

JUSTIN PAGE: Given that the connection to the grid is a State issue, it hasn't progressed as quickly as Federally, where they were declaring zones and offering licences. There were a number of connection points identified, and, again, in some of the proponents' applications, they outlined where they believed the connection points could be. But it never progressed at a State level where it was agreed upon where those connections would be if the projects went ahead because the projects haven't been awarded, basically.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Would it make more sense for there to be some sort of scoping and planning done at a State Government level to make it more attractive for proponents and speed it up?

JUSTIN PAGE: Absolutely. One of our submissions was that the State Government should be developing and owning what we were calling the energy hubs where those connections and points would be, like within the Newcastle port and Newcastle Harbour. Absolutely, our view would be that it makes sense to have them identified, and government controlled would be our view.

JAMES MIRANDA: We've been working in hand with the MUA to push for the State Government to develop a comprehensive offshore wind industry strategy, like they have in Victoria, since the Minns Government came in. We were told that there was one that was developed under the previous Government that got shelved. I do not know whether or not that actually existed, because no-one could find it when we asked. But no such strategy has been developed. When you look at the fact that there was a proponent and then they pulled out at the last minute, that sort of clear guidance from government to provide certainty to potential proponents that this is something the Government is taking seriously, it's something they want to make happen and they're going to make sure that the projects happen and are connected and everything is there—the fact that there isn't that in place I think definitely played a role in the Hunter proponent not going ahead. It's not the sole reason; there are plenty of other factors. But it would've been great to have a bit more of a clear strategy from the State Government, for sure.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: The Premier has been out this week spruiking the Santos Narrabri project. Putting to one side how bananas I think that project is for lots of reasons, can you talk about the material impact on the renewables rollout, particularly when it comes to the gas pipeline going across high-voltage transmission lines and all of those issues and whether it would divert the workforce? Perhaps I will go to you, Mr Miranda. What's the tangible impact if that project goes ahead?

JAMES MIRANDA: We've been raising this for a while. The Narrabri gas project is within a two- or three-hour drive of three out of the five renewable energy zones, so you can't really deny that it was going to be pulling skilled workers who may have otherwise been working on renewable energy projects away from renewables. For our trades, we've already got massive skill shortages. With any additional strain that you're placing on the labour market and the skills market, we may see delays and costs go up on projects that are affected by that. I think you mentioned the pipeline as well. On the current construction timelines, it's looking like the Hunter Gas Pipeline is probably going to be getting built at around the same time as the New England transmission project. If you look at the corridors that have been earmarked for both of them, they intersect. We may actually get to a point where one project literally has to pause and make way for the other—a quite literal crossroads between gas and renewables. We need some clear guidance on what is going to take preference there. Our view, as the ETU, is that we just shouldn't be building the fracking operation in New South Wales.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: You mentioned before about the map with regard to when coal or power stations are closing and the jobs that would be transitioning. When they say that something is going to be extended, do you think that adds to the uncertainty of workers planning for their future?

JUSTIN PAGE: Yes, absolutely. I think what the State Government used were the licence expiry dates for coalmines. As we all know, coal is dependent on oil³ demand. One of the flaws with the model is that it uses the licence end date. That doesn't mean that coalmines are going to go to that length. What we've seen are recent announcements of coalmines laying workers off because of a number of demands. While it's good that it maps the

³ [In correspondence to the committee](#) dated 10 October 2025, Mr Justin Page, Coordinator, Hunter Jobs Alliance, clarified their evidence

actual numbers, the dates of when that actually happens, in reality, are all going to be brought forward. What it does for us is it gives the scale of the enormity of jobs that are currently within coal. The job we have to transition them into new industries is enormous. We need government policy settings and frameworks to actually make that happen.

The CHAIR: That takes us to our time with you. Thank you very much for coming and giving evidence. You may have taken a couple of questions on notice. The secretariat will be in touch with you in regard to that and any supplementary questions we may send you. Thank you for your time today.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Luncheon adjournment)

Dr JOHN SHIEL, Member, Renew, Hunter Region Branch, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Welcome back. We now welcome our next witness. Would you like to make a short opening statement before we go to questions?

JOHN SHIEL: Other than the statement made by Renew, I must say that the transition to renewables is absolutely essential for two reasons, really. The coal-fired power stations have reached end of life. I should declare that I used to work for the power stations—Pacific Power—for designing Bayswater and Eraring and all that. I also was a board member of Citizens' Climate Lobby. I now live in a zero carbon ecovillage near Gosford, so the transition is possible. The coal-fired power stations will reach end of life within the next 10 years. We've got to have some other form of power. If we keep eating the planet up at our current rate, because we're burning fossil fuels, we'll have wilder extreme events. All countries in the world need to pull their weight on this. Australia is in the top 20 globally of carbon polluters cumulatively since 1850, so we're one of the worst. We're also the highest per person carbon polluter of all OECD countries—rich countries. We're double the average. We're an extremely bad case.

Nuclear is too expensive. It can melt down, has dangerous waste and will be way too late. The regions have been selected for REZs, or renewable energy zones, because of their area of land, their suitability for solar and wind—this area here is a very good wind area, and out west we have great solar—and their existing transmission line corridors. We need to manage the net zero transition. We need some sort of authority that can coordinate across companies in the whole coal industry, both mining and whatever. There are a million jobs out there, according to Beyond Zero Emissions. I used to be the leader of the Newcastle Beyond Zero Emissions chapter, and I worked on *The Million Jobs Plan*. You can see that renewables really generate lots of jobs. I can go into some of the previous concerns. We found over 100 per cent of jobs for Collie, for example—of the workers there. Privatisation has increased power prices, not renewables. When Macquarie Generation took over Bayswater, the very first thing they did was game the system by taking a unit offline. It is the privatisation of assets which is causing power prices to go up.

There are great health benefits if you get rid of the coal. I've seen a lot of people with problems here—with asthma, coal dust and that—and all along the coal line. I used to live along the coal line. This is a win-win-win proposition: increased community wealth, health and low-carbon emissions to decrease extreme events. Can I say that the increased community wealth can be obtained by having an energy cooperative that spreads the wealth across the whole community instead of picking out one or two farmers. Renew advocates energy hubs that would like to disseminate the proper information, not all this Facebook rubbish that's floating around that you can't believe. Solar and wind firmed by batteries and pumped hydro are the cheapest form of new power, and that has been proven over and over again. I won't go into nuclear.

This is my final point. From the industry point of view, we can compensate large power users by having them reduce their power. For example, Tomago Aluminium, which uses 10 per cent of electricity in the State—if we can compensate them, then basically we can get around the peaks. Coal-fired power stations have trouble turning off their units during the night; therefore we have this product called off-peak power. Eraring Power Station had trials to ramp down at midday because prices are negative, and that was quite successful. Agriculture can coexist and benefit from renewables: sheep grazing with solar farms. You can have cattle and crops. With fencing around wind turbines, you have plenty of ways to graze around that too. These are real agri-solar and agri-turbine ways to prosper.

The CHAIR: The Committee has resolved to have free-flow questions, so questions can come from anywhere. I will throw to the Hon. Emma Hurst.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Thank you, Dr Shiel, for your time today. You raised concerns in your submission that the urgency of the transition is not being addressed and that delays and slow approval processes are actually causing more distress for communities. I'm just wondering if you can talk a little bit more about this and just flesh out for us some of the concerns that you're seeing around the delays.

JOHN SHIEL: Yes. Could I say that we really need to get to net zero in like 2030 or 2035. That is really the rich country goals to avoid calamitous climate change. When I was with Pacific Power in the '80s, we rolled out Eraring and Bayswater to stop blackouts. It was a one-way grid, and the farmers had no resistance to that at all. They were very grateful that we could supply power to them and that sort of thing. But now that it's a two-way grid, because you have generation happening both ways, there seems to be some resistance by some farmers—and I think it's promoted a little bit by politicians and perhaps some billionaire miners or Advance Australia—that there should be no transmission lines going back to the coast and where the population is.

It doesn't seem fair to me. It's just not fair. We should take a realistic, practical view—I'm an engineer—and let's try and work with the community. That's the problem we've had. You've privatised the transmission lines—they should never have been privatised. Just like the backbone of Telstra—we should never have privatised that. Now that it has been privatised, you've really got to work hard to make sure that the distribution of wealth across the community is fair, and I'm not just talking about farmers but any coalminers or coal power station workers. It has to be a fair transition.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: Absolutely. We've heard from some community members that they feel like there hasn't been the right consultation and that there has been a lot of confusion. How do we speed things up but also take the community with us so people aren't feeling like they're not getting the right information or they're not being consulted with appropriately?

JOHN SHIEL: One of Renew's key points is that we need to really—and the State should get behind this. The Federal Government has kicked it down the line a bit. Energy hubs: We have to have these real estate shops where you can go in and get an expert's advice. I don't take my car to a dentist to get it fixed up; I take it to an expert mechanic. And people you hear online, I mean, even politicians, they haven't got a—I've got a PhD in adapting homes for climate change. I've modelled the climate in Adelaide in 2050 and it's not a pretty sight. It'll be three degrees and we probably can't stop it. We've got to put the brakes on carbon emissions, very fast. As far as what we can do about it, the first thing is educating people so that they know the facts and get them from a trusted source; the second is we can pick off probably the low-hanging fruit when it comes to transmission—and by that I mean the offshore wind zones, REZs, particularly Port Stephens and Illawarra.

SunCable has got a project underlined to take massive amounts of power from the Northern Territory up to Singapore on an undersea cable, just like we have the Bass Strait link. It's not hard to put in a short—a few hundred metres, or maybe it's a couple of kilometres, I think, because you don't even see them really from the shore. There's all this pretence about that it will kill sharks and kill whales and all this. There's no evidence to that at all. I've gone into the science and, in fact, it can help because you can treat it like a reef and it can generate new fish and that. So if we picked off the low-hanging fruit, and by that I mean areas where—there's a little bit of resistance happening in Port Stephens. That seems to be kicked off by, as I said and as the previous speakers were talking about, the fact that an announcement is made and then, all of a sudden, all the Facebook pages kick off and Advance Australia walks in, and billionaires finance—you know. So I think the low-hanging fruit is the way to go.

The Hon. EMMA HURST: You mentioned local energy hubs. Certainly, we've heard a little bit about them during the inquiry and the advantage of those. In your opinion, why would a local energy hub be a better option than the current methods of consultation and engagement used by the New South Wales Government? What would be the difference and the main benefits we'd see switching to the local energy hubs?

JOHN SHIEL: I think it's a question of being accessible. If you've got a local hub, a local shop and it's open maybe three days a week or something and maybe even staffed by Renew volunteers—I'm sure they'd even come to the party and things like that—there'd be trusted, reliable sources of information that you could readily walk in and just have a nice long conversation with, no pressure. Whereas, the State Government currently, I don't think they're hitting the mark as well as they should.

The CHAIR: How would those energy hubs be different to what currently happens now with EnergyCo drop-in centres where you go in, there's a person with a laptop, you ask them questions, they don't have the answers and they tell you to go back to their website? How would these energy hubs be done better, do you think? Essentially, what EnergyCo is doing at the moment with its drop-in centres is a version of what you're proposing. How would your version be better?

JOHN SHIEL: It's really a question of what sort of personnel you have staffing them and what the accessibility is and the credibility. If the current set-up is they drop in and the person doesn't know the answer or they're trying to look up information, they're just a receptionist or something. That's not that credible and they may not be able to address their question on the spot. The difference between an expert and someone who is just front of house, a receptionist, is the expert can solve a complex problem on the spot, and if the person walks in—I have about five farmer mates up in this area and most of them are for the transition; one's got some concerns about views and that sort of thing. Say one of the farmers walks in and wants to know, "Why can't they put it underground?" Maybe that's the question that an expert should be trying to handle—what's the cost and delay, and how would it slow down the transition and things like that. I'm saying that we should be getting experts to be more readily available to the public so they get—

The CHAIR: Are you saying EnergyCo aren't the experts? They're the ones that are supposed to be driving this transition.

JOHN SHIEL: I guess what I'm saying is—

The CHAIR: Are you suggesting that EnergyCo shouldn't be the ones that run this, given that they failed in the consultation thus far to do it right?

JOHN SHIEL: I'd say they need to partner it, for sure. Perhaps partner with some not-for-profits that would have quite a lot of expertise. We used to run a very interesting area of Beyond Zero Emissions in Newcastle with several guys with PhDs. We were analysing industry and doing all sorts of good research.

The CHAIR: In terms of the community benefit, you talked about spreading it across so it wasn't just farmers getting the benefit from those projects. How would that work in terms of encouraging farmers initially to take on those projects on their land if you're then limiting the benefit they would get or spreading the benefit across a broader selection of people? How would you see that working with encouraging host people?

JOHN SHIEL: That's a good question. Perhaps some farmers would benefit more than others. You can have a multi-stakeholder cooperative, where certain stakeholders have different benefits and different obligations to others. That's where you could set up perhaps—let's just assume two types of stakeholders. One is with a key block of land on the transmission line that's absolutely required, which is precious to the transmission guys. He may get a slightly higher benefit. Then another guy who is in the same community is not that much affected, but he does get some benefit.

The CHAIR: This is probably the final one from me. You talked about low-hanging fruit, and you said offshore wind was lower-hanging fruit. I wasn't sure whether you were here when we had Ausgrid talking about their community battery proposal and piggybacking that off rooftop solar, which seems to be where the Government is going with the Illawarra REZ a bit more than offshore. Is that something you would consider as low-hanging fruit as well, in terms of taking action, having more rooftop solar connected to community battery projects?

JOHN SHIEL: Rooftop solar is one of the key mechanisms. If you think backwards, how do you fund this transition carefully? Householders know that if they invest a little bit up-front, they've got free electricity, almost, from then on. If you put a battery in and get the rebate after about, I think, I don't know, five or 10—beyond the life of the battery, anyway, you'll get very good returns. The return on investment is very, very high, and that's why we've got the half the homes in Australia with rooftop solar, which is enormous. It's the biggest uptake in the world. Now, if you then combine that with community batteries, there have been a few proposals made, but when it comes to giving the batteries to Ausgrid and to give it to the DNSPs—the network guys—that's a little bit of a free gift for them. That's like letting them stabilise their network without any cost.

What you should be doing is giving it to the community, so the community benefits. We really need to have community batteries more so than network ones. I believe Ausgrid is proposing a Rathmines one. I saw the plans for that. We have our own community battery at Narara Ecovillage, where we have our zero carbon village. We built that from scratch. We got an ARENA grant for \$1 million. We were the first community to come to ARENA and say, "Look, we'll have our own solar, and we'll have our own big battery, and we'll attach it to Ausgrid. You watch us do it." The lessons we'd learnt was don't ever try it again. It was a very difficult job to bring it up from the bottom.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Dr Shiel, you were talking about low-hanging fruit. As you have said, the Hunter has degraded sites and land, or old mines. What role can they play in supporting renewable energy?

JOHN SHIEL: I missed the first bit, sorry.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: The degraded sites, or old mine sites, how can they be used in this renewable energy landscape?

JOHN SHIEL: As part of Beyond Zero Emissions, we visited the Upper Hunter here and saw the mayor, previous mayors, and Singleton. There were plans on the board at that point to use old mines in pumped hydro-type arrangements. I think there was one that's pretty close to going ahead, but that's the sort of thing. If you've got a deep mine, you can make that a dam and then pump it up the hill, if you're got a big, nice mountain nearby. Then do that when the solar is negative, if you like, and then off you go with the wind turbines blowing hard. You get cheap storage and then, when you run it down the hill, you've got yourself power when the peak prices are very high.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: I understand your organisation has over 200 members. What would you say in the Hunter—do you believe that people are generally accepting of renewable energy?

JOHN SHIEL: I lived in Newcastle for over 10 years and I was astounded by how green it was once BHP moved out. There's an incredible number of environmental organisations. Look at Rising Tide. It had 7,000 people at its last event last year and it's aiming for more this year. There is an incredible movement in the Hunter and there's a lot of support for renewables. The power stations are going to die. I was at Liddell and it had holes in the roof. The generator and turbine were rusting away, and I was asked to try to fix that in the future and we worked on that. Liddell closed a while ago.

By 2035, they're all planned to close in New South Wales. I think that's Bayswater or Mount Piper. We've got to have something on the table. We're not going to have people living in caves, and renewables are really the only way to go and we've got to get there fast. The fast way to get there is Matt Kean's brilliant idea with these REZs. I was congratulating Matt on that stupendous way to go. The tricky part was the transmission lines. Four or five years ago we were working on this with Beyond Zero Emissions. I can show you the plans. There's the die-off of all the power stations. We thought about, "What's the big thing? We've just got to get quickly into transmission lines." It seemed to drop off the agenda.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: You'd say that they're more accepting of renewable energy. What do you think in terms of, say, nuclear energy? Is there a level of acceptance there, or should it be off the table?

JOHN SHIEL: I have rarely heard anyone put forward any practical suggestion about how you could possibly get nuclear in place before the power stations go. It's impossible.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: The time frame would be too long.

JOHN SHIEL: Much too long. Apart from the fact that it's dangerous waste, it can have meltdowns. There's just no regulatory framework here. Apart from all that—and there's nowhere in the world that even has a safe repository for any nuclear waste. You've got 100,000 years worth of waste you've got to carefully maintain. I have not found any person yet to come up with a credible explanation as to why they'd do it. I've had a few politician-type people who push it a bit and, frankly, it's laughable. If you've seen the latest report, it talks about the decrease in renewable uptake around the world. There are only 11 countries around the world with nuclear reactors under development. That tells you something.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Dr Shiel, one of the things that we've heard quite a bit throughout the course of the inquiry is concern from landholders in terms of the impact that these projects can have on them. I would hope that you would agree that there are some concerns in the community that are very real in terms of where some of these projects are proposed. One thing that we heard from Ausgrid this morning was around trying to find opportunities in urban areas and industrial areas as well—more solar on warehouse factory rooftops—just so that some of the project generation and capacity is actually in metropolitan areas instead of it all being out in the regions, and maybe having a better balance there. Would you have a view on that you could put to the Committee?

JOHN SHIEL: Well, 80 per cent of the population lives on the coast, and more than half of those would have solar on their roofs to start with. So they are pulling their weight in that respect, from the household. Commercial—there's actually a higher uptake in commercial solar, so they are actually powering along in the populated areas. I think we have to be careful about why REZs are chosen and why it is that those particular regions were selected. It's because they have a large amount of area which is not too expensive, so you can put a large solar farm or many wind turbines. Keep in mind, I heard a complaint that maybe one bird a day gets killed by every wind turbine—millions of birds a year get killed by cars, windows in buildings and cats. We're talking millions. Let's get this in perspective. When it comes back to whether the urban population can "pull their weight", they're the ones that've been pulling their weight forever when the one-way grid was in place. They are the ones carrying the load for the regions.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Sorry, can you explain—

JOHN SHIEL: So Vales Point and Eraring were power stations—we had to develop Liddell and Bayswater because the coal was at the surface here. We had to re-route the road and we had to put in the conveyors. But the ones on the coast use the saltwater to cool their turbines. What I'm saying is in a one-way grid, the coast was doing all the hard work, except for a few regional power stations—Mount Piper, Bayswater and Liddell. You had Eraring and Vales Point and White Bay, all of those ones, well before that. Now, I'm saying with a two-way grid, we need to be fair about it and think about how the regions can help the population.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Sure, but I guess my point was if you've got the majority of consumers in the cities, if there's more you can do to uplift urban on a broader scale, to then perhaps not have the number of projects out in rural communities, and it's a fairer balance. I guess that was my question, because that was the conversation.

JOHN SHIEL: Can I say that this new initiative of batteries for homes is actually accelerating. I mean, what is it, a thousand batteries a day, or something, getting implemented. That is taking a huge load off the grid, and that's the population of the coast doing that. As you say, a lot of community batteries are going in. Well, some community batteries, but the Ausgrid network batteries are going in, and some are really superpowered. They've got the 500 megawatt hour one in some of the old power stations.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: Dr Shiel, I might ask about one of the issues that we've come across as part of this inquiry as we've visited different locations, but particularly with solar. We've met with a lot of landowners who are generally supportive of renewable energy, but they don't want a solar farm next to their farm or in their area, and often for the right reasons. They often say that it's prime agricultural land or it's inappropriate that it's put in a particular place. I wonder whether you have a view about whether we've got the time to wait in order to get all of that planning right? Do we have time, where we can just stop the rollout of renewables, go and work out the best possible sites to put this in and slow down that process in order to meet those concerns that people have? Or is there an immediacy to getting this done as quickly as we can?

JOHN SHIEL: I think I was clear about the urgency of the problem, but I'm also very aware of the delicacy of trying to weigh the disadvantages with the advantages. The disadvantages across all the communities—and we're talking the farmers, the farming community, the mining community, the power station community. We've got to balance the transition. That's where we need something like the transition authority across all the industry and across all companies—not AGL just balancing Liddell and Bayswater but expanding that to all the industry so that, as the transmission is required, then those benefits go to the whole community.

As I said, with energy cooperatives you could probably, hopefully, come to some arrangement with those guys. Whether you've got to put the solar farm a little bit further away, the solar farms—this is the map of solar potential in the Hunter. Really, anywhere out west is good. That's why these ones here are perfect solar farm areas, whereas in here, you've got the high-wind area, which is up round this area. You would try to negotiate to make sure that—okay, maybe you've got to go a bit further west or north. But you should be able to come to an arrangement that satisfies everyone, rewards the community and rewards the whole—you can't run roughshod over everyone. Back in the old days State government, when putting a transition line through, probably just made sure it went through, but I think you can't do that now. With privatisation, you've got to respect—

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: So how do we deal with the problem where everybody loves renewable energy but they don't want it next to them. It's that nimby problem: "Not in my backyard. It's really important, but it should be in some other zone." How do we deal with that? Or do we just have to do get the renewable energy there and then sort through in the future how we might better zone and place these things in the way that you're talking about?

JOHN SHIEL: I think you've got to look in the long term. There's a construction bit of pain but then there's a long-term gain. Do they want power in the future? There is no alternative; the power has to go in. If it's not solar panels, maybe they could put in wind turbines. I think you've got to negotiate in good faith. This is what it comes down to.

The CHAIR: That concludes our time with you, Dr Shiel. I don't believe you took any questions on notice but there may be some supplementary questions we put to you. The secretariat will be in touch. Thank you for your time.

JOHN SHIEL: I thank the Committee for their work.

(The witness withdrew.)

Ms PAULA DELL-McCUMSTIE, New South Wales Policy Advisor, Association of Mining Exploration Companies, sworn and examined

Ms KERRY ATKINS, New South Wales Policy Director, Association of Mining Exploration Companies, sworn and examined

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

KERRY ATKINS: Yes, I would. First of all, thank you so much for the opportunity to come today to speak on behalf of our members. We're a national organisation. We represent mining and exploration companies around Australia. We have approximately 600 members. Our members are made up of critical mineral miners and metal miners and associated service providers. We support renewables. They're key to enabling decarbonisation, which can also support the mining industry to deliver decarbonised mineral products to markets. Of course, a lot of our members are mining the very products that are needed to build these renewable energy projects.

Unfortunately, several of our members have had deposits sterilised due to lack of communication from the renewable energy proponents. However, there are certainly mutual benefits of co-located mining and renewable projects. Our recommendations in this space are as follows: We would support a tri-party agreement attached to the application form between the explorer, the landholder and the renewable energy proponent to ensure that consultation occurs at the early project stage; and penalties and compensation to be introduced and enforced where a lack of consultation occurs. I will give a little bit more information on that. It's impossible to move a geological deposit. With consultation, a very thorough plan can be made as to where the project can locate—perhaps the renewable energy component versus the proposed mining site.

We'd love to see the partnership expanded between the Central-West Orana Renewable Energy Zone, NSW Farmers and EnergyCo to include exploration right holders. It would be great to be involved in any of the discussions that are happening, and it would be great to have that partnership happen all around New South Wales, as communication is always key to solving all of these problems. In mining, there are very tough up-front rehabilitation bonds. We would love to see renewable energy proponents have the same type of robust rehab bond regime. It would be great to have one source of information—for example, the department of planning—to have a current map of approved proponents in New South Wales and those proponents who have applied for approval for renewable energy projects.

That would improve transparency because, to be honest, the problems we have seen have been about a lack of communication and a lack of transparency. The department of planning amended their guidelines last November, and that has certainly been really helpful. Also, mandatory consultation between the renewable energy proponents and the mineral titleholders would address these concerns and preserve access to prospective land for exploration. It would be great to see compensation frameworks for exploration companies impacted by renewable energy projects covering expenses incurred and annual fees that mining projects and explorers have to pay for land that they cannot explore on. They were the main points that we wanted to bring up today. Thank you for the opportunity.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Thank you both for your submission and for being here today. I wanted to pick up on the part of your submission where you talked—and you mentioned it briefly then—about the issues around rehabilitation bonds. That's come up a little bit this morning and over the course of the other hearings we've had. I was interested when you said in your submission that exploration companies, or people working in that space, have a minimum value of \$10,000, yet there's nothing for the renewables. Could you talk more about why you think it would be a good idea to have some sort of decommissioning bond process so you had better equity across all areas?

KERRY ATKINS: Absolutely. I think it protects the landholder in the event that the renewable energy proponent goes into administration or is unable to complete their project. Even at the end of their project, I think it protects the landowner and also gives them a lot more equity in the game.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: I think you talked about how the bond should be held in trust by the Government in a similar way to exploration bonds. Do you think that would be the best mechanism in terms of how to do it?

KERRY ATKINS: Definitely, yes.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Are you aware of any other States that do anything in that space that is similar, or not at this stage?

KERRY ATKINS: I can find out for you. We are a national organisation. We both specialise in New South Wales, but I'm very happy to get back to you on that point and advise on the framework.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: That would be great, if possible. One more question, if I may, Chair. You spoke about it in your opening statement, but the idea of having better consultation and more transparency around which projects have been approved and which ones are going through the planning process has been a very strong theme. Sometimes people find out about it at the pub, or council today gave as examples that they didn't know about certain projects. Even proponents might not know that there are others nearby. In an ideal world, what would that look like? I know you call out the planning department as having responsibility for that.

KERRY ATKINS: Yes, I think that data is now so available that it would be very simple to have one statewide interactive map with all of these approved and proposed projects. That would put the responsibility on everyone else to go and have a look at that map and constantly see what's going on in the area. We have many examples of exactly what you just said, where an auger turns up on a piece of land, and the mineral exploration titleholder who has exclusive rights to that land didn't have any clue. Honestly, all of our members are very open to these conversations, and they regularly inform us that they try to make contact and that no-one will talk to them about what's happening and things like that. I really see this as a communication and information gap, to be honest. As I said, mining and exploration projects and renewable projects can work really well together. There is no reason why they can't. Power is, of course, for a mining project, if it does eventually get up, their biggest cost. Their biggest concern is reliable, cheap power, so it really should be a marriage made in heaven, you would think.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Better transparency and accountability that then comes with that.

KERRY ATKINS: Definitely. That's why I think the idea of possibly a tripartite agreement that the proponent puts into the planning department to say, "Yes, it has been signed off by the landholder. It's been signed off by the renewable energy proponent and the EL holder. So therefore everybody has met and discussed." Because, quite honestly, the location of the renewable energy project can be very easily moved, but the mine usually can't, because that's where the mineral is. With that up-front communication and long-term planning, you can overcome a lot of the angst that's happening, because you certainly can move a solar farm and possibly a windfarm as well, with that great consultation.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: One more question on that topic: Have you had any of your member companies where that uncertainty of whether or not a particular renewable project will go ahead—because, again, we've heard that some can be years in planning and then maybe not come to fruition—has that impacted people in your industry in terms of what they do with their exploration as well?

PAULA DELL-McCUMSTIE: One of the things is that the renewable companies sign an agreement with the landowner. That can impact them because they can set that time for whatever they want—five to 10 years—and therefore the explorer is basically reduced to not accessing that land, because the landowner, in certain cases, will not allow an explorer on if they've got this agreement in place and, therefore, like you said, you don't know how long that's going to last. As Kerry said, the explorer has exclusive rights to look for those minerals.

KERRY ATKINS: The explorer mightn't even know about that other agreement.

PAULA DELL-McCUMSTIE: Very unlikely, yes.

KERRY ATKINS: They often don't know until it's all too late, and then they'll come to us and say, "We've just lost the whole project because we didn't even know this was going to happen." There is a really big gap in the communication.

PAULA DELL-McCUMSTIE: And the policing of it. The planning department needs to make sure—the renewable energy absolutely has to contact the stakeholders, the explorers.

The CHAIR: Sticking with that theme, can you give us a sense of how widespread this issue is in terms of minerals being sterilised? Can we quantify that in terms of loss of potential State revenue?

KERRY ATKINS: We can get back to you on the potential loss of State revenue from the cases that we have. To be honest, we haven't calculated. For an explorer, it's very hard to know what that might have turned into, because a lot of exploration holes that are drilled don't turn into a mine. In fact, very few do. That's the importance of exploration. You have to be able to drill a hole which is minimally invasive to find out what is under the ground, because there's no other way to know. Once a wind turbine has been built there, an exclusion zone is created around it and you can't explore there. If an explorer has got a sense that they believe the most prospective area of the lease is there, for example, and that conversation can be had up front—that's the importance of communication and the co-existence side. I just want to let the Committee know that AMEC has commissioned a consultant to prepare a very comprehensive national report on land access and the challenges that agriculture, mining and the renewable energy sectors have all had because we're all trying to use the same piece of land. How

do we do that successfully? We've just published about a 90-page report on our website. It's completely free. It explains the problem throughout Australia. It defines the problem really well. It has some key recommendations. I'd be happy to send a copy of that report.

The CHAIR: That would be great. Thank you.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: I want to come back to the issue of the proposed bonds. Aren't renewable energy projects and mining projects fundamentally and completely different in their nature, in the sense that what you're talking about when you're mining is altering the landscape forever—extracting those minerals out of the ground and completely changing the nature of the landscape? With renewable energy, often when, in a sense, decommissioning occurs, it's more likely that it's replacing old technology with new technology. It's something that is ongoing in terms of making money. Why would a bond be necessary when that's happening?

KERRY ATKINS: I guess the bond is an up-front cost that proves that you are going to leave the land in the same way that you found it. With exploration, for example, the \$10,000 bond that we're referring to, which is very small—the large open-cuts are about \$200 million—is just to drill a hole. To be honest, if the explorer never came back—although they will—that hole that they drilled could be filled in by the dirt that was surrounding it. It seems unfair that you would have to pay a \$10,000 bond just to drill a hole but you can erect a whole heap of steel wind turbines and not pay a bond or not give the Government a guarantee that, at the end of the day, you will leave the area as you found it.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: It's about risk, though, isn't it? We've got countless examples of mines going broke or not cleaning up at the end. That's the reason that we have bonds. Equally, at the moment we've got examples where renewable energy operators have simply replaced technology and they continue to operate. I'm looking for where the problem is. I can't find a single example of a renewable energy operator that has left a million solar panels on a farm and not cleaned them up. We've had them operating past their life span already in this State.

KERRY ATKINS: Then I can't see why an explorer has to lodge a bond to drill a simple hole either. The comparison there is pretty similar to me in terms of exploration.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: So does that mean you're in favour of removing those bonds?

KERRY ATKINS: No. The bonds are good because they give the landholder some certainty that, in the worst-case scenario, their land will be restored to how it was before anything started.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: Why don't landholders negotiate this as part of their contracts?

KERRY ATKINS: I think it's good that the Government does regulate industry and ensures that landholders are protected.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: You know they're entering into them voluntarily; they don't have to sign up for these things. Why should the Government be putting in an enormous up-front cost that'll act as a disincentive for renewable energy by requiring a bond that's probably never going to be used?

KERRY ATKINS: I guess that's just a difference in opinion.

PAULA DELL-McCUMSTIE: There may be mess created during construction that needs to be remedied. That's one of the things we have in exploration.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: That's a different issue to decommissioning.

PAULA DELL-McCUMSTIE: No, during the construction. I'm talking about exploration. This is trucks and vehicles driving onto a property to potentially drill a hole, as Kerry said. It's the same thing. I imagine the construction of solar panels and wind turbines would cause some deterioration of a farmer's property. That bond could cover that.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: I would have thought most farmers are very street smart people. They get the right advice. If they felt as though there was an issue, wouldn't they negotiate that into the contract? I haven't heard a farmer come along and say, "I don't like the contract I signed. I think there should have been a bond built into it." Why should the Government come over the top of that and put in place a bond that is unlikely to ever be needed?

KERRY ATKINS: It's just a comment from members. They feel it would level the playing field.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: We've had other witnesses talk about opportunities for old mine site renewal by having renewable projects put on them. Do you see those opportunities?

PAULA DELL-McCUMSTIE: This is your passion, Kerry.

KERRY ATKINS: No, you go.

PAULA DELL-McCUMSTIE: We think it's a great idea, especially with a circular economy. There is a lot of focus when a mine starts on the actual decommissioning side of it. The Government is definitely working towards—in the resources department—looking at that and actually including the community more and being able to collaborate with people to try and look at that. It's happening, but it's just a bigger change.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Have you done any studies to understand that potential on the sites or the buffer zones? If you have, can you enlighten us?

KERRY ATKINS: Our organisation hasn't. We basically conduct studies in things that people ask us to. We haven't specifically conducted a study into that, no. As Paula said, I think it's an incredible opportunity. A lot of our members tend to be explorers, so they're on someone else's land. I heard the gentleman before me speaking about—you were asking, "Where do you put these renewable energy projects? No-one wants them on their land." Actual mines usually own the land that they're working on. What a great opportunity, I would think, given that the community has already previously accepted a mine there. You would think it would be a great opportunity. As Paula said, NSW Resources is very keen to repurpose old mine sites.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: You mentioned that sometimes a renewable energy zone is over a potential mineral deposit. What kind of compensation framework do you think should be established if you're not able to extract those minerals, especially if those minerals are going to be beneficial to renewable energy?

KERRY ATKINS: Taking just one slight step back, I realise that, over the last couple of years, this has all developed very quickly. It would be great for the renewable energy department to work really closely with NSW Resources who have done so much mapping in the State and understand where the most critical minerals are. That would be the optimal initial step to understand what the State needs and what Australia would really like to mine in terms of the Future Made in Australia policy that we're all working towards at the moment. I think that is the first step. Compensation—I don't have any figures. We'd have to go back to members to talk about it. I don't know, sorry.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Is there an opportunity where mining and renewables could successfully co-locate? Do you have any examples of what that would look in New South Wales?

PAULA DELL-McCUMSTIE: As Kerry mentioned earlier, I have actually been involved with a case where a renewable energy company hadn't contacted an explorer. I had to go and communicate with them on numerous occasions and then, finally, once they understood—that was one of the things. The biggest thing was their lack of understanding for exploration and mining. They really didn't have a clue, and once they finally understood the potential in that area, they were like, "We can work together. We'll have our area." They needed the ridge for their wind farms and the explorer was looking in the valley, and they were like, "Yes, we could work together"—the explorer, and moved on. That's the thing with exploration: They moved on. I think other people have got it now. They were very keen, but it took a lot of time for us as explorers to actually go and let them understand the whole concept of what exploration is.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: I'll just go back to the rehabilitation bonds. Could you explain how these work for mining companies just so I can get an understanding of the difference between renewables and mining? Do you see it as being similar in how they would operate?

KERRY ATKINS: Mining companies are different to exploration companies. They have a different bond. But mining companies, for example—it's completely based on the estimate of the cost to rehabilitate the mine to the state that it was in before you commenced mining. For example, out here in the Hunter Valley, probably about \$200 million is your bond to rehabilitate one of the large mines. The department keeps a very detailed calculator on its website that is constantly being updated. It calculates every square inch and every possible input into how much it's going to cost, and then the company has to pay that and maintain that bond. The State keeps the interest on the bond, and the company has to keep that there even while they're rehabilitating. They're actually paying the whole rehab cost and they can't get that released until the very end of having spent the \$200 million, so they're actually kind of double paying. For explorers, there is a set fee of \$10,000.

PAULA DELL-McCUMSTIE: Plus any extra that they have to pay, depending on what type of exploration they do. If the rehabilitation and the exploration they do looks like it's going to be more than \$10,000, they have to pay extra. I know a few of our members have up to \$100,000 in their bond, including all the individual projects they have on.

KERRY ATKINS: It's a risk management tool for the government, and I support a rehab framework because I really think there is always an unscrupulous operator in any industry. We both have been in the mining industry forever and we love it. You're always going to come across an unscrupulous operator somewhere or

something's going to go wrong, and that is the whole point of having a bond system. It's a risk management tool for the landholder or the landowner or the State to make sure that things that have happened in the past aren't repeated.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: I'm just having a little bit of trouble hearing. Are they usually successful in covering the costs of the rehabilitation? I think you touched on that, but I was having trouble hearing.

KERRY ATKINS: Yes, they are now.

PAULA DELL-McCUMSTIE: Yes, they are definitely because the government has that calculator to work it out exactly.

KERRY ATKINS: To be honest, New South Wales rehab bonds for actual mining, not exploration, are probably the highest in Australia. In other States—for example, Western Australia—you just put in 5 per cent of your estimated, so you would then pay 5 per cent of \$200 million. We are really the only State that puts the whole 100 per cent in. Our State resources Minister is very risk averse in that area.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: In your experience, when a mine has been rehabilitated, is there any infrastructure or change to the landscape that's different to what it would have been originally?

KERRY ATKINS: I don't think I'm qualified to answer that one.

PAULA DELL-McCUMSTIE: By definition, taking ore out of the ground will mean that the landscape is lower, but then there is always a plan for rehabilitating and often back to the level that it was before. They can infill it with their waste and then they'll put soil and they can turn it back to usable land.

KERRY ATKINS: Paula's a geologist so she can explain the layers of the earth.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Thank you for coming along today and thank you for your submission. I'm just wondering about the data that underpins your concerns about what's unfolding. In terms of exploration that's going on in New South Wales, is there a central record-keeping arrangement that exists, and who maintains that?

KERRY ATKINS: MinView, our head geoscientist in New South Wales, keeps fantastic records. Anyone can jump on and you can have a look at every mining lease in New South Wales, every approved exploration lease. It's all mapped out.

PAULA DELL-McCUMSTIE: And all the related documents.

KERRY ATKINS: Yes, and all the documents supporting it. NSW Resources has all of those rehab bonds that we just talked about. If you have a look at any of the Hunter Valley mines, you'll be able to see how much is put aside. You'll be able to see what the closure plan is for any of the mines. It's just the planning—

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: My question is on the exploration side. I'm wanting to know whether there is evidence of exploration. Looking at it, it's actually starting to decline in the State.

KERRY ATKINS: There is, actually.

PAULA DELL-McCUMSTIE: Well, it's cyclic, really. It is a cyclic thing, depending on—

KERRY ATKINS: We can send you the latest on that, which we do have.

PAULA DELL-McCUMSTIE: It depends on commodity prices. It depends on what's happening in the world.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: That's right. That's the nature of the mining industry.

PAULA DELL-McCUMSTIE: It's very, very dependent on many, many things.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: As opposed to a causal effect between what's developing with respect to REZs and, obviously, the changes taking place.

PAULA DELL-McCUMSTIE: Yes, investment is a big thing and sovereign risk.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: That's right. Thank you.

The CHAIR: That takes us to the end of this session. Thank you very much for your time. You did take quite a few questions on notice, so the secretariat will be in touch regarding them and any supplementary questions we might send as well.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

Mr MICHAEL HOLZ, Resident and representing Singleton Solar Standoff community group, affirmed and examined

Mrs MYREE RUSSELL, Farmer/landholder, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: We now welcome our last two witnesses. Mr Holz, would you like to start with a short opening statement?

MICHAEL HOLZ: Yes, thank you. I am a resident of Mitchells Flat and a member of the Singleton Solar Standoff group that was formed about 12 months ago after Elgin Energy announced plans for a solar factory at Mitchells Flat. In March 2025 I made a submission to this inquiry and I thank the Committee for the opportunity to speak today, and also for the Committee taking time out yesterday to visit Mitchells Flat. What is the proposed project? Elgin is an overseas-based solar company that is majority owned by the Copenhagen Infrastructure Partners group. They operate as an independent solar and storage development platform in the UK, Ireland and in Australia. The solar factory to be located at Mitchells Flat is 10 kilometres to the east of the town. The proposed solar factory will be 210 hectares in size—that's 520 acres—and will consist of 177,000 solar panels and a 90 megawatt battery storage system.

In addition, Elgin are intent on constructing a new 66 kV transmission line stretching 14 kilometres along Mirannie, Gresford and Pioneer Road reserves through to an existing substation at Singleton that is located near the Hunterview residential estate. Given that this is a State significant project, it will require New South Wales State Government approval. Apart from an initial meeting—I'll call it a meeting—at Singleton library in August of last year, 2024, Elgin has not engaged with the community and they are yet to submit their scoping document, which is the request for SEARs from the New South Wales planning department.

As you saw on your visit yesterday, Mitchells Flat and the neighbouring areas consist primarily of rural and residential lifestyle blocks. Based on 2021 Census data, there are about 1,600 residents—470 families—who enjoy the peace and quiet of a rural lifestyle in and adjacent to Mitchells Flat. We are a family-orientated community, where people have chosen to live and raise their families in a location where there is no industrial activity whatsoever. In recent years, there have been two residential developments to the east of Singleton at Sedgefield, which shares a boundary with Mitchells Flat. The developments include the Hunter Highlands Estate, which comprises 40 residential lots, and the Big Ridge Estate, which is a rural subdivision consisting of 60 lots ranging in size from two to 20 hectares.

Everyone will be impacted by either the solar panels or the route of the transmission line through to the Hunter residential estate. Our primary concerns are the location of this project in the broad area of the Hunter-Central Coast REZ. It is very important to stress, firstly, that we, residents, and the Singleton community are not against renewable energy sources. For us, this is not a political or a government party issue. Our community is simply asking that developments like what is proposed at Mitchells Flat be constructed in the right location within the Singleton LGA so that they do not impact on either our rural residential communities or our productive farming land. All industrial activity—inclusive of mining, power generation, industrial estates, the army base et cetera—is located to the north and west of Singleton, with all of the residential development occurring to the east of town.

Anyone that has visited the Hunter Valley is aware that there are vast areas of mining rehab and buffer lands that are ideal for solar projects, given their cheaper establishment cost, being in close proximity to existing electrical grid infrastructure. We are already seeing examples of all this alternate land use, as evidenced by Malabar Resources' Maxwell Solar Farm, which is on the old Drayton site; the pumped hydro plant to be located at Muswellbrook coal; and the Stratford Renewable Energy Hub near Gloucester. Elgin have made no attempt to engage with any mining companies in the Hunter. The community has major concerns with the blanket nature of the Hunter-Central Coast REZ that has been established without any consideration of the suitability of potential sites for large solar development.

The planning process needs to be improved, inclusive of land use mapping, in order to provide greater transparency, clarity and certainty to communities on the best locations within each REZ for renewable projects and, more specifically, where renewable projects are not appropriate. There should be no-go zones within the REZ zones. Other community concerns with the proposed solar factory—and these would be a common theme that you've encountered in your visits out to Dubbo and to Armidale—are the visual amenity and the landscaping impact, which in this case is 177,000 solar panels adjacent to the main Gresford Road; the bushfire hazard and the impact of major storm events; the responsibility for end-of-life decommissioning and rehabilitation of the site; the public liability insurance premiums for neighbours; impacts on mental health, emotional wellbeing and sense of place; and impact on neighbouring property values.

The route of the transmission lines that Elgin is seeking to install the transmission line will require some extensive clearing and will have a significant impact on endangered ecological community. The area of the proposed transmission line is located within an area of core flora and fauna connectivity. Briefly, I acknowledge the support we have received from Singleton Council. They are united with the community in wanting to see former mining land used for renewable projects, rather than impacting on and destroying more productive farmland. In November 2024 Singleton Council voted unanimously against the proposed Mitchells Flat location, and we thank all councillors for their bipartisanship with regard to this request.

We'd also like to acknowledge our elected State and Federal representatives. Dave Layzell, our Nationals State member, has attended community meetings and raised our concerns in State Parliament, and he continues to engage with us. Dan Repacholi met with residents back in November last year, and in March this year actually broke ALP party lines with a speech in Federal Parliament. Dan stated that the Mitchells Flat solar farm is not smart planning, that our community deserves a say and that we say no to the Mitchells Flat solar farm development. Your colleague Emily Suvaal also visited Mitchells Flat back in March. I met Emily here last year at a post-mining land use speech she did as part of Singleton Council. Emily has just recently chaired that inquiry into the beneficial and productive use of post-mining land.

We are very appreciative that all of the inquiry's recommendations were accepted by the New South Wales Government, inclusive of conducting a land audit of sites for potential repurposing for renewable energy projects. Finally, with regard to the NSW Minerals Council, they are the industry association that represents the State's mining companies. They provided excellent submissions to both this inquiry and the post-mining inquiry. They have indicated a willingness for renewable energy developments to be located on former mine sites once their operations cease. We need the regulatory framework to be reviewed and modified to allow this to happen.

In conclusion, we are asking for, and hoping for, three primary outcomes from this inquiry, being a more coordinated approach from government in dealing with new projects to ensure that infrastructure is placed in the most appropriate locations. We ask that all future energy projects be required to obtain a site verification certificate prior to lodging a development application, which would help to ensure that renewable projects are located in the appropriate areas, which protects the community and would also provide up-front clarity to the proponents of renewable energy projects.

Secondly, we would like to see former mining land prioritised for renewable projects, and again note the mining companies' willingness for this to happen. Finally, in line with the current requirements for the New South Wales mining industry, we ask that all proponents of renewable energy projects be required to obtain a rehabilitation bond that fully covers their end-of-life remediation costs. This would help to ensure that all land that is used for renewable projects is returned to its pre-used state. Again, thanks for the opportunity to speak with you today and for visiting Mitchells Flat yesterday.

MYREE RUSSELL: I come to you today as a fourth-generation farmer, a landholder and a steward of the land on which I live and work. I am not a public speaker and I'm very much out of my comfort zone, but I am passionate about the farm I call home and I have great appreciation for the surrounding area. I would like to extend my gratitude to the Chair and the Committee for the opportunity to appear today, here in Singleton. Singleton was historically founded on agriculture, with around 350 local dairy farms supplying milk to the Singleton Dairy Co-op in its heyday. Until its closure in 1988, the factory produced the famed Singleton cheddar cheese, which was made in the tradition of the original English cheddar and proved to be popular across Australia.

According to the experts in the industry at the time, it derived its quality from a combination of factors, the two most important being the skill of the cheesemaker and the source of the milk—the dairy cows grazing Singleton's rich Hunter River flats. It is some of those very river flats, classified as BSAL, or biophysical strategic agricultural land, on which the Hunter Transmission Project's proposed alignment and high-voltage transmission line is set to traverse. Today, Singleton is a major economic contributor to the region, with coalmining a very dominant industry. Broadscale mapping of agricultural land across New South Wales was undertaken to assist in identifying and managing competing land uses proposed for high-quality agricultural land, specifically for State significant mining or coal seam gas proposals.

Amendments to the Electricity Infrastructure Investment Act 2020 enabled such energy infrastructure as required by the HTP permissible on BSAL. I question how this legislation could have been passed. All of our remaining strategic agricultural land must be warranted protection from all forms of development. Once a transmission line is built on or over a piece of land, you drastically reduce its potential. If our farming capabilities are lost, we lose the ability to feed our nation and its ever-increasing population. My husband and I initially became aware of the Hunter Transmission Project by way of a letterbox drop in late 2023. It has been almost two years of uncertainty, distress and frustration.

There was an unauthorised entry to our property by a fieldwork team in July 2024. I have written endless emails. There have been many robust discussions and numerous meetings with the various team members from EnergyCo. Responses are slow and some questions are yet to be answered. The people we have consulted with have very little knowledge or understanding of intense farming, or farming practices in general for meaningful engagement. As recently as Tuesday, we had Transgrid members and an irrigation farm specialist visit to establish by what method we are to be able to irrigate within the easement.

We are on our fourth place manager, and it has only been in the last three months that we have been given a direct mobile number and email address for our respective place manager. Since my submission in January, the alignment across our property has been altered. The HTP EIS has just completed its exhibition phase. The updated alignment across our property and surrounds was not the one included in the EIS. I question how that is ethical. Farmers like myself are left grappling with the reality of all this renewable energy infrastructure, trying to establish how we can not only live with it but also continue to run successful and economic, sustainable farm enterprises. The "C" word—compensation—forms much of the rhetoric and a constant incentive used by the EnergyCo members. As farmers, the land is our livelihood. How do you compensate for the loss of use of such valuable land classified as BSAL? Whether it be part of our property or beyond, this land must be protected from development.

How do you put a dollar value on visual beauty? It is the visual beauty of the river flats that has brought me much solace, comfort and sense of place for the 25-plus years I have lived and worked on our property. It is the love of the land, our family, and pride in what we do that keeps my husband and I moving forward. The significance of renewable infrastructure projects such as the HTP for energy security is continuously being emphasised, but it is just as crucial to get their placement right. I do not have the answers, but we need to find some balance, and sooner rather than later. Affected landholders, whether it be lifestyle or on an agriculture enterprise such as ours, must be respected and supported. The inconvenience of the loss of production and use of land—and, for some, the ultimate sacrifice of having to leave their properties—needs to be acknowledged and not just expected. I thank the Chair and the Committee for conducting this very important inquiry.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Thank you both for your opening statements. I know you said you're not much of a public speaker, Mrs Russell, but that was very good. Thank you for being so honest and upfront with the Committee, and likewise, Mr Holz, when visiting your place yesterday. I also want to acknowledge that Dave Layzell is here as well, as the local member. This is probably a bit emotive, but in terms of community morale, obviously you're two local landholders who are impacted, but I know that there are hundreds of other people who are part of your community groups and organisations who have concerns about this. How much of an impact is this having on your communities—that lack of uncertainty and that lack of consultation? How can we, as a Committee, help to maybe alleviate some of that concern that you're hearing and feeling and living through?

MICHAEL HOLZ: If I just speak to that first, these two projects we're talking about here are a little bit chalk and cheese. In our case, as I mentioned, Elgin haven't actually even pulled the trigger on this project yet so we're really just dealing with total unknowns. Will this go ahead? Will they end up making a submission to the Government to commence the project? For our community, it's a lot of frustration of the unknown and the fact that we've had no community consultation whatsoever from Elgin apart from—I referred to it as a meeting. They basically had a drop-in session in the library just across from here. They had, I think, five posters up on a whiteboard that you were allowed to go and read, and if you wanted to ask questions, ask questions. You would never say it was a community meeting or anything like that. It was just basically a drop-in session and just take it as is.

For us, it's really the disappointment that there's no engagement. As mentioned in the earlier session with the council, we've obviously gone on the front foot with a lot of signs. We've engaged with council and got a great outcome there. We're aware that it's not the right location and council knows that and Ausgrid knows that. Everyone seems to know that except for the proponents of this project. I really feel for the Russells and for other families that are impacted by the Hunter transmission line, because that project is obviously right on their doorstep now. You can obviously talk to the issues. I've seen it in some of the families that are dealing with that issue.

MYREE RUSSELL: I have found that it's a matter of "if it's not in your backyard". A lot of people aren't aware of where exactly the Hunter Transmission Project is going. Our neighbour is a dairy farmer and we are the last two remaining private landholders in that particular area at Mount Thorley. There is another privately owned property. That young fella's property is the property on which the Gouldsville accommodation camp is to be located, because the alignment really didn't enable him the opportunity to be able to stay on his property. As far as community support, there is really only the two of us landholders. We are sticking together and remain united as far as when we have dealings with EnergyCo.

It is a State significant project. I made contact with the council because I just could not understand how such infrastructure could be placed on agricultural land. I'm a farmer; I'm not a politician. I'm sorry; I don't know

the legislation. I haven't had to until now. My opinion was, if I had wanted to build something like that down on the river flats, there is no way that we would be allowed to do that. So I contacted the duty planner and she told me to read the local environmental plan. It goes against everything. We are RU1 rated, and it's against everything that we, as landholders, are supposed to achieve. We are feeling a little bit hopeless. Like I said, I appreciate the opportunity to put forward my view. But no—to answer your question—I don't feel that we have a lot of community support, because it overrides the community. Because it is a State significant project, it will appear to just go ahead.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: We've heard this from other witnesses in different locations. As you say, you're a farmer. You're running your business, with a husband and family. You're trying to delve through and understand. You just mentioned looking into local planning. It's quite complicated. Have you found it challenging to understand what your rights are and how that evolves? Could there have been better support for you from, say, EnergyCo or someone to help you understand what your rights are as well?

MYREE RUSSELL: Definitely. We could have used some help. I don't know that EnergyCo would have been the people to provide that.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Or maybe someone independent.

MYREE RUSSELL: Yes. Just to even understand all of the legislation. It's very confronting. It's a lot to digest.

MICHAEL HOLZ: Again, as was mentioned there, you're talking about a couple of farmers. In our circumstance, when you drove out to Mitchells Flat yesterday, you saw the number of residents and the number of properties. In our case, we've obviously been able to band together all of that neighbourhood. It's not just Mitchells Flat; it's all the areas around Mitchells Flat. As I said, we've engaged with Singleton Council and the Singleton people. For us, it's been a lot easier again because that solar farm will impact such a big area and a lot of people. We've been able to pull a group together.

We've probably all got our little specialities in terms of what we can bring to that group. Any gaps that we've had—for example, a few of us are NSW Farmers members. I've definitely reached out to them and spoken to Reg Kidd, who was their head of energy policy. I've had chats with him—obviously interacting with our local members as well—and others have looked at the signage, advertising and media. So it's a lot easier for us because of the sheer volume of people that are impacted. Obviously everyone came together almost in shock when it was announced 12 months ago.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: One of the other things that we're hearing—and, again, this came up earlier today when Ausgrid were here and then the witness just after lunch, and I live in a regional community, so I understand it as well—is the feeling that all of the renewable focus is in our communities. I think you've both said you're not against renewables, but it's making sure they're in the right locations, particularly here in the Hunter, where you do have mining land or potential industrial areas that have closer proximity to existing transmission lines. The other thing that came up was about urban renewable projects, whether it's on factory roofs—I think Ausgrid were talking about looking at doing a pilot. I think you called that out in your submission, Mrs Russell. How do you think that balance should be better achieved so you have a little bit more happening in urban areas and the whole weight of this does not fall on rural and regional communities?

MICHAEL HOLZ: I will go first on that one. As I mentioned before, in the fact that we haven't really had any engagement with Elgin directly—we've spoken to EnergyCo at the drop-in sessions that they've had in the community here. The same with Ausgrid, because they've had drop-in sessions in relation to the upgrade of the line they're doing. They raised that themselves, of us, in terms of, as you said, whether it's in urban areas, shopping centres or industrial estate roofs and having battery hubs. To me, it just makes total common sense. If that roof space is available and you can have battery hubs within communities that can then, of a night, draw down on that battery, it beggars belief why that isn't happening in the first instance. If we still have a shortfall, we then digress and go out to the rural areas to start to get capacity from the regions. But you almost think why hasn't it been the other way round, to at least start that process within the cities?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Did you want to add anything to that, Mrs Russell?

MYREE RUSSELL: No, I think Michael has pretty much covered my sentiments.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: But I think it picks up on your point before about high-quality agricultural land that we need to feed and clothe the nation. If you can have a better balance with where these projects are and maybe a bit of urban uptake as well, it might alleviate some of the issues.

MYREE RUSSELL: Definitely.

The CHAIR: Mrs Russell, can I just go to the part of your opening statement where you talked about finding EnergyCo trespassing on your property. Sadly, that is not the first example we've heard of this. Can you explain how you came to find them on your property, and what was their excuse or rationale for trespassing on your property?

MYREE RUSSELL: That, we will never forget. I think it was 16 July 2024. It was a horrendous day—windy and cold—and we had been inside. My husband went down to the farm to check on our cattle, and he met a ute coming up our laneway. He asked the two gentlemen, "Who are you? What are you doing? Are you anything to do with the Hunter Transmission Project?" They told him, "We have permission to be here." He said, "No, you don't." They were a fieldwork team working for WSP. It was late in the afternoon, about four o'clock, and he just said, "You don't have permission." They said, "Yes, we do." He said, "No, you don't. I'm the owner. You don't have permission." And he politely told them to leave. He came back and he was ropeable. By that time it was a bit late to get on to anyone.

In all of this, like I have explained, we have been given the same as if you, Chair, went to an EnergyCo drop-in session. You would be given a card with the EnergyCo 1800 number and the community email. That is all we had. You would ring that 1800 number, and a very polite call-taker would answer the phone. Then a message would be sent on. The following day I contacted that actual company, WSP. I rang them and asked what projects they were working on. The lady said, "We are working on many projects all over the Hunter." I said, "What about the Hunter Transmission Project in the Mount Thorley area?" She wasn't sure. "Just give me all your details, and I will follow it up."

I lodged a formal complaint with the company, and then we heard back from our place manager at the time. An investigation was instigated and, from then, it was a mistake that the people had come onto our property which, in this day and age, I find extremely hard to believe, with GPS. One of the very first maps that we were shown on a laptop—there was myself, my husband and our next-door neighbour, huddled around a laptop of one of the EnergyCo members to look at the initial alignment. When my husband went down he could see where the ute had circled, and it was actually where one of the towers on the Google map we had seen on the laptop was going to be. But, no, they weren't supposed to be on our property. We did get a written apology from EnergyCo. They did an investigation, and we did receive a formal apology. They were going to start new protocols, which I thought should already have been in place.

The CHAIR: Would you be shocked to hear that, up until about eight months ago, their field teams weren't even going out with proper GIS software? Would that shock you? The new CEO told us in budget estimates that she was proud of the fact that she had implemented a change where field teams would now actually have mapping software. Does that sound to you like best practice in terms of community engagement?

MYREE RUSSELL: No, not at all.

The CHAIR: What did that example of trespass do to your confidence that you are going to be treated fairly and with respect?

MYREE RUSSELL: From then on, we thought we would never be treated fairly or respected. We became highly suspicious of the whole project from then on, and still are, really.

The CHAIR: Further on from that, with EnergyCo being deceptive in the EIS proposal, where they essentially didn't put in the proper route, did that compound your level of distrust?

MYREE RUSSELL: Yes, definitely.

The CHAIR: As a bare minimum, what would you like to happen in response to that? Do you think EnergyCo should have to resubmit that EIS without the lies, without the deception and with the proper details in place?

MYREE RUSSELL: Yes. When you looked on the EIS, there was something like 15 or 16 technical reports. All of those reports were made anytime from March to July. They were compiling all of these reports while they were still talking and negotiating with landholders. To me, what appeared in the EIS may not have been what was exactly happening on the project. It just seemed like they're rushed. We have been more or less told that. Where I am at Mount Thorley, we're surrounded by mine-owned farmland, so they have bought the surrounding farmland as buffer zones. We are surrounded by mines. We have an industrial area across the road from us. When I look the other way, that's where the beautiful vistas are. That is where the HTP is planning to go. I said to one of the leading consultation people at the very beginning that the landform over there looking across to the mine land is forever changing because the mine has sort of moved. It's moving away from us. They're doing rehabilitation. Every six months, if you don't visit the area and you only come up every 12 months, the landform

is changing. I said that, in time, it could go there. You don't have to come across the agricultural land. She just politely told me, "We don't have time for that." It's like they're paid to do a job at all costs.

The CHAIR: You talked about this in your submission. You talked about concerns around biodiversity and particular species or habitats. Do you think there's a bit of irony in the fact that we're apparently destroying the environment to save the environment?

MYREE RUSSELL: Exactly. To save the atmosphere, we're littering the environment.

The CHAIR: Has there been any positive engagement with EnergyCo around your concerns around biodiversity and changing the routes to avoid impacting these particular habitats?

MYREE RUSSELL: In the EIS, they had reports and mechanisms that they're going to put in place. Like I said—

The CHAIR: Did that feel like lip service more than actual, concrete actions?

MYREE RUSSELL: Yes. Like I said, after they came onto our land unauthorised, what they say has little substance. On paper, it all looks good, but we all know that in real life things can be very different.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Thank you, both, for coming along today. Mrs Russell, on the second page of your submission, under the heading "CONSULTATION", the third paragraph says:

On the 12th December 2024, nearly twelve months to the day from when we were informed, we "may be impacted" by the HTP, my husband and I, as well as our dairy farmer neighbour, were given opening letters of acquisition from EnergyCo and the alignment across our properties finally revealed.

Can you expand on that a little bit? How was that done? What were you told about what that meant in having those issued to you?

MYREE RUSSELL: We had had consultation. We opposed the project from the very onset on the fact that it is going across such strategic agricultural land. They said to us, "If it has to go over the land, where would it create the most minimal impact?" We said going adjacent to the Hunter River, because then we wouldn't have to travel under it, the cattle could stay away from it and it would be less impactful for us in terms of running the farm. That acquisition letter was given to us in the form of a meeting at the tourist information centre in town. We were guessing that that would be given to us at that meeting, but prior to that it was very random, the contact. They had organised this meeting—we discussed it—at which the opening letters were given to us anyway. On that opening letter, it included the corridor adjacent to the Hunter River, but that has been changed.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Any explanation about why that change was made?

MYREE RUSSELL: Yes. Like I explained, we have adjoining mine-owned land. There is my husband and my property and the neighbour that is a dairy farmer. Either side of us is owned by the mines, but it's farmland. They rent their houses out. The dairy farmer neighbour, he actually rents some of the mine-owned land and has expanded his dairy enterprise by doing that. Instead of keeping adjacent to the Hunter River and heading back over to Gouldsville—where the accommodation compound is proposed to be—they went directly back. We do have a rail corridor that runs along the Jerrys Plains Road. They just headed straight back across all of the farmland to the rail corridor. But because we don't own the mine land, we were only given a map of where the corridor would be. Our neighbour and I could only speculate how they were going to get to where they had to go. If you look at the map on the website, you sort of have a rough idea. We were only speculating how they were going to get over to Gouldsville. Understandably, the mine stepped in and didn't want them going straight across and virtually cutting that farmland in half, which is understandable. Like I've said all along, whether it be on our lands or anywhere, it doesn't belong on farmland. That's how the alignment has been changed.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: I want to thank both of you for your written submissions and for coming along and giving evidence today. It's really invaluable. I also thank Mr Holz for hosting us yesterday on a site visit at Mitchells Flat to have a look at the proposal. When I read your submissions, the thing you really seemed to be saying is you're not opposed to renewable energy, but there is just this incredible chaos. There's uncertainty. In that quagmire of issues it's very difficult to understand what the impacts are going to be on the community.

You point to, rightly so, the fact that we should be using disused industrial land and that we should be using mining land at the end of a mine and repurposing that instead of prime agricultural land for solar and wind farms. One of the things that struck me that you said yesterday on the site visit was something like you felt as though you were victims of a decade of inaction, where if action was taken earlier, then it could've been planned out better and we could've had those industrial sites and post-mining sites being utilised. But, because there wasn't

action for 10 years, there's now this incredible rush to meet our targets to get our renewable energy rolled out. Is that a fair summary of the position?

MICHAEL HOLZ: It is, but I think my comment was probably more targeted at just the whole-of-government solution to the situation we're in now and the fact that we didn't have bipartisan agreement between all parties at Federal and State levels—it's all hindsight—10 years ago where we just had an agreed path forward as to how we're going to manage the energy transition into the future. Obviously we see it playing out now daily on our television screens and social media—renewables, anti-renewables, the nuclear debate and all of that sort of stuff. It was more of a comment. I think most Australians would be disappointed with where we're at now. It does seem rushed and it does seem unplanned, and I guess that's the outcome we're now left with, rather than having had a whole-of-government solution to the energy debate.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: In a sense, if we had that bipartisanship or multipartisanship where everyone had agreed on a process, then there would have been lots of time to plan this out and to exclude zones.

MICHAEL HOLZ: Far more time to plan, for sure.

The Hon. CAMERON MURPHY: And then, because that wasn't done, we're now in the position where renewable energy projects are popping up all over the place.

MICHAEL HOLZ: That's right. I don't want to be scathing of governments either, but we do seem that we have this date that we have to achieve all of this. We know the power stations are shutting. We know that nuclear is a long-term solution, so at the moment it's all about renewables and how we can fill that gap when the power stations close. Earning has been extended previously. I don't know what opportunities there are to continue to do that, but at some point those power stations will close permanently. We need to be in a position to have covered for that supply that they would've previously given to us.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Thank you very much for the opportunity to visit your place yesterday. In terms of the consultation, or perhaps the better phrase is the lack of consultation, with Elgin, is there any ability that you're aware of where EnergyCo, if it was approached by yourself, is able to put some pressure back on Elgin to be more forthright about what it is proposing, or is Elgin able to just sit there pretty much and wait this out? If you don't know the answer, that's fine, but it seems to be basically just waiting this out and leaving yourself and I think someone else that you mentioned, or maybe two others—

MICHAEL HOLZ: Elgin is a private development, and I don't know that EnergyCo can necessarily play a role there, but I will just touch on what was mentioned previously. Even in relation to EnergyCo, we've taken the opportunity to attend the drop-in sessions that EnergyCo and Ausgrid have run, and, again, you get the generic telephone number and you get the generic email address for EnergyCo. They've never responded to any of our questions either, albeit our issue is definitely not as pressing as what's happening to people out at the Hunter transmission line. So the approach we took to that was, I'm a member of NSW Farmers, as you are Myree, and we went around, I guess, using NSW Farmers and contacts that they had in EnergyCo to get some of the answers that we were after, especially in relation to the road reserve and what happens if Singleton Council—and we're very grateful that Singleton Council are opposed, and hopefully they won't approve the road reserves.

What does that then mean to Elgin? Do they go back to their boardroom and say, "We need to find a new path now," which might be through private landholders? What does that then mean for the private landholders in the route? I guess, again, that absence of engagement with Elgin has forced us to use our own skills to get outcomes. We've got advice now from NSW Farmers, in a roundabout way from Elgin, we've sought our own legal advice on a few of these matters and we've spoken to Ausgrid, just to get as good an understanding as we can for a project that hasn't actually pushed the button yet in terms of starting the actual project. Again, that's the frustration: We're all just mucking around in this space where—

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: In limbo, basically.

MICHAEL HOLZ: Yes. Going back to that requirement, and it was mentioned in the councils' session this morning, if they'd just get that verification certificate up-front to say, "These areas, we're not looking at having those sorts of developments there," then they would know up-front that the project is not likely to get approved. Elgin hasn't done that and, I guess, the mechanism didn't exist for it to happen either.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Mrs Russell, you mentioned in your submission hazards and health risks from the transmission line. Could you expand on your concerns?

MYREE RUSSELL: EMFs are a huge concern for us and we've expressed that repeatedly to EnergyCo, to which they said they would do a study and get back to us with the results. That included a report that was included in the EIS, so I wondered did they do that for us or was that part of the process of the EIS anyway? In the presentation that one of the design fellows gave to us, they pretty much told me that I would be exposing

myself more in my house through household appliances than what we would travelling beneath and around the transmission line across the property. Where they're proposing to put the alignment now, in order for us to do anything—because we have high land where all the infrastructure is, like the houses, the sheds, all the machinery. We travel down to the farm—that's where the cattle go, that's where the cropping is, that's where the hay production is. We have to travel under the transmission lines numerous times a day. In summertime it's day and night, when you're making hay.

Farmers are generational; my husband's family has had that farm for 100 years. He has not lived anywhere else in his life. It's very emotive for us. Our son wants to continue that legacy. My question is, on the internet there is so much information about EMFs—nothing is conclusive, but has there ever been a study done for a lifetime of exposure? My husband and I are not so worried about ourselves; I'm worried for my son and his future children. They say to us, "There are people in the suburbs living under exactly the same transmission lines." But do those people live there all their lives?

People in the city tend to move around. It's not that it doesn't happen, but unlike regional people and generational farmers—they stay on their farms all their lives. That's my greatest concern. Of course there have been storms where you've seen such towers be blown over. There are a lot of hypotheticals, and they're saying they're such random cases, but anything can happen. The EMFs are a huge concern. That is our greatest concern. It is a concern for my son. He has indicated that. Like I said, it's very emotive because if he doesn't want to stay there, what are we fighting for? Why are we fighting?

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Can you just explain EMFs?

MYREE RUSSELL: Electromagnetic fields and the radiation. I'm sorry.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: No, I just wanted to make sure that I understood what you were talking about. What health implications—what can happen with that?

MYREE RUSSELL: Like I said, it's inconclusive, but in children exposed—they did a study in the *British Columbia Medical Journal*. I've read it so many times. I'm sorry. If younger children lived within 600 metres—but then as the distances got closer, there was a greater risk of leukemia. It's inconclusive, but there was a higher risk. Then again, when you read these, they don't actually give you for how long and—where are those children now? What are their health outcomes now? That has been my argument. Our neighbour is the same. His son is working on the farm. They will be the same. Hopefully, they will continue it on. That's our argument.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Where the lines are going to be, you can't avoid them. Is that what you're saying?

MYREE RUSSELL: No, we can't avoid them. We cannot avoid them. We have to travel under them to do anything. They're at the beginning of the farmland.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: With your farming, is it cattle and hay production?

MYREE RUSSELL: Yes.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: So that's not dairy, but cattle.

MYREE RUSSELL: Beef cattle.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Will there also be loss of productive land—as in where the lines are, you won't be able to have your cattle grazing, or even where you've grown your hay before?

MYREE RUSSELL: Like I said, on Tuesday we had an irrigation specialist and Transgrid members come out to determine how we can irrigate under it. You can't have water going straight up to the powerlines. We use aluminium irrigation pipes, so everything has to be—

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Earthed?

MYREE RUSSELL: Earthed.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: I learnt that only yesterday.

MYREE RUSSELL: With everything, there's just a great unknown. It frustrates me. You've been to the information sessions, and they have their glossy brochures and they show cattle grazing under the lines. In one you can even see an irrigation line under them, but is it photoshopped? Everything from a certain angle can look any way. They can photoshop me and I could be on the front of *Vogue*, but it's false advertisement. We graze, but we cell-graze. As the term suggests, the cattle are in a confined area.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Then you move them along.

MYREE RUSSELL: Yes, and then strip feed. That's another thing—the electric fences. They have to sort out how that works because, under the transmission line, they're saying that won't work.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: You're working all this out now—

MYREE RUSSELL: Yes.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: —whether you can still be an operational farming enterprise. They've told you they're coming, haven't they?

MYREE RUSSELL: Pretty much. It's just how we can continue to do what we are doing.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for your time today. I don't believe you took any questions on notice, but if you did, the secretariat will be in touch and there may be some supplementary questions we put forward. Thank you very much for your time. Mr Holz, once again, thank you for hosting us yesterday. It was much appreciated.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

The Committee adjourned at 15:30.