

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 Hay Services Club, Hay, on Wednesday 18 February 2026

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. Peter Primrose

PRESENT VIA VIDEOCONFERENCE

The Hon. Cameron Murphy

The CHAIR: Welcome to the sixth hearing of the Committee's inquiry into the impact of renewable energy zones on rural and regional communities and industries in New South Wales. I acknowledge the Nari Nari and Wiradjuri people, the traditional custodians of the land on which we are meeting today. I pay my respects to Elders past and present, and celebrate 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 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.

Ms ALISON McLEAN, Executive Manager, Economic Development and Tourism, Hay Shire Council, sworn and examined

Mr JACK BOND, Chief Executive Officer, Edward River Council, affirmed and examined

Mr GARRY STOLL, Director, Planning and Infrastructure, Murrumbidgee Council, sworn and examined

Mr STEVEN PARISOTTO, Senior Planner, Murrumbidgee Council, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: I welcome and thank each of our witnesses for making the time to give evidence. Mr Parisotto, would you like to make a short opening statement before we go to questions?

STEVEN PARISOTTO: No, thank you.

ALISON McLEAN: I will, thank you. The South West REZ and Hay's role in the energy transition represents the most significant economic, environmental and social transformation for this community since settlement. The region's topography, sparse population and large-scale primary production make it well suited to host energy development. Hay council did not approach this transition with fear. We did not approach it blindly. We approached it with pragmatism and with the community at the heart of every decision. From the outset, we've held the mantra that this transition must happen with us, not to us. Council made a deliberate choice early to invest in community engagement and capacity building and to ensure our residents have the tools and information to participate meaningfully in the process.

The work led to the development of the principles document, which now underpins how we engage with government and industry, and, most importantly, how government and industry engage with our community. Recognising the impacts—pressure on housing, accommodation, water, waste management, roads—and concerns about boom-and-bust cycles, consultation fatigue and ensuring that agriculture and renewables can coexist, we have strengthened our governance approach through the development of a community benefit framework and renewable energy position statements, ensuring there is a transparent and consistent structure for negotiations, planning agreements, benefit sharing and management. The position statements clearly articulate the expectations of the community and council around both the impacts and opportunities from the transition. They place council in a position to effectively negotiate and advocate for our community. Our community has also been clear: We are not chasing short-term growth; we are focused on long-term legacy outcomes.

Importantly, Hay is not working alone. Across the South West REZ, all seven councils have collaborated since 2022, strengthening our collective ability to negotiate for better outcomes. Now formalised into the Regional Renewable Energy Response Committee, this regional partnership is essential because the impacts and opportunities of renewable energy do not stop at local government boundaries. We all recognise that this transition is not linear and that continued preparation is key to a successful transition. For communities like Hay, the renewable energy transition is not an abstract policy conversation. It is real. It began the moment the first developer started a conversation with a landholder. As a community, council and region, we have made a choice to engage in the transition on our terms. This transition also gives this region, for the first time, agency over its future, with the ability to draw capital investment into the region and further diversify our economy, and it's about long-term jobs.

While the construction phase is temporary, the operational phase is enduring. Thirty-five highly skilled operational workers living in town—that matters, because in small communities a handful of families can mean the difference between decline and sustainability. What the transition does require is a coordinated approach from Federal, State and local government to ensure that our communities are protected and supported through this transition. We require a whole-of-government approach to ensure that the infrastructure needs of these communities are met, that the impacts are mitigated and that the benefits flow into the communities directly impacted. We need support to ensure that the opportunities available are realised. We need all agencies, from EnergyCo to Transport for NSW, to engage early and often and to acknowledge the critical role that local government plays as a lead agency in these communities.

The CHAIR: Mr Bond, do you have an opening statement?

JACK BOND: That's a hard act to follow, I think, that one. I'll try not to duplicate any of the things. I think a big change that's happened in the last 12 months since the inquiry submissions were made is that EnergyCo has actually really stepped up to the mark, I believe. They have funded every council within the REZ boundary, a dedicated \$250,000 per council over a period of time, to assist with managing the impact that it does have on council resources, which has been fantastic. That created a very big uplift for council to understand what is coming, rather than trying to manage it within a very small resource within some of our smaller communities

in this area. I believe that's made a big uplift, and I think that really goes to understand what is happening and what's on the way.

At the same time, we understand that it is going to be a much bigger impact than we might have anticipated at that time. I think the impact on drinking water is going to be significant out in these rural areas. You probably drove past where some of the sites might be. We did some calculations on what the water could be, and it could be three million kilometres of carting water just to try and get to the sites. With the roads, the last-mile roads out here, to try and get off the State highways onto the actual sites is very significant as well. I think that's something that certainly needs to be looked at.

I think waste is another significant one as well. To try and put the amount of waste they're going to generate into our small community facilities just will not work for anyone, and we really need to work together. EnergyCo are now preparing whole-of-government reports that imagine these infrastructure impacts, which I think is a very good outcome there. Out of those reports, there's going to be some very big recommendations to be made, where councils, State government and the proponents need to work together to make sure that we get legacy projects and are not left with liabilities that are going to impact our small communities going forward.

GARRY STOLL: On behalf of Murrumbidgee Council, I'd just like to put things into perspective first very quickly. We host the site of the Dinawan substation, the VNI West from Wagga to Dinawan and then the VNI West line from Dinawan across into Victoria. We have three major wind farms: the Yanco Delta Wind Farm, which we share with Edward River; the Dinawan solar farm, which we share, again, with Edward River; and the Bullawah wind farm, which we share with Hay and Edward River as well as the Dinawan solar farm. All these developments are in approximately close proximity to each other.

We've also got the distinction of having the PEC line, which is a major transmission line across South Australia as well. The PEC line and the Dinawan substations commenced construction approximately three years ago, so we've suffered the consequences of this scheme the last three years with the destruction of our local roads and the splitting of our community. We've tried to deal with that with the conditions of consent that the department of planning placed upon those two developments, which we feel are completely inadequate. Since then, we've formed our own policies on the last-mile routes, which we've shared with Edward River and Hay, to try and negotiate satisfactory outcomes for our communities who are using roads that we've built and maintained for the last 90 years, on average of 20 vehicles a day, now seeing over 300. We've been at the coalface since the inception of this scheme.

In relation to Planning New South Wales, we feel that they've been lacking. We have not seen them on the ground out here at all in their assessment process or any of these developments. Transport for NSW, again, are dealing with their roads only but not the last-mile routes. That simply comes back to council to negotiate outcomes, which is a full-time job virtually and a huge impost on our resources. Also, the rents in the local towns have grown exponentially, which has cut out a lot of housing for our community. The current rent for a bedroom in Coleambally is \$350 per week. That's just for a bedroom. We didn't want these things. We'd be very happy if they were not here but, as they're coming, we can't stop them. As Ali and Jack both said, we're going to try and leverage the benefits of these to make our community sustainable into the future.

The CHAIR: The Committee has resolved to have free-flowing questions, so they may come from anywhere.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Thank you all for being here and for your opening statements. I just wanted to ask about the interaction with EnergyCo, because that was something that did come up in your submissions. I note, Mr Bond, you said that it's improved a bit since you wrote these. To any or all of you, what do you think was the trigger for that change, how has it improved, and is there anything else that you would like to see from that interaction from council and EnergyCo?

ALISON McLEAN: When we first started the conversations, we actually had to lobby for EnergyCo to come down here. We have been working as a group of councils since 2022. The first time that EnergyCo actually visited this region was at the end of 2023. We did feel like we were the forgotten REZ. There was a lot of energy by EnergyCo put into Central-West Orana and New England as well. We have, I think, as a group of councils, lobbied for them to come here. We have ensured that the agencies that are involved in the decisions, such as Transport for NSW, waste, Water and Planning, are part of those conversations as well. I attribute it to the fact that we have really worked together to ensure that what they're responding to is a regional response, not individual councils, but we've also worked really hard to develop that relationship with EnergyCo.

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

JACK BOND: I certainly agree with Ali's comments there. I think with EnergyCo only coming back into fruition—I think they weren't really a department. It was something set up in the 1980s, re-formed back in

2020, when this was starting to build up again. So they've been rebuilding their staff, and I think certainly that focus was on some of those REZs that were further ahead. We are probably the last REZ in the timeline to go ahead. But I think they're starting to put those resources down here, which is a much better outcome.

GARRY STOLL: We've got a slightly different take on EnergyCo. We spent a lot of resources, time and staff in compliance issues, assessment of applications for two years before the EnergyCo payment scheme came in to help councils pay for those resources. We're two years behind Hay and Edward River. EnergyCo have always told us from the start that they are the final approval for their developments and they've got a fair bit of power in negotiating and massaging the end result of the developments. That hasn't quite proven to be the case.

We have an issue where Yanco Delta need to run a transmission line down two of our local roads—significant loss of biodiversity along the roadside and, in one section of the road, four towers are that close to the road they have to be protected by barricades. We are opposing that location of that transmission line. We wanted it shifted into the adjoining landowners' properties, with the landowners' agreement. Unfortunately, they have got contractual arrangements with another energy development. EnergyCo said that they would be able to negotiate to have those transmission lines located onto the private property to alleviate our issues. Unfortunately, they were unable to do that, despite saying that they believed they could.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: I think you mentioned, Mr Bond, there was \$250,000 or something each council got. What was the process of that, and then how do you as a council determine what you use that funding for?

JACK BOND: The process was pretty long. We'd heard that it had started to happen in other REZs first, and we were hoping with that precedent set that we could leverage that, and that's probably where we forced a discussion and pushed back a lot around how much resources and time was already taken on our staff. Our staff are wonderful, but I think trying to assess developments like these—and I think the road impact is something that we've never seen before, especially when you've got Transport for NSW assessing movements of the wind turbine blades, which is very significant. We haven't got the skill set to understand what that means when it gets onto our roads. I would love to see State government look after that.

We do get a pretty free leash on how we get to spend that money that comes into council. As a council, we have all the developments that have been approved through the AEMO process within our council boundaries, so we put on a dedicated resource just to manage that. They're the ones who work with every developer going forward and keep all our councillors up to date. That's been a big uplift. But some of the other councils that might not have any proponents currently approved in their area, I think they're looking to spend that money on some studies and understanding what it might look like. We call ourselves the G7, the seven councils that are within the region, and we're looking to pool those resources together as well so that we're not duplicating the work between ourselves too.

THE CHAIR: Mr Stoll, you spoke about inadequate conditions of consent from Planning. Are you able to flesh that out a bit and tell us where you think they're inadequate or what needs to be improved in that space?

GARRY STOLL: The main one that we're arguing with them over is their default position for the last-mile routes over council roads, which is basically based on the pre- and post-dilapidation report. When the construction period is three years, we've found that we would constantly have a crew on our local roads—sometimes weekly, sometimes fortnightly but at least once a month. Those roadworks are unprogrammed, unfunded by council, so we got to the point where over the three-year period we were then trying to charge the contractors to pay for those road upgrade works. The pre- and post-condition relies upon a condition of the road assessed before work starts and at the end of the construction period, which is totally inadequate, to the point now that we've adopted our own policy whereby we'll be requiring all future renewable energy developments to sign a voluntary planning agreement for council to construct the roads applicable to the traffic volumes that they'll be putting down those roads. They'll be paying for that work and then council will be maintaining it with our crews for the life of the development.

THE CHAIR: Ms McLean, in your opening statement you mentioned quite a few things around what your council has put into place. I think you mentioned a sort of principles—

ALISON McLEAN: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Is that like rules of engagement?

ALISON McLEAN: It is.

THE CHAIR: Is that public or is that available?

ALISON McLEAN: Yes, it is.

THE CHAIR: That would be available for the Committee to have a look at?

ALISON McLEAN: Absolutely. We've continued that work, where we've now developed a community benefit framework and also the position statements. The position statements cover everything from what our expectations are around roads, what we expect around waste and water management. Edward River have also done a similar set of documents. It just firms up our ability to negotiate. We've found now, going into negotiations with planning agreements, we ask the developers to refer to those position statements and respond to those, and it certainly gives us a different level of negotiating power.

THE CHAIR: How have they responded to those?

ALISON McLEAN: They've responded really well to them, actually. In the negotiations we've had so far, one of the things that our community said in that principles document—the principles document reflects what the community saw as impacts and opportunities. One of the key things that our community wanted to see was affordable energy. If we could see the towers spinning, we wanted to feel it in our hip pocket. Someva/AGL are actually going to deliver an affordable energy plan to every resident and small business in 2711 and 2710 postcodes. That's something that was really important to our community and something the developers have been able to deliver for us, but that is based on the fact that we had the principles document and those frameworks for them to respond to.

THE CHAIR: This is a question to all the councils. We heard up in New England that water availability and the use of water for these projects is going to have a significant impact on their communities. I'm just wondering whether you've done similar assessments or seen similar assessments on some of the projects that may be coming and how much of your water are they going to use up and how you plan to manage that.

JACK BOND: Yes, absolutely. They have just completed a whole-of-government water study as well as a sewer study. The sewer one, I don't think will be as big of an impact. They'll create their own ponds, evaporate it off and manage that sewer base from there. But the drinking water is significant, because where the four main locations are, they are 50 kilometres away from every town, so a 50-kilometre round trip or a 100-kilometre round trip is significant when you start to cart the amount of water. That's where that three million kilometres will actually start to come in, which is significant. I think at some point in time, whether it's council-driven, State-driven or the proponents all come in together, it would actually be a lot cheaper if they built a dedicated water treatment plant five kilometres from all these sites, not coming into council areas. It takes away all that truck damage on the State roads coming in and out of those sites. That could possibly be left for a legacy development, to be left for the farmers in that area, to get access to drinking water during droughts. It might also be a bigger liability as well. These days, you can get package plants, and I think if they really looked to invest in something like that, it would make a significant difference to the projects.

GARRY STOLL: To add to what Jack and Ali have just said, Murrumbidgee Council will be hosting two major accommodation camps. We already have the Dinawan accommodation camp. The Yanco Delta accommodation camp will have up to—at its peak levels—nearly 900 workers onsite. Obviously they're fairly desperate for potable water. They've approached us to supply that water. We can't from the Jerilderie water treatment plant, which is the closest one, because it's struggling to cope with Jerilderie township at the moment. We're looking to transport that water or source that water out of Coleambally through an existing bore that we have. We're investigating that at the moment, but our commitment first is to our community rather than the development. If there is adequate capacity in that system, we're likely to sell water to them.

THE CHAIR: That was part of my question: Do you have capacity in your systems to offer water? What we heard from Armidale council was that one of the projects was going to basically take up all their water supply, or a significant percentage of it, for the year. Do your systems have the capacity to take this on?

ALISON McLEAN: Hay does. We have the capacity to supply. We see it as an opportunity, as an income stream, for councils. We're a really small council in terms of our rate base, so we need to look at how do we create financial stability and sustainability. We do see that as an opportunity, but as Jack said, we'd like to see some legacy infrastructure projects come out of this. If they are using our water, then we'd like to see improvements to our water treatment plants, furthering supply out to our outlying areas, and alternatives like Jack was talking about, so it's not just that sugar hit of construction but we leave a legacy for the community.

THE CHAIR: These are the things you're including in your negotiations or your principle document with the developers?

ALISON McLEAN: Yes.

GARRY STOLL: Well, we're trying to.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: With regard to, say, roads that you have to do, to your knowledge, the road upgrade costs that you'll need to do, are they being covered by the proponents or are you having to use ratepayer funds for these REZ projects? That's to all councils.

JACK BOND: All the upgrades will certainly be done by the proponents, absolutely, but I think it's still that interim of maintenance once the upgrade is done, and then the long-term upgrade as well, because at this point in time we've only got what could be a single narrow unsealed road. To try and get these wind turbine blades down, they're going to be a lot wider. The depreciation on such an asset going back to council and the extra maintenance that they'll leave behind, that's where I think Murrumbidgee has taken a good lead in trying to get some conditions in that the proponents are to pay for the cost of that upgraded maintenance going forward.

GARRY STOLL: We've had the difficulty—I think all councils share this issue—is getting across to the developers that they are local roads that have been developed to suit our local communities of remote, spread-out large stations, averaging 20 vehicle movements a day. One development over the life of their project with construction of 208 wind towers will have over 2½ thousand oversized, over-mass vehicles down these roads, which were built to cater for 30 vehicles a day. That is an issue that's taking up a considerable amount of time with our staff to try and get this message across that the developers have to construct these roads to make them suitable for that level of traffic.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: And then for the ongoing maintenance.

GARRY STOLL: Yes. They'll have operational management staff onsite for the next 30 years. Obviously that level of traffic will probably be a lot less, but still, there will be impacts higher than what it is currently.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: That then brings me to a question with regard to you saying your council staff are having to spend hours or so, and you mentioned that you have been given funding per council which you can use any way you like. Are you finding that you're having to use that for additional staffing or—

JACK BOND: I think we've put on the one dedicated resource as a whole new resource. As well, we've put some of our planners' time towards it and our engineering team's time towards it as well. Yes, certainly a new dedicated resource.

GARRY STOLL: The impacts we've felt it had on our roads happened prior to that funding resource which was made available, so we had two years of that. We haven't put extra staff on, but one of the outcomes too is that we've had a number of our own projects undertaken in the last two years and various State Government funding opportunities. They've all had to be put back, and we're now quite behind on those and we're seeking extensions. It may be that we may not get those extensions. That's another unintended outcome of this situation as well.

STEVEN PARISOTTO: One of the other issues with the roads is, obviously the developer understands that they have to construct the road to meet their standards. It might go from a level one road catering for just farm vehicles to being level three to cater for the heavy vehicles. There's maintenance issues during the construction period. Who is going to do that? Council will do it if we've got the resources and can be paid for it. But at the end of the project, when it just comes down to maintenance, council doesn't want to see a higher level road, which means council is then having to keep it maintained to that standard. One of the things that we will require is that they bring the road back to the previous standard once the construction phase is done.

ALISON McLEAN: I was going to add in some numbers for you. I think one of the things of impact for us is the cumulative impact. For the three councils here, we're hosting the four developments that have had access rights given to them. For three of those projects, we're talking about 5,473 OSOM movements over that construction period. Nearly all of those will be coming through the Hay roundabout. That's a significant impact just on that State road and then on to our local roads, but there's also an impact that we're asking the developers and the State Government to consider, and that's our existing industry. We don't want to see our existing industry come to a halt, which is our livelihood, because of these movements. That's where we need Transport for NSW to really come on board and take a look at not these projects in isolation but what they look like from a holistic point of view with our industry.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: That interests me. Have you been given a whole-of-region cumulative impact assessment or is it project by project? Sometimes that is harder to say what the impact on your roads will be. But if you had that whole-of-region assessment, it might make it easier to say, "This road needs this." If it's only project by project, what are you seeing?

ALISON McLEAN: Before EnergyCo were really part of this conversation, we actually developed that resource ourselves. This is the prop. This is the spreadsheet that we have for all of the developments—not just

those who have been granted access—that we're currently dealing with across this region. There's 33 projects that the seven councils are dealing with, and we have put all of that information together. EnergyCo have delivered a number of studies that we've requested. There's a cumulative impact study, a waste study, a water study and a skills gap analysis, but we don't have a transport study that looks at all of them.

JACK BOND: Yes, the transport one's quite difficult. Because of our location, we are almost equal distance from Port of Newcastle, port of Adelaide and port of Geelong, so I don't think they've actually determined which port they're coming from. We're hearing the Newcastle port's probably going to say no, because there are so many wind blades already going there because of the other REZ projects that are going up. To come out of Victoria is very dense in terms of the road access and some of the constraints that are going to be along that alignment, so we're probably hedging our bets that it's most likely going to be Adelaide, across the Sturt Highway, and then coming down the Sturt Highway onto those last-mile roads.

GARRY STOLL: Also, I addressed the Independent Planning Commission on Friday about this very matter. We have a development that's in the process of being approved, which is the Dinawan solar farm, which will be using the Newell Highway and then turning onto the Kidman Way—both State-owned roads, and an intersection that council's been lobbying for more than 20 years to be upgraded. It's poorly designed and poorly built. The Dinawan solar will only have 17 oversized, over-mass vehicles using it, and the department of planning, with an obvious lack of consultation with Transport for NSW, have said that it just has to be slightly widened by two metres either side.

This is the same intersection that Yanco Delta will be using to put 2½ thousand oversized, over-mass vehicles coming up from Geelong over their three-year construction period. The department of planning has an accumulated impact guideline that they put out for renewable energy. Obviously they didn't listen or read their own document. Our argument was that they should have consulted with Transport for NSW, whether they do it on the Dinawan solar or the Yanco Delta Wind Farm, but that intersection has to be upgraded. We're trying to do it at a local council level, but there needs to be, at a State level with these departments, some sort of consultation to achieve the outcomes we've been asking for.

JACK BOND: Just on roads, another unique situation that we have out here—you've seen the flatness and the remoteness that's there—is that we have two of the largest irrigation companies in Australia. A lot of those irrigation pipes that go under the road are not owned by the council or the State Government; they're owned by the shareholders or those farmers that own that water. A lot of those bridges and culverts have not been assessed to understand what these loads are going to take over those assets as well.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: It sounds like councils are doing a lot of the administrative work on behalf of, say, the Government to get this REZ up and running.

GARRY STOLL: They are.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: What would you say has been the administrative cost to each of the councils?

GARRY STOLL: One recent example I can state is we received a traffic plan for one of the developers which indicated a number of our local roads, bridges and culverts that they would be using. We used \$70,000 of the money that EnergyCo gave us to assess these bridges and culverts, because the traffic management plan that is associated with it said that there'd be very minimal impact on these bridges and culverts and roads. Our independent assessment that we had undertaken indicated there would be significant impact on these roads and bridges and culverts. The developer then changed their transport route, and they're not going to use that road anymore, so we just spent \$70,000 having stuff assessed which we probably didn't need to have assessed.

ALISON McLEAN: Can I just add, there's another challenge for this region in terms of the development in that all material will have to come in from outside of the area. All water, as Jack mentioned, will have to come in and out of the council areas. There's an additional load of heavy vehicle movements that the other REZs won't have, and that's something that we would like to see from the developers and from EnergyCo or Transport for NSW, in terms of a coordinated approach, because what we have found is that while the tier 1 contractors will say, "This is the road that must be used," by the time you're down to the sub-sub-subcontractors, they're going to take the shortest route that's available, and that may not be a road that's been identified. We would like to have as much information as possible around what those heavy vehicle movements look like, because while the OSOM numbers are huge, it's actually that constant heavy vehicle movement on roads that are designed for 20 or 30 local vehicles that are now going to be taking upwards of 300 vehicle movements a day that really has the impact.

JACK BOND: Our council are just coming out of the Project EnergyConnect, so from the Dinawan substation in South Australia upgrade. The concrete truck movements on one of our local roads, which was a sealed road—it was extremely damaged during the construction period. We tried to work with the contractor,

Elecnor, to step in and make those upgrades very quickly. Because of our remoteness, they were saying that it was very challenging to try and get contractors to even come out and do the works, so council actually stepped in and did the works. It was \$600,000 that we've had to lay out, on the hope that we do get the money back. We do believe we will get the money back, but even that took away the resources from the typical maintenance—we haven't got these spare crews just to do it—but we felt we needed to do it to make sure our community wasn't impacted.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Thank you all for coming, and thank you for your submissions and also the frankness with which you're presenting the evidence today. In terms of the seven councils working together, sharing information et cetera, is that done through a formal structure of monthly meetings or regular specific meetings where there's an agenda which is worked through in that sort of rigorous way, or is it more—I won't use the term "ad hoc", but on an as-needs basis, getting together when you think there are enough issues on the agenda, so to speak, that really require us to meet and discuss? Just that structure of meeting and collaboration—it would be interesting to know how that works.

ALISON McLEAN: It started as the G3. This is the G3—we're enormously amused by our names. Then we formed up the G7. We've now formalised that into the Regional Renewable Energy Response Committee. Through EnergyCo, we've been funded to appoint a regional energy manager for that very purpose—to add structure and rigour in that information sharing. We appointed the regional energy manager in January, and we will now start to have regular meetings where we discuss that. We also have a six-weekly meeting with EnergyCo, where the G7 all attend as well. So we do have regular meetings. We share all of our information, because we realise we can't do this alone. This is something that we're used to doing across all of our councils—we share information; we share resources—but this is a significant impact for us, and so we realise that we need to resource that effectively, but we also need to be able to share that information. The conversations that we're having about roads, we all have regularly with each other, but we have now formalised that.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Inside each council itself, and I appreciate that some are larger and perhaps are better resourced for a whole range of reasons—there might be a more wealthy council, vis-a-vis one that has perhaps not been so prosperous over time—embedding inside the council the work that's to be done associated with this, is it essentially driven by the general manager of the council taking the leading edge on all of this, or are there effectively subcommittees or a standing committee that operates which deals with what are obviously a range of issues that are on the boil at any point in time? How is that managed by each council?

ALISON McLEAN: I think it probably goes to resourcing and size. We work closely with other councils in the other REZs as well. By way of example, Dubbo council has 600 staff. They did a study as to how many hands, or how many roles, an EIS—this is an EIS—would go through, and that's 60 roles that it would go through. For Hay Shire Council, we have just under 60 staff, including outside staff, and that goes through two people; that's myself and the general manager. The impact of a development is the same; it doesn't matter what the size of your council is. For us to form up a subcommittee in council, we simply don't have enough people to do that. It's about using the resources we have to respond, but that impact is significant on the resourcing that we're able to put.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: And that would be typically the general manager, perhaps, with the lead role—the person responsible for nodding and saying no. Perhaps explain that, but also the person involved in planning at the council, and what other specific areas inside the council would typically have a key role inside this sort of work? Obviously roads.

ALISON McLEAN: Yes. I'll let Jack and Garry talk to theirs, but for us it is the roles that it's fallen into. This is probably one of the challenges that we had when the REZ was announced and we started to hear conversations from our landholders. It was, "Whose role is this? What does this actually involve?" For our council, it's the general manager—me—as economic development, and energy, and then planning as well. Roads obviously comes into it. But in a smaller council, the general manager really has oversight and input into everything. Jack, you're bigger.

JACK BOND: Yes, we're a little bit of a bigger council, 150 staff. But I'll probably say, a bit like Dubbo, that 10 per cent of the staff—generally, we have a monthly meeting internally. Fifteen staff probably come to it, everyone from myself down to our manager of transport, just so that they're aware of what upgrades might be done by the proponents going forward. If they do see maintenance increase because of these developments, they can also feed that information back up so that we can fight the case on council's behalf. That's probably where we sit.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: That's very helpful.

GARRY STOLL: Murrumbidgee Council has a staff of about 90. I'm largely responsible for renewable energy, as director. I just pull in staff as and when required—our road maintenance teams, our planning staff of one, just at the other end of the table, on occasion—but it's mostly just myself.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Thank you. That's very helpful.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Thank you very much. That's all really, really valuable information. In terms of the renewable energy manager, I was wondering if you could just elucidate on the actual remit of that position. What tasks will they actually be undertaking and who will they report to?

ALISON McLEAN: The regional energy manager reports to the chair of the RRERC, the regional renewable energy response committee, and I'm chair currently. That role is really about providing a strategic response across all—there's seven areas, everything from roads, waste, water, accommodation, workforce uplift. We will get together as councils and as a committee and start to deliver those responses that will reflect what Edward River and ourselves have done in terms of our position statements. That role will also then support councils around resourcing, how to use those resourcing. It becomes an information-sharing role as well.

We will be delivering sort of pro forma responses. So, if you're looking at an EIS, what are the things that you need to look at in an EIS, when do you need to respond, key dates. The meetings that we have had to take on as a result of this is really quite extraordinary. What does that response look like for Transport for NSW? When are those key meetings? It's about taking all the work that the councils are doing, sharing that information, but then being able to share that back to the various departments. So it is that united response that means there is consistency in messaging, consistency in approach, allowing for all of the unique approaches that we need to take from our local roads and for our communities, obviously.

The CHAIR: This is just one final question from me to wrap this up. Mr Bond, you mentioned all that water infrastructure that's not owned by council and no-one's really been contacting the two irrigation companies. Has the New South Wales Government been made aware of that? Has EnergyCo been made aware of the third party that they need to engage when they're planning this process?

JACK BOND: Yes, we have raised it at a couple of meetings. I'm unsure if it's even been followed up and spoken to to the irrigation companies about what these might look like as well, so I'm not sure exactly. I don't have the exact answer now, but I can follow that one after this to find out where it's up to.

The CHAIR: Yes, that would be good.

GARRY STOLL: Just for the Chair's information, the three developments in Murrumbidgee Council are all outside of the irrigation area. There's no surface water available for them. They'll either be seeking bores or well water if the chemical content allows them to mix with concrete. With Dinawan, for example, the bore was unsuitable, so they were using potable water for their concrete batching plant. To source water from the irrigation supply, from Coleambally Irrigation or Murray Irrigation, you would have to have an extraction licence.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Can I just slip in one quick one?

The CHAIR: Yes.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: I thought Mr Parisotto's point was very interesting and important to think about: the issue of the roads being needed to be upgraded for the purpose of works to be done and the transport across them—but, over time, of course, you've got the issue of not needing the roads, and you described the discussions or at least thought about how that was going to be brought back to a level that could be managed sustainably over time. Could you please just elucidate on that, how far that's got as an idea to be dealt with, given we're dealing with into the future as far as the eye can see?

STEVEN PARISOTTO: Certainly. It's got to the point where we've developed a policy. When the developers come to us, we say, "Here's council's policy," outlining what we require and how they are to go about it. So we've given them a copy; I'm assuming that they've accepted that's our council's position. The other thing to note, like I said—I deal with development assessments. I look at a variety of development applications. Recently where we've dealt with a lot of applications in rural zones for non-typical rural uses—say, a feedlot where there's heavy vehicle movement—and quarries on these local roads, we've put to the developer conditions of consent saying, "These roads are only maintained once or twice a year by council as part of our program, so we go out there, fix it up." We're saying to them, "Because of your extra traffic generation, there's damage as a result of your development. We're going to put a condition of consent saying we will monitor it. If it's outside our maintenance program, you pay for the extra maintenance," and also other conditions about not using it in wet weather. The condition is fair, it's reasonable and it will pass the Newbury principles for planning and what have you.

Those sorts of conditions, where you're doing much smaller scale, are being accepted readily. From our point of view the frustration comes from going over the same issue with different developers and a lack of—I'll try and use an analogy from rugby union. It's like an under-eight-year-old trying to lift Will Skelton in a lineout. We're at the bottom. Where we come from, we want to see our communities thrive. We don't want to see towns die. We're doing things, and we seem to be getting the information piecemeal from the developers, for example. Post-construction development they're going to have between 20 and 30 families coming to our area—awesome. We need to open up some residential land for that, so we're doing that. There are other blockages along the way, but we're working through it. Going back to your question about the roads, we have got the policy, yes.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Thank you. That's very helpful.

GARRY STOLL: Can I just add something very quickly to what Steven was saying? It's the fact that we're not the consent authority—councils are not the consent authority; the State Government is. We've tried to get that policy up. It's the first one that we've had on our desk, which is the Dinawan solar. Department of planning did not include it. That policy, even though it's community-driven, council-adopted, it's pointless if the department of planning is not going to back us in making sure it goes in as a condition of consent.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: And that's Mr Parisotto's example of the road maintenance over time on the project.

GARRY STOLL: Yes, exactly. We put that in our submission to the Dinawan solar farm, and it came back with draft conditions of consent pre- and post-dilapidation report, their standard default conditions. They ignored our request to put that policy up.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Can I just ask one more?

The CHAIR: No. Could you put it on notice?

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: I can put it on notice, just about the sentiment of the ratepayers towards the REZ. It's on notice.

The CHAIR: Sorry, Mrs MacDonald. We did run a little bit over time. Thank you very much for your appearance, your submissions and, probably more importantly, the mammoth amount of work you guys are doing for your community. It probably goes unnoticed, so thank you for that. We will put some supplementary questions to you on notice and the secretariat will be in touch in getting them back to us. Thank you very much for your time this morning.

GARRY STOLL: Thank you for listening to us. It means a lot to the councils.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

Mr BRETT STONESTREET, PSM, Interim Executive Officer, Riverina and Murray Joint Organisation, sworn and examined

Mr TERRY DODDS, Chair, Energy Security and Affordability Committee, Riverina and Murray Joint Organisation, and Chief Executive Officer, Balranald Shire Council, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

Ms HODI BEAULIV, Executive Manager, Governance and Economic Services, Balranald Shire Council, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: We now welcome our next witnesses. Do any of you want to make a short opening statement before we go to questions?

TERRY DODDS: The REZ and the ongoing influence and legacy that will be left by it is both a great thing and perhaps a risk to councils, depending on what's in their area. During deliberations this morning, we want to talk about both. Hodi will be talking about missed opportunities in this end of the REZ, and I'll be talking about some of the things that we've just heard others talk about in relation to matching capacity against scale and speed.

BRETT STONESTREET: From the regional perspective, RAMJO certainly does support the transition to renewable energy and the path that regional New South Wales does need to play in that process. But what RAMJO would like to emphasise is that it is regional New South Wales that is essentially providing the key to the door to have renewable energy introduced into this State and this nation. Without regional New South Wales, the primary consumers of energy, which are the large users and also metropolitan areas, would not have the opportunity to realise those goals. Because of that, our communities—regional communities—would like this transition to occur with us and not to us. In particular, what I would like to raise through this discussion is the question of infrastructure and how local government sits in the pecking order in terms of dictating the future of that infrastructure. It was raised by a couple of the speakers in the last session that I would like to speak further with. Also, there's the question of community compensation and community benefit schemes.

The CHAIR: The Committee has resolved to just have free-flow questions, so I might throw to Ms MacDonald to kick us off.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: I wondered whether you have, as an organisation, done an impact assessment across the footprint of the REZ.

BRETT STONESTREET: We have completed two iterations now of an energy strategy, the first one in 2022 and the second one in 2025, that was adopted. To answer your question in terms of specific data, we haven't undertaken that. Certainly the issues are called up in that strategy, and some ways of dealing with the issues. But in terms of measurable data, we haven't got that in the strategy.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: You mentioned before that you want to be with the project, or it working with you, not to you. In working with all of the councils, what is the overall sentiment of the people living in the REZ zone towards the REZ?

BRETT STONESTREET: I think the overall sentiment is that this is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to embrace the investment and the transition to renewable energy. Local government and the councils that I'm here representing—those councils, and more specifically the councillors, are elected by the same constituents that elect the members of this Committee. I know that's stating the obvious, but when it comes to specific developments—all of which are State significant developments, of course—then it is the New South Wales Government that determine the conditions of consent.

It is almost invariably the case that when local-government-owned infrastructure—obviously there is State-owned infrastructure as well, but where there's local government infrastructure involved, the conditions of consent talk about consulting the local council, not complying with local council policies. One of the speakers in the last session made reference to that, where elected councillors adopt policies in terms of asset maintenance and whole-of-life costs. When it comes to the pointy end of a State significant development determination, that's where with any development—and I've had 45 years experience in local government—the regulatory authority has a stick at the front end. Once the approval is issued, the stick's gone, or largely gone. The word "consult" with local government is a very open-ended term and, therefore, local communities don't feel they've got an equal part in the process.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: So how would you change that? Instead of the word "consult", you wouldn't change it with "comply", but how would you see the local government and people from the area having more of a say in what happens here?

BRETT STONESTREET: I would beg to differ. If I take roads infrastructure specifically, State roads are obviously State, so that's not a matter for local government to do. Local roads are owned by local government and are fully funded by local government. For me, the elected councillors—elected by the community, by constituents—need to exhibit their draft policies and they need to have acceptance from their communities as to what those policies are. When it comes to that specific component of infrastructure, be it local roads, when determining an application at the department of planning level, they should be putting a condition that says "consult and comply with publicly adopted policies of that local government area".

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: With the planning, do you think it's coordinated or largely project to project, as they come forward? Bearing in mind that there's got to be that consultation, plus taking into consideration each local government area, are they working with the whole government area or sort of "this one's over here, so we'll only consult over here; we don't have to worry about over there", even though it's a wider project?

BRETT STONESTREET: From a planning perspective in New South Wales, the decision-making process is centralised. That's centralised in Sydney. There are delegations of authority that are passed down through, if you like, regional planning areas. Currently there are eight or nine regional planning areas in New South Wales. There is a discussion paper being published as we speak in the last fortnight from the department of planning that looks to consolidate all regional planning areas into one single area, and I suppose I would highlight that to the Committee as a touchstone of the lack of visibility of the needs at community of interest level, which for me is LGAs and a more broader sense would be the RAMJO region. But there is a lack of visibility and appreciation of what the local communities expect.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Mr Stonestreet, obviously you would have heard the early witnesses talk about the group of seven and how they're working together. How does the joint organisation work with that group? Obviously, those seven councils are also in your JO. How does that interplay work in practice?

BRETT STONESTREET: I think there isn't a great deal of integration between the two. Mr Dodds, who is online today, is the chair of our energy committee, newly appointed to that. But, of course, you did hear the previous speakers talk about the question of resourcing in councils. They certainly do a great job, and they consult with each other. Coordinating that back up through to the JO level, if that was done in a formalised sense, I feel it might get bogged down in coordinating what efforts that they want to make, and they do a great job. To answer your question, we do have an energy subcommittee. Mr Dodds is chair. He could maybe provide further comment on that question. But there's not a lot of integration between the two.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: It's a nice segue because, Mr Dodds, I was going to ask you about that role and how that's working from your perspective. I think earlier you said something that perhaps Ms Beauliv might talk about—missed opportunities that you see with your experience with your council. Could you maybe take us through those two areas?

TERRY DODDS: By and large, RAMJO works on relationships and personalities in between the meetings, because the meetings are only four times a year or maybe a little bit more. All the CEOs know each other. All the mayors know each other. For example, I've been in contact with Brett quite a few times in the last few weeks and Tamara, another person working for RAMJO in the energy space. As we work through things, sometimes the amount of email traffic and phone calls gets quite intense, and then you'll have an area of a month where not much is going on. But I want to go back to the question from the other lady earlier on about the roads and make a suggestion that when the State certificate and State assessment is done that there's a generic instrument placed on each approval that an independent dilapidation survey will be done and that that will be repeated, say, four or five times a year by someone like ARRB, which is the Australian Road Research Board, or a NATA-registered lab, and there's heaps of civil engineering consultancies that do dilapidation surveys and actually put the onus, through an independent assessment, back on the developers to maintain the local infrastructure.

The challenge that Balranald's got—and I'd be speaking on behalf of other rural and remote councils, and even councils that aren't so rural and remote—is that even carrying out that alone when you've got one engineer looking after an area that's bigger than 63 countries, in Balranald's case, is not doable. Nor would it be economically advantageous for seven councils to independently go out and do seven RFQs or seven RFTs and hire seven companies to go and do dilapidation surveys. The State in their approval process could quite easily wrap that up in one instrument and through the development get reimbursed for the cost of the dilapidation surveys and actually put that onus on the developers instead of the councils carrying the weight of compliance, which has become the de rigueur. That is one way that it could be done. If there's seven councils that are going to have their local roads affected—and as Brett said, it's not about the State roads—there's seven areas that are going to be adversely affected with all of these loads.

We did some sums here, and in one of the potential new wind farms, which is Keri Keri, that's still in the developmental stage—it's only a little one, 115 turbines—there's over 1,700 loads going to go on local roads just for the components of those turbines, and probably twice that for concrete reinforcement, daily traffic. I'm an ex-soil analyst and, quite frankly, none of the unsealed roads in our area would take even 10 per cent of those loadings before the material will become friable, which is a technical term for turning to bulldust, in the summer and in the winter, or when there's times of rain, total bogholes. They're not designed for that quantum of weight of high-GVM vehicles at all. I'm not even sure whether the people making the decision to grant these quite understand the level of complexity and difficulty that this is going to cause downstream.

As a matter of fact, because of my training in being a soil analyst, I'm 100 per cent convinced that they don't know, because it's a very specialised field. Our roads out here will not cope with that, and we will struggle even managing people to make sure they can comply with fixing our roads up. We'll even struggle with the management of it. When you look at the eastern renewable energy zone, with 6,600 loads for the turbines alone, you can double that for the raw materials, 18,000 semitrailer loads going to an area like Murrumbidgee, the quantum of risk to the local road network is almost unfathomable.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Thank you. That's very useful. Did you want to add anything, Ms Beauliv, about any of the challenges you see?

HODI BEAULIV: Yes, that would be great. Thank you for the opportunity. Transport obviously has a major impact on economic development to a region, and so the opportunities that are created by the renewable energies are vast for our region, in the South West REZ and across the RAMJO shires. The challenge that we have is the time frame that we've got to maximise those opportunities to be able to create economic development opportunities within the communities in which they're happening. For example, the conversation around the transport, if we were able to be better planned in advance, then we could make sure that maximised advantage to our region.

As our previous colleague mentioned in the previous presentation, Ali McLean, this may do damage to our existing economic development industries because of the extra pressure that it's putting on our resources, without any up-front investment, because the majority of the investment is lagging behind the development. Unlike the other renewable energy zones, we have had the Transgrid interconnector go through our region first, and so we haven't necessarily been able to capitalise on that as best as we could because it happened so quickly and it was here before we had the chance to really create the opportunity for our local businesses to upskill and take advantage of some of those opportunities. If we'd had the forethought we may have been able to put in place more people that were trained locally to be able to then be skilled up and ready for the next level of work that was to come along in relation to these new renewable energy projects.

We've been fortunate in the Balranald shire—we've got a civil construction company that was able to take advantage of the Transgrid project and has really stepped their business up from being a small business to employing a much larger workforce. The challenge then is for them to be able to keep opportunities happening. Because with the South West REZ the majority of the projects have happened in the eastern end of our region, it's now harder for them to get that flow-on work and keep that workforce employed. This disjointedness, and then not strategically planning the rollout so that it's keeping those jobs in region, is meaning that we're then having subcontractors come into the region to deliver projects that are not leaving the benefit behind, from an economic development perspective.

The other challenge that we also have is, as a cross-border community, sometimes we don't necessarily understand the implication of what's happening on the other side of the river. For example, with a lot the transport planning—as we've discussed with the RAMJO group and the G3 group that spoke first—there's not a designated route designed yet of where the product is going to come from. If it's going to come through Victoria, where are the conversations happening with the Victorian Government around the transport routes? Or, if it's coming through South Australia, where are the conversations with them? They're upgrading the port in South Australia—they've just made that announcement with the investment of the submarines—so how does that impact on this project? Where's the cross-border communications and how are we making the most of this to leave an ongoing legacy?

For us, in our part of the region—there was a question earlier around whether the community are supportive of this—a lot of our farmers at this end of the Riverina-Murray are very supportive, because we're going through very dry conditions here at the moment and it's providing the opportunity for those farmers in more marginal areas to offset their farming income with other income streams that is reliable, regardless of weather conditions. So, for us out here, it's really attractive; for other parts of our region, maybe not so much, because they've got the liveability issues, they're smaller lot sizes, there's more amenity.

We already have a powerline run into our area, so to upgrade that powerline would be fantastic. Even though it's just been upgraded, previously there was available 3.98 gigawatts of capacity in the interconnector and

that was oversubscribed by 400 per cent. If we had more powerline out here, maybe it creates the opportunity that those communities further to the west may be able to connect to that to then create some stability in our economy that takes away the weather pressure and utilises the existing opportunities. We're so busy rushing to catch up that we're not thinking perhaps as strategically as what we could about where we should be investing our renewable energy resources across the State. There's definitely parts of our region that would welcome this type of development with open arms.

The CHAIR: I'll go to the issue of cumulative impacts. Mr Stonestreet, you partially touched on it in your response to Mrs MacDonald's questions. Do you think they're being adequately addressed across the multiple concurrent projects, as it stands?

BRETT STONESTREET: I don't believe they are. I think the focus is more on chasing down deadlines to have lower emissions targets achieved. Whilst, obviously, the democracy that we live in is quite justified through that process, the reality of it is that the time frame to the finish line is the important thing. Assessing what impacts, cumulative-wise, will be on communities is, for me, a secondary consideration. As each project comes through the door, obviously there's a return-on-investment imperative for investors. Investors need to have return on investment. The governments of the nation and the State need to achieve targets, and those two must meet in some agreed fashion. In my view, the impact on local communities is not dealt with in a considered way across what might be planned into the future, but it's more dealt with on project-based assessment.

The CHAIR: Have any of you actually read the Government's version of a cumulative impact study at all? I think they published them in September or November last year.

BRETT STONESTREET: I have not, Mr Chair.

TERRY DODDS: Yes, I have. I read it again this morning. Our councils have been given a copy of a couple of documents. There's a very comprehensive one done by the Government, which I perused again this morning. All it emphasises to me is that we're playing catch-up. I'll give you an example with the housing. Our two water filtration plants are currently past maximum production. Even with a small increase in housing, or even transient workforce accommodation villages, we're going to struggle. Yet, under the new RAF scheme through DCCEEW, we're told now that because the Safe and Secure Water program is now finalised, there could be a two-year process before perhaps—and it's a perhaps, not a sure thing—there'll be a new funding stream available through a community service obligation which DCCEEW is working on at the moment.

That pressure on our water supply is only based on our current pressures, not including the extra pressures from the South West Renewable Energy Zone. So we're behind the eight ball before we even start with water. I'm sure there's other councils in that regard too. I heard the previous speakers talking about the difficulty of getting water in the east, and the irrigation companies being approached. That's just one example of the cumulative impact. We had a council meeting last night. We'll be adding the State Government's cumulative impact to the integrated water catchment management strategy and making sure the two align. At face value they don't. The IWCM, which has taken over two years to do, was actually out of date before it was finished because of the extra impacts of the South West Renewable Energy Zone only coming online recently. That's one example.

BRETT STONESTREET: Could I pick up on Mr Dodds' comment about housing in terms of planning for that? The New South Wales Government adopted a housing strategy some four years ago, predominantly focused on metropolitan areas, to support, in particular, local government areas to put infrastructure in place for housing needs—\$875 million in committed investment over a four- or five-year period. It's only now, in 2026, that there is a regional New South Wales housing strategy being developed at this point. Mr Dodds talked about catch-up. Housing for regional New South Wales is one of those areas in catch-up mode.

The CHAIR: Mr Dodds, do you actually think that what the State Government produced was a proper cumulative impact study? The way I've read them, they more look like a constraints study or a constraints report. Quite often they present risks to community—like waste, like water—as opportunities, which I find highly disingenuous to the community, to present risk to those communities as opportunities, but with no actual solutions being offered. I'll maybe get a comment on your view as to the quality of the report, other than playing catch-up.

TERRY DODDS: I liked the report for what it was. At least it gave us a vision of what was going on at a high level. It's very difficult when you're looking at an entry level within your boundary and not understanding the freight train coming down the line from the other direction and how fast it's coming. From that point of view, it was very good. You're right, it doesn't have any solutions, but at least finding the problem is the first step you need to do before you address any potential solutions. I liked it as far as that went. It was enlightening, because I learnt some things about potential projects that I hadn't even heard of, particularly in the north-west part of our shire, north of Euston. It was very, very enlightening. But on your vein, it was a bit frightening, because what it has shown is our complete lack of capacity and momentum to be able to keep up with the wave that's coming

through. We are going to be even under more pressure now, particularly with housing, and housing an area here is linked to water. I've already spoken about the pressure we're under with our water filtration.

The CHAIR: Just picking up one of your comments, is it a concern to you that you became aware of projects through this cumulative impact study as the CEO of a local council that you hadn't heard before, that this is the first you're hearing of a project in your council area?

TERRY DODDS: Yes and no. I've only been here three months, so I wouldn't expect to know everything that's going on. If I'd been here three years and not known, I would have been a little bit more circumspect in my answer to you, but having only been here three months, I'm on a learning journey about all the things that are happening in Balranald and surrounds, not just the cumulative impact. I've found an Aladdin's cave of information that might have taken me another 12 months to learn. It was a bit scary, because I didn't realise the quantum, but then again, in reflection, other people might not have expected me to know that after only being here three months. I'm still flat out remembering everyone's name. I hope that's answered your question.

The CHAIR: Yes, that's an important clarification.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: I thank all the witnesses today. You bring some very detailed evidence which is very specific to those geographic areas responsible, and that's very valuable for this inquiry. Mr Stonestreet, I thank you for the submission. On page 2, if I could please take you to that, there is a series of dot points. Could I please take you to not one paragraph but two paragraphs below that, and it says:

At the same time, while the large-scale renewable energy shift is underway, quite a number of RAMJO communities suffer through inadequate energy provision. They can have regular brownouts and blackouts, as well as limits to new industries and employment opportunities.

This is a very important paragraph. I'm wondering if you could elucidate on that and provide more details.

BRETT STONESTREET: Certainly. We have 11 local government areas in our region, of which two of those local government areas are in a growth phase. A couple of them are in a stable population position and the remainder are in a decline. The majority of our members are really not so much looking to manage growth but actually attract growth. In order to attract growth, you need basic utility provision in order to achieve investment, and one of those areas is power. This is a real opportunity for affirmative action in terms of shoring up the future, futureproofing some of these small communities into the future, if there was direct access allowed to the energy source from those smaller communities that we're talking about here—if you could directly access the power source rather than just being required to link in with the State network as a result of the new spine infrastructure. It would essentially be place-based advantage for the small regional communities to be able to tap into that energy.

Can I just point to a reverse circumstance that's existed in this State for years in terms of the reverse, in terms of location-based advantage, in terms of sewerage infrastructure? Metropolitan Sydney, by and large, do not treat their sewage to a tertiary treatment level. Hundreds of thousands of megalitres of sewage treated to primary level only are pumped out into the ocean. Because of that essential cross-subsidy with dealing with that issue, that puts a limit or some sort of a ceiling, suppression, on the costs of development in metropolitan Sydney. It's public knowledge that that occurs. By and large, almost all regional utilities are required to secondary-treat if not tertiary-treat their sewage effluent, which adds cost. These costs for metropolitan Sydney should not be hidden. The reason I cite that as an example is that in the reverse, in the regional small communities, for them to be allowed to tap into the source of energy at generation point will go some way towards assisting them to reverse their decline.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: It's a very interesting and important point you make. Do you know whether that's been put into the mix for consideration about how some of these communities may be able to have access, and reliable access, to electricity in the future? There are many issues on the table, so to speak, and always there's potential that something is important but perhaps hasn't been brought into sharp relief. Do you know whether this has been sort of ventilated or thought about at the higher level?

BRETT STONESTREET: Certainly the issue has been raised before; today is not the first occasion that this has occurred. But I think getting some detail behind that and looking at the cost benefit for the future of regional communities specifically has not been done. Again, I'll point to the real opportunity that is there for those communities, especially those in decline, that could assist them. Yes, there might need to be a cost subsidy to make that occur, but it futureproofs those communities from an energy perspective. I think more work needs to be done.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: I think it's a very important point. I appreciate you putting it in your submission.

HODI BEAULIV: Can I just add a couple of specific examples in that space? We've just had a new critical minerals mine established just 10 kilometres north of Balranald, the Iluka mine, and at that mine site, for example, they're having to put in their own solar farm to be able to provide reliable stable energy supply to be able to meet their need. That's one example. We've got another example where we've got an almond farm that has pumps for their irrigation, and they're looking to put in their own solar as well, on the farm, just because they can't get that reliability of supply through the network, even though the network's running right through the region. If they were able to link into that network, then it would save having to have their own systems being applied on the farm, or onsite.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Thank you. Going back to Mr Stonestreet's statement, the paragraph about "they can have regular brownouts and blackouts"—are you able to elucidate on that? Is that something which is more particular around certain times of the year or is it more ad hoc and can happen really with very little notice?

BRETT STONESTREET: I'd have to take that question on notice.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: That's fine.

HODI BEAULIV: We could provide some comment on that from a Balranald perspective, but not necessarily the rest of the Riverina and Murray Joint Organisation. We had a situation the other day. I'm sure you're all aware of the heatwaves that came through New South Wales earlier in January. Prior to that, on 19 January, we had a storm go through the region which took out some of our electricity supplies, which as a result of that we were having—not necessarily in the township itself but in the outlying areas—brownouts as a result of that reduction in power supply.

When we get temperatures in the 50 degrees, at close to 50 degrees, it makes it very dangerous for some of those communities out in those really remote areas to be without electricity at that point in time, especially when their stock's already doing it difficult. Their pumps won't run to be able to put the water from the bores into the stock troughs and things like that, so it is particularly an issue in that fodder time of year when the brownouts happen, but also whenever there's any damage to any power lines. Essential Energy has been working as fast as they can to fix that infrastructure that went down, but whenever there's any damage to infrastructure it's really important that it's restored as quickly as possible. I think it was more than a week that they were out trying to repair the damage that was done through that storm and then it just happened to coincide with some really hot weather at the same time.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: That's very helpful, thank you.

The CHAIR: That concludes our time with you this morning. Thank you very much for your time and your efforts on behalf of your communities. There may be some supplementary questions that we may put to you and I think there were a couple of questions you took on notice, so the secretariat will be in touch regarding those. Thank you very much for appearing today.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Short adjournment)

Mr ANDREW BROWNING, Committee Member, Bundure District Landholders Group, sworn and examined
Mr RICHARD COUGHLAN, Secretary, Bundure District Landholders Group, sworn and examined

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

RICHARD COUGHLAN: Yes, please. I represent the Bundure District Landholders Group as secretary. I am joined by Andrew Browning, who is also a member of the group. We are an incorporated group of farming families neighbouring proposed renewable projects who have been proactive in hosting meetings with EnergyCo, Transgrid, project developers and local council in an attempt to inform these bodies of the vast consequences that we are facing and to get to best outcomes for our community. Tony Mahar, Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner, has been present at several of these meetings.

Issues we are facing, number one: The enormous social and economic cost and lack of compensation to new neighbours of renewable energy infrastructure and transmission lines is grossly underestimated by all forms of government and renewable energy developers. The cumulative impacts of multiple developments in our local area amplifies this disruption. Examples are telecommunications connectivity is an ongoing issue since Dinawan substation construction began in 2023. The 463-bed camp has reduced our telecommunications to near zero for the last three years. No road maintenance, combined with hugely increased volume of traffic on single-lane raw clay roads has left our roads in ruin.

Security issues—incidents of trespass and damage to properties, insurance and liability are huge issues for landholders with neighbouring developments which is not being addressed by project developers or government departments or insurance companies. Landholders need legislative protection against claims of damages to renewable infrastructure. Fire control—we rely heavily on fixed-wing air support to contain fast-moving running grass fires and are extremely concerned that aerial suppression will be compromised with wind turbines, not to mention social and environmental disruption, mental health, noise, visual disruption, potential decreased land values and negative impacts on biodiversity are all major issues for our community.

Point two: Energy companies are not only failing to acknowledge the hidden costs, stress and concern about the unknown issues associated with neighbouring their developments; little respect is shown in the negotiation process of individual neighbour agreements by including unacceptable demands. Compensation varies greatly from one project to another, and in one case, a large project developer does not see it necessary to offer much in compensation for their project to go ahead. Burden is placed on landholders to navigate these agreements with no support. Landholders are being pressured to sign agreements to then lose any right to object to unforeseen detrimental effects that may occur at a later time. New South Wales planning guidelines are far too one-sided in the developer's favour and in some cases are being used by developers to minimise their commitment to a negotiated agreement.

Point three: The transmission lines and issuing of access rights in the South West REZ lack the detailed planning and departmental scrutiny that projects of this size and importance to the national energy transmission would in normal circumstances be required. For example, the granting of planning consent by New South Wales planning for the Yanco Delta Wind Farm prematurely in December 2023 has resulted in many and extremely consequential modifications to this project through the EPBC. There was no detail in the original EIS of the construction camp, 890 employees, or camp location, no transmission route to access the substation, incomplete surveys and gross understatement of disruption to native grasslands, Myall woodlands and groundwater.

Statistical change in environmental impact from the original EIS for Yanco Delta Wind Farm to the amendments sought by the developer. Native grasslands—original impact was 130 hectares; new impact, 418 hectares, a 223 per cent increase in impact. Weeping Myall woodlands—original impact, five hectares; new impact, 159 hectares, a 3,000 per cent increase in impact. Superb parrot—original impact, 31 hectares; new impact, 319 hectares, a 919 per cent increase. Total project impact on native vegetation, originally approved by the EPBC, was 130 hectares. The new impact is 1,269 hectares, for a total of a 978 per cent increase in environmental impact.

Point four: The coordination of the energy companies to minimise the environmental footprint in our unique landscape has been nothing short of a disgrace. For example, one developer has the Dinawan substation hub landlocked and are not allowing other energy companies access to the substation, resulting in transmission lines along McLennons Bore Road and the unnecessary removal of protected Weeping Myall. Transmission lines need to be coordinated with all stakeholders. We question the role of EnergyCo in coordinating transmission lines to the substation.

Point five: There doesn't appear to be a New South Wales governmental department willing to make energy companies accountable for their actions. Can the parliamentary Committee explain to us what the role of

EnergyCo is? Local government is not well enough resourced to manage compliance issues. Under what circumstances would AEMO revoke an energy company's access licence? Point six: Community consultation engagement has been inadequate, as town drop-in sessions are not attended by many people in town, who have little comprehension of the impacts of the development on close neighbours. We have suggested an open Q and A session with EnergyCo and project developers to increase transparency.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: I thank the gentlemen for coming along, and thank you for your submission. In terms of the matters you've raised in your submission, which you've also expanded on as you've been going through your evidence, have these matters, either all or in part, gone through any procedural steps to the councils, whichever council or councils are affected, and through that mechanism, going to the council, who are very much working very closely on those matters, broadly speaking, given you any satisfaction at all? The purpose of that, just to be clear, is not to reflect on the councils but to understand is there a communication going on.

RICHARD COUGHLAN: We understand that the New South Wales planning—I'll give you an example of that with, for instance, the local roads. From our understanding of communicating with our local council, the Murrumbidgee Council, and with New South Wales planning, prior to construction there was an agreement signed that they were to assess the condition of our roads, and while construction was underway they had no requirement to maintain or upgrade the road infrastructure. These are clay dirt tracks, so when you get 500 vehicles and trucks and heavy machinery going up and a bit of rain, they obviously become impassable, and local council, it's not their responsibility. The New South Wales department are going to be okay that at the end of what's nearly a three-year construction period, they had to return those roads to the original condition. Really, local Murrumbidgee Council have been walking with us on the journey, but they are limited in what they can do. It shouldn't be local council's responsibility and ratepayers' to maintain roads that have been ruined by developers, I suppose.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: We had the councils in earlier today. It's a group of seven which are working in a very coordinated and appears to be a very effective way, notwithstanding the issues that need to be resolved. That's why I raised the issue about the engagement with the council. In terms of yourselves, as farmers, producers and individuals, are you taking matters up yourself in your own right or are you doing it through your group here? Are either giving you any joy at all about the points that you've raised, either as individuals or as part of this group?

RICHARD COUGHLAN: I would say both individually and as a group, we have raised these concerns. We've met with developers, EnergyCo, Transgrid, for I would say inadequate results—really nothing, limited achievement. Deaf ears, I would say. And we've been meeting with these groups for three years.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Most recently, you're engaging with EnergyCo. Are you able to give us some detail about when that was?

RICHARD COUGHLAN: Yes. The last meeting we had with EnergyCo was in relation to—the best example I can give you was probably three months ago, and there is the issue about landlocking. One developer has effectively landlocked entry or transmission lines for another developer to get back to the substation.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Is that the one you referred to in your opening statement?

RICHARD COUGHLAN: Yes. We thought, from our research, EnergyCo is the body that is charged with coordinating the developers to minimise impacts on local neighbours and the environment. We presented a case where one particular developer had the opportunity to come down a private landholder's land but the other developer wouldn't come at that.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Play ball.

RICHARD COUGHLAN: Yes. We presented that to EnergyCo and they said, "Yes, we consulted with both developers and we were unable to get a result." So that was quite disappointing. They just sort of shrugged their shoulders and seemed unwilling to utilise their powers for the benefit of our community.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: We heard evidence this morning from the councils about the appointment of a renewable energy manager, someone to be one of the key people coordinating these issues across a number of councils. I was wondering if you'd like to comment on those because a number of the issues you've raised would seem to come under the purview of that person, such as transport, for example, but many others. I was wondering if you could comment on what your hopes would be for that position? Please feel free to take it on notice, if you wish.

ANDREW BROWNING: From our layman's perspective, we sort of thought that EnergyCo had that power as the umbrella body to pull some of these things into line. Is this new appointment of a similar vein and

will that person have the power and the willingness to execute those powers to get a resolution to some of these issues? I guess that would be our hope. We're just screaming out for someone or somebody to try and get some coordination because we feel, all the way along, that that's been extremely lacking. Early days, during the competitive process, the developers couldn't communicate with each other due to the process.

RICHARD COUGHLAN: Competitive, yes.

ANDREW BROWNING: That's done now that all the access has been awarded. We were really hoping that once we reached that point there'd be a lot more coordination to minimise, as Richard said, the impact to us from all the things that Richard said in his opening statement. I guess this is the first we've heard of this new appointment, is it, Richard?

RICHARD COUGHLAN: Yes.

ANDREW BROWNING: We are just really crying out for someone or some body to come in and coordinate this stuff to minimise the impact on us that have to live right next to it.

The CHAIR: When you were talking about the access rights and transparency, you were talking about the planning department essentially favouring developers and developers taking advantage of loopholes or things that are lacking in the process. Are there any specific examples you can point to where you would say that the developers have taken advantage of things that are lacking in the planning process?

RICHARD COUGHLAN: That example that I gave you about Yanco Delta Wind Farm, the significant change in the EIS, if that isn't called a significant change and it's only called an amendment then—what is it, a 3000 per cent increase in the environmental impact, and that's an amendment? What do you call a significant change in the environmental impact? If that's not it, then I think that's pretty poor. In relation to the planning department, I can't think of any others off the top of my head, but one example of a near neighbour trying to negotiate a neighbourhood agreement—a particular developer was requiring security and to lodge a caveat over part of their property and for them to obtain mortgage consent. It would seem that neighbours are in a really inequitable situation when you're dealing with large corporations. We're not lawyers. We haven't got endless funds. That would be all I'd have to say on that.

The CHAIR: Going back to that Yanco Delta example, where they did make significant modifications to their project, would you like to see some greater clarity? This Committee can make recommendations about what the Government should do. Should there be tighter controls on what is a significant modification, and if there is proven to be a significant modification, they have to—

RICHARD COUGHLAN: Resubmit the EIS.

The CHAIR: Yes, resubmit the EIS and almost reset the process with the community.

RICHARD COUGHLAN: Yes, I would agree with that. The amendments have not been approved yet. They're still going through that process. But yes, I'd like to know what is significant and what is not significant, because the impacts on our local landscape, we believe, are significant.

ANDREW BROWNING: There were so many—I guess there's a lot of amendments because the original EIS was lacking in so much detail, as Richard explained in his opening statement, with things like camp locations and where the transmission line was going, groundwater use. There were just so many important issues lacking from the original EIS that was approved.

The CHAIR: So tighter standards or controls in terms of what is expected in an EIS for these sorts of projects probably need to be bolted onto the front end to avoid this situation that you've had with Yanco.

RICHARD COUGHLAN: Yes. We believe not having a site selected for a camp for 900 people, a camp location, and no transmission route to access a substation—we would argue that that was incomplete.

ANDREW BROWNING: Pretty fundamental.

The CHAIR: It seems pretty fundamental to me. Picking up on your submission, you talked about access rights for projects in and outside the REZ. You note that 14 per cent of infrastructure has been granted access rights, 14 per cent sit outside the actual gazetted REZ. What's your view on restricting access rights to projects outside the REZ? Should it be prioritised that they have to sit within the gazetted REZ zone to be given priority access?

ANDREW BROWNING: Definitely, in my opinion, yes. Certainly it should be given priority. I think the boundary of the REZ was recently moved to accommodate one of the developers, so that's happened. But speaking of the boundaries of the REZ, the substation was initially originally constructed outside the REZ—not by much, but outside. We as a group wonder why—too late now, I guess—why that substation wasn't actually

constructed in a much more central location so that all the developers, from where we are up the eastern end across to here, could have more centralised access to it. We found that astonishing.

RICHARD COUGHLAN: Yes, the original positioning of the substation—effectively with the Coleambally irrigation to the north, you're blocked out there. So one particular developer basically surrounds the substation, so it makes access for other developers very difficult.

The CHAIR: Dealing with EnergyCo and consultation, we've heard quite regularly that EnergyCo refuses to want to have town hall-style meetings where they get questions put to them. Have they refused that option with the community here?

RICHARD COUGHLAN: They haven't flat-out refused, but I suppose they've pushed it.

The CHAIR: Have they offered or had any town hall-style meetings, or has it just been those shopfronts with the person sitting in there with a laptop?

RICHARD COUGHLAN: Not EnergyCo, no, they haven't.

ANDREW BROWNING: We've certainly put that forward to EnergyCo and the developers that to just show up and give a presentation is one thing, but to show up—all together by the way, not just one on one—and take questions from the floor so that we can have some sort of collaborative approach, we've found it hard to get traction on that, yes.

The CHAIR: Have there been any reasons or rationale or, shall I say, excuses thrown up as to why that can't happen?

RICHARD COUGHLAN: No, I think from our perception, it's just EnergyCo's lack of commitment or lack of willingness, I suppose, to meaningfully engage with developers and utilise what I believe is the powers that they have or their basic role for existing. They just don't seem to be willing to get involved in that process.

The CHAIR: The evidence we heard from the councils was that they thought EnergyCo had stepped up its game in the last 12 months. Have you seen any noticeable step-up in their game from, obviously, a very low point?

RICHARD COUGHLAN: No, we haven't.

ANDREW BROWNING: Not as yet, no.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Following on from that, and I appreciate a bit of time has passed from when you wrote the submission and being here, in the submission I think you were talking about wanting to have a community meeting in Jerilderie to talk about some of the—I'm assuming that hasn't happened.

ANDREW BROWNING: Just give me some more context, please.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: You talked about wanting a local meeting in Jerilderie with all stakeholders in a public forum for the community to get it, similar to what the Chair was asking.

ANDREW BROWNING: No, that request hasn't been acquiesced to, as far as I—

RICHARD COUGHLAN: No.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: In terms of your group, how many members roughly do you have? What's the scale of people?

RICHARD COUGHLAN: Twelve local landholders.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Do you try as a collective to work together, where you can, to meet with companies and work out some of the neighbouring agreements.

RICHARD COUGHLAN: Yes, all the—we're working as a group.

ANDREW BROWNING: Not the neighbourhood agreements; they're between individual landholders, but the community benefits stuff.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Do you find it sometimes challenging for people to share information based on some of the non-disclosures and things that they're having with companies or has that not been an issue for you?

ANDREW BROWNING: Yes, it is challenging at times, but I think our group does a very good job of differentiating between roles—for instance, the role that the group partakes and the confidential nature of the individual neighbour agreements. But, yes, we walk that fine line.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: We've had evidence in other hearings in different parts of the State where people have spoken about effectively wishing that the NDAs didn't exist so that landholders could speak more openly in the community, would know exactly what was going on and what was planned. Is that something that comes up amongst your members at all?

ANDREW BROWNING: Yes. I'll speak from my personal experience. Myself and my partner and our business are directly in this space, and we just flat out said to one of the developers we weren't going to agree to certain NDAs, because we thought it was relevant to share with our neighbours. Yes, it is an issue, for sure.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: You've mentioned in your opening statement, and it's in your submission as well, some of the impacts on telecommunications and connectivity with the substation. Can you just talk to us a little bit more about what you're seeing, the impact that's had on your business, how it could have been resolved, to not become such an issue in your view?

RICHARD COUGHLAN: Yes. There's a tower located on Kidman Way, central to our properties. Ever since the construction started on the substation, you can't make phone calls, and you're trying to—we're all trying to run a business. Can't make phone calls, can't get emails—texts maybe. You have issues with fires, being able to communicate. We had a fire on our property a couple of months ago, and we don't receive notifications on the RFS app, and then when the fire is underway and people are trying to call you to figure out where to go, you cannot have communication. We had an issue with a group of people that cut six of our fences and were stealing gear from, I suppose, Transgrid's construction team, and you've got no phone reception to make a call to the police.

Several of our neighbours are quite elderly, and it's put a huge strain on our businesses. For example, if you want to make a phone call and you're out in a paddock, you have to drive 20 minutes back to the landline to make a phone call. If you can think about that in your own line of work, it's extremely frustrating. We have numerous meetings with EnergyCo, the developers, Transgrid, and these issues have been on the table for probably three years and no offer of resolution. We've spoken to the telecommunications Ombudsman, and no movement there. In the current day, you can't operate your life and business without proper communications, so it's been extremely frustrating.

ANDREW BROWNING: Just if I could add to that a couple of examples. I'm RFS group captain for the area. During December it was, just for an example—we're a farm, we grow crops and we're harvesting in December—the phones were just pretty much useless. We had a fire. I'm in my header, trying to get things organised, and the RFS ACTIV app wouldn't open. My group vehicle, the mobile data terminal wouldn't work till I got almost to town. I'm harvesting, and I can't open the apps on my phone for all the grain receival sites to check pricing and delivery arrangements and so forth.

I think the point I'm trying to make is that the way society is set up these days, phones are no longer a luxury. I know the day that the camp shut down for the Christmas break, because I was out in the paddock—my wife and I were moving some sheep—and all of a sudden our phones started pinging, and everything started working. After the Christmas break, the workforce went back to camp, our phones went to rubbish again. You don't need to be a rocket scientist to work out that it's just a massive, massive impact on our amenity and connectivity and running our daily lives.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Obviously, those tools and the telecommunication access is vital to you running your businesses and your farming enterprises these days. As you say, it's not a luxury.

ANDREW BROWNING: And emergency services these days as well.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: I've sort of picked up on it with your evidence, but just in terms of the personal impact that it's having on you, having these projects in your area, and I guess on behalf of your members—again, in other areas, we've had landholders talk to us about the uncertainty and being not quite sure what's going where, the time frames. In some cases, the mental health impact in the community has been noted as well. Is there anything in that space that you wanted to share with the Committee in terms of your experiences?

ANDREW BROWNING: Yes, massive. As I said, we're right next to one of the developers, my wife and I. Yes, it takes a tremendous toll on our mental health, I suppose the uncertainty as much as anything, but we live where we live. There are advantages that we love and there are disadvantages that we wear because we choose where we live. Visual amenity and the noise—and that's another point. The developers all say that the sound limits are within these limits or ABC, but the cumulative effect isn't really recognised or measured. You've got one developer—we were going to have three. One got knocked on the head so now we've got two. But there doesn't seem to be any appreciation or measurement of the cumulative impact of multiple developers, for example, with us, surrounding us. We have another new neighbour that's in the same boat as us being surrounded probably even more so, and she regularly comments on the toll that this is taking through so many ways: the time it takes to

handle all this stuff, the mental toll, the visual toll, the amenity, lifestyle, the whole—and we feel it doesn't get appreciated.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: We're hearing it around the State, if that's any consolation to you.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: I was going to ask a few different questions. In your opinion, do you think landholders were given meaningful ability to negotiate the route alignment? I know it's a bit late now.

ANDREW BROWNING: For the proponents? For the PEC line?

RICHARD COUGHLAN: For the east-west, 520. We have 18 towers going through our property. I would say no, but they have their compulsory acquisition powers. An example I could give you is there was a part of a line could have gone through a TSR, stock reserve, instead of going through our place and crossing the creek, but we were told, "No, we don't like or we can't go through stock reserves." Then you drive an hour away and they have gone through stock reserves—so, yes, a lack of transparency there. But obviously with the compulsory acquisition it had to go somewhere. If you had a choice, you wouldn't want it going through. I would say very limited ability to influence the pathway.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: We've mentioned that in your submission you asked, or would like to have had a public forum. That hasn't happened yet. If there was one, what outcomes would you have been looking for at such a forum?

ANDREW BROWNING: Just some more transparency and some more coordination between everybody, whether it's government, developers. That's the thing that's frustrated us so much is that—as I have referenced earlier—the commercial-in-confidence provisions when it was all competitive, that's done now. It's all been awarded. So why aren't there some heads getting knocked together to just make it as streamlined and as least impactful as possible? That would be the main one. The other thing is the long telecommunications that we've spoken about and just some other stuff to try and alleviate the impact on our lifestyle and business.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Do you believe that would go to consultation in a way? Has the social licence process been genuine or do you think it's just been information given out?

RICHARD COUGHLAN: From our perspective, it hasn't been met at all and I don't think it's—it may be written into their communications but, from our experience, I don't think there's any weight at all put on it. I don't think it affects, from our point of view—it doesn't seem to affect the ability of a developer to do what they want.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: You haven't had the public forum, but you've got this now. What would you like to see from Transgrid and EnergyCo, if you could have—maybe not a wish list, but if there was something for the future. What would you like to see from Transgrid and EnergyCo moving forward?

RICHARD COUGHLAN: For EnergyCo to utilise their powers and, I suppose, execute what their primary objective is—to coordinate these individual projects to minimise the impact on our local community. For example, if you have separate parts of a development and they're all running transmission lines or multiple companies are running transmission lines to get the power back into the substation, it seems pretty simple for EnergyCo to get them together and say, "We're not having six sets of powerlines back to the substation. You guys need to coordinate it." I thought it would have been cost effective for the developers to do that and make sense on a lot of counts but that doesn't seem to be happening and EnergyCo don't seem to be forcing people to the table. That's one thing I would like to see happen.

ANDREW BROWNING: Yes, just the coordination. Unless we're completely misguided in our interpretation of EnergyCo's role, just to exercise your powers and get some coordination between these bodies.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: You mentioned in your opening statement different projects changing. Do you think the long-term biosecurity management responsibility has been clearly allocated or because they keep changing—

RICHARD COUGHLAN: You mean more the environmental impacts?

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Yes.

RICHARD COUGHLAN: I don't see how you can have those increases in environmental impacts from your original EIS. I just don't see how you can make such significant changes and not be open to either resubmitting an EIS or significant scrutiny on that. I think it's a significant departure from the original EIS and so, no, I don't think they are living up to—I don't think it meets the pub test, personally.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Have you seen any measurable benefit to the local community since this REZ started?

RICHARD COUGHLAN: Andrew can comment on his thoughts, but my opinion is the only people that will benefit from this are the landholders who choose to have it on their land. For everyone else, I think it'll be a detriment to the community. I think it's created significant unease between neighbours. I think it's created more division in our community and, yes, I personally think it's a net negative on the whole community. I see little example of local employment or engaging of local businesses. I think it's been poorly planned, it's been poorly executed and poorly managed. We have to live with that for now and for the rest of our lives. So, yes, it's been extremely disappointing in how it's been managed, would be my opinion.

ANDREW BROWNING: I suppose council have had a lot of money thrown at them and I guess they're going to build a new doctor's surgery in town and childcare centre up at Darlington Point through the VPA process, so they're getting a lot of cash initially. But other than that, I would agree with Richard's comments. It seems to be that those of us that are really wearing the impacts seem to get little appreciation of the cost to our businesses and lifestyle.

The CHAIR: Just quickly on that, you said you're getting a new doctor's surgery in town. Is there going to be a doctor to go along with that?

RICHARD COUGHLAN: All those issues, yes.

ANDREW BROWNING: We do have a doctor, at the moment.

RICHARD COUGHLAN: Recruiting and maintaining staff in small country towns is extremely difficult. For instance, take one of the proposed development camps has the ability to host 900 people. We have one doctor and it's a two-week wait to get in. And that's one example.

The CHAIR: The pressure on that one doctor is already immense.

RICHARD COUGHLAN: Yes. We presented that to developers and they tell you that they've got it under control, but I see no evidence of it.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I think that pretty much takes us to time so thank you for your evidence. Thank you for your work on behalf of your community. We may have some supplementary questions and we'll flick them to you and the secretariat will be in touch in terms of getting them back to us. Thank you once again.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

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

Mr NATHAN MENSER, Community and Stakeholder Engagement Manager, Transgrid, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: We now welcome our last witnesses, who have been waiting patiently all day. Thank you very much. Would either of you like to make a short opening statement before we go to questions?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Yes, Chair. Before I do, I just want to commend the Hay Services Club on how well done the event is and the venue is. It's really well done, and I commend them for their efforts in hosting the Committee and us today. I also pay my respects to the Wiradjuri people of the lands we meet on. We'll keep our opening remarks short, as we appeared at the Singleton hearing. However, I'd like to reiterate Transgrid's thanks to 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, working on transmission networks, as well as generators and batteries. And we thank the many regional businesses that support us in our work. We also recognise the impact that our infrastructure has on landholders, their neighbours and communities in regional areas. We have and always will continue to listen to regional communities, as they want honest, transparent communication about projects, clear plans and timelines and actions based on community feedback.

We are working with local communities, who have called for genuine investments that prioritise long-term benefits, delivering local jobs as well as educational opportunities for young people and community benefits that will leave a lasting legacy to enable everyone to take advantage of the clean energy transition. We employ more than 2,000 people, with more than a third based in regional New South Wales, including a growing apprenticeship program, to meet the challenges that face the renewable transition. Since our last inquiry hearing, I'm able to share that we will soon also be opening a new training and skill centre in Wagga Wagga to train skilled workers in constructing high-voltage transmission towers and lines, starting with the nation-critical project HumeLink.

Noting this inquiry's focus is on the South West Renewable Energy Zone, I want to highlight that Transgrid is delivering the critical transmission infrastructure required to connect the South West Renewable Energy Zone to New South Wales major load centres. This includes three nationally significant projects: EnergyConnect, HumeLink and VNI West. These projects will enable renewable energy generators in the South West Renewable Energy Zone to reliably export electricity into the grid, supporting New South Wales's clean energy transition and energy security. We thank the Committee for your work in this area and are happy to answer any questions.

The CHAIR: Just in terms of employment locally, specifically with the substation we came out and saw yesterday—refresh my memory. At peak, there was 400-and-something people?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Correct, yes.

The CHAIR: How many of those were local to the region and how many were brought in? Obviously, some had to be brought in from overseas because of their technical knowledge of the synchronistic condensers, but how many were local employment?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: I'm not too sure on the exact number, Chair, but what we do with our contractor—being the delivery partner contractor Elecnor—for Project EnergyConnect, we put strong stipulations in regard to what their local employment numbers are as part of the tender. I'd have to get back to you on the exact number or percentage of what that is for that work. But you're completely correct in saying that a lot of the technical expertise required to deliver those synchronous condensers has been sought from around the country and around the world in that instance. But I'm happy to take that on notice and get back to you.

The CHAIR: That would be good. Obviously, you were listening to the last witnesses and they were talking about concerns around telecommunications in and around the substation. Have they voiced those concerns to you in the past, and have you been able to ascertain what the actual issue was or the cause of that issue?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Yes, Chair, they have. We've spent much time with the local community groups, being the Bundure landholder group that came in as well as council and EnergyCo and Telstra in many instances, to discuss the impact on the telecommunication network in the region. We've been very much prioritising face-to-face and coordinating those meetings and discussions. We understand that a lot of that imposed impact that is occurring from the increase of population in the area is due to the adequacy of the telecommunication towers that Telstra hosts in the area, so we've been trying to work with them very closely on what they potentially could do to assist in regard to what is the increase of population in that area around the substation.

What we've done for Transgrid as part of recognising that impact and trying to reduce that impact with landowners is look at what we can possibly do within our substation and part of our camp, where we've actually

installed a significant amount of Starlink or satellite generators and receivers, not just across our main kind of central locations in those hubs but also to vehicles in other locations as well and to our workforce that actually have to travel across the line to reduce the impact and the imposing impact that it has in bringing down the mobile network that's in a fairly poor state around there at the moment. In saying that, we've also understood and are listening to community to take that on board as part of any future projects that do come forward—to potentially look at funding opportunities for investment into more of a social legacy in that instance as part of our project, and also leaning in on EnergyCo and other developers as well to also consider the voice of the community on that impact to see if they can look at investing similarly to support.

The CHAIR: Was there any positive response from Telstra from their end in terms of wanting to put anything in place to upgrade or fix?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: It's more of a recognition, is what was kind of incurred in that instance, but we knew that the communication was very much that it would take a long time and a significant investment to support that. So Transgrid decided to actually look at what we're imposing on community at the moment and how it can best mitigate that. That's the approach we've taken.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Following on from that—and I appreciate what you're saying and that it's multi-layered in that there's a role for Telstra as well—just hearing from witnesses before you, I think they made some pretty good points around the impact on their farming businesses but also potentially emergency services as well, because no-one would want a situation where the RFS couldn't go and help people if there was a fire. I suppose learning from what's happened there, and you did say that you want to look to that, is it a case of just more investment? How do you solve this if it's a problem that you know could exist in terms of that impact on the telecommunications? Is there any kind of insight into that?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: In the instance of Transgrid, we can only solve what we can control.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: And I appreciate that.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: In that instance, we're very much looking at what mechanisms could we solve in that instance. To do that, we've identified that if we invest into having more of an alternative—of using Starlink and those things—that is the way that we can best do it from what we can control, but I can't comment on what Telstra could possibly do.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Going forward, knowing what you've learned here, you might say we need to up, for instance, the Starlink capacity or capability for people onsite so that then you don't detract from the local access. Is that part of the solution?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Correct. And also to then support the workforce that has to leave those substation locations and actually travel across linear projects as well. But sharing that knowledge with developers and sharing that knowledge with the other generators in the area has also been of benefit too, so they can understand what they could possibly do to also support, as reducing the cumulative impact. We've been very up-front and forthright in sharing that information in those conversations as well with other developers.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Just following on from that consultation point, we've heard from a number of local councils and local council groups throughout the State. It would seem to me that they're a principal source of information for you and people you need to coordinate with. How do you actually do that? What is the process? Is there a line where you can say, "This is the first thing that happens. This is what we do." How does that actually occur in relation to your coordination with local councils and your consultation?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Yes, sure. I can talk about how we've really kind of taken our engagement approach with local councils and how we've found it being successful, and Nathan can then share more the specific location areas and the local way we've approached it. We very much identified that we prioritise face-to-face engagement as part of our practice. We've spent a lot of time in community here speaking directly with council to really uncover and identify what are the social impacts in the area and the community impacts that the transition is causing, and then identifying with council what information could we provide as part of our projects that we're delivering and how can that data be used to better understand our impact, that then can inform them on what the impact is that they're hearing from developers and EnergyCo, and other cumulative impacts as well.

The process that we've taken as part of our engagement with councils is making sure that we're consistently in communities speaking with them face to face, as well as following up and providing them the appropriate information through those planning engagement milestones, to ensure that they have all the information and data and timeline of when our projects are coming through and what impacts that they'll have with community. On top of that, we're also making sure that we actually allow community to inform us about our engagement approach as well. So when we engage with council we want to make sure constituents and community

are getting the same kind of respect and authority as well. A lot of our approach to engagement has been, like the national guidelines talks to, about prioritising face to face to actually be in community to listen and to provide opportunities for them to have a voice to see where they can influence and support our projects to be delivered. Nathan, did you want to talk?

NATHAN MENSER: Thanks, Michael. We've undertaken quite a rigorous engagement program over the last 3½ to four years on the VNI West project. It started early with engagement with councils and regional level stakeholders where we were wanting to road test the VNI West project while it was still in the regulatory investment test for transmission phase. That was a way for us to uncover some of the critical issues that were in the region that we would need to address as part of our project development. There were several face-to-face meetings where we travelled out to the region, gained some very good insights from knowledgeable people from councils and from the local region, and that informed how we then moved forward with the commencement of our community engagement, which was July 2023.

Over the next two years we undertook a rigorous program to start from a study area, where we took VNI West as a concept, and then refined that down over a number of engagements to land on our 200-metre corridor that would then progress into the environmental assessment phase. Throughout that time we also demonstrated to community how we took their feedback on board and how their feedback changed the shape of VNI West before it was in the environmental assessment phase. That resulted in a lot of positive outcomes. We were able to move the line away further from the town of Moulamein, for example. We were also able to accommodate some landowners' wishes around what they would like to see on the alignment. We took feedback from other stakeholders and councils as well throughout that process.

That resulted in us landing on that 200-metre corridor that we then put forward for the environmental assessment, which went on public exhibition in August of last year. Now we're still continuing those engagements. We now have specific topics that we're working with councils and communities on. Councils we engaged just last week on the subject of roads. We're about to do more community engagement on the overall project as well in the next few weeks. That's all leading towards an amendment report to support our EIS, which will be tabled midyear with the department of planning.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: You mention roads—I know I've taken a bit of time but I'll come back to that when others have finished. That seems to be a recurring issue that I'd like to talk about.

NATHAN MENSER: Yes.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: I just have one more on a slightly different topic. The community newsletter that you gave us yesterday—I was interested where it talks about \$300,000 in community grants, and there's a couple of examples of them. There's a preschool and an art show and things. Can you just talk us through a little bit more how that process works, how many recipients have received funding under that, and who can apply and how that all flows into the community?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Sure. The community partnership program is something that Transgrid initiatives started with the beginning of Project Energy Connect and it's run across our footprint of all our projects in New South Wales. It's also a project that runs through the cumulative impact of the HumeLink as well as VNI West, and the Hunter Transmission Project as well in that region. It's a program where community groups can apply twice per year for grants up to \$5,000 that can contribute towards ultra-localised community initiatives. We've really found through the success of this program that it was the ultra-local community groups that were really missing out from a lot of the funding and that needed those substantial grants.

It is actually just one mechanism of our investment back into community as part of community investment directly. There's also investment across our community investment benefit program for HumeLink that we also offer and we do. But it's also our focus on what our local and regional spend is directly with projects, as well as our jobs and skills and apprenticeships that we offer, they really build that social legacy that we're leaving with communities. So there's been a substantial economic investment for just that component but it's one of many pieces to make up that social licence fabric that we can leave for communities.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Because it came up in more informal discussions that the Committee had yesterday, that sometimes the funding through VPAs or whatever tend to focus on the bigger centres, where a local small group or a hall or whatever might actually need a little bit of money that could go a long way. So that's sort of what that program's designed to do, is what you're saying?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Correct, yes. And some examples of that have been solar panels and that for local schools, increased coverage and visibility for rural fire services and local brigades with cameras put onto towers to create better visibility for bushfire awareness and bushfire management. It's those kind of ultra-localised kind of supports around those regions that's been really supportive.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Thank you.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Are you able to provide, perhaps on notice, the figures by each LGA for that community benefit fund?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Yes, sure, happy to. Just in addition, and probably talking more about our direct spend, I can confirm that across our major projects in local LGAs as part of our local and regional spend, we've spent over \$800 million in local communities. For this region, just as an example, more kind of Balranald, there's an \$11 million spend across our direct spend. It doesn't include indirect, which is our spend for our workforce and what they do contribute in regards to accommodation and food and beverage and those reasons. But happy to also provide that extra data on the direct community investment.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: With regard to, say, social licence—you were talking about that before—how does Transgrid measure social licence? Is it surveys, complaints, land access agreements or a combination of all of those—or none of those?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: It is a little bit. If you look at the foundations of social licence, engagement is definitely a foundation, so making sure that we're monitoring community sentiment, we're monitoring complaints, commitments as well. Transgrid puts a very strong focus on landowner commitments, where we're accountable and transparent in fulfilling those commitments, because, being so involved in regional New South Wales, we've found it's often those commitments that are the fabric of what then changes sentiment in community. But it's also a number of other things, as I was speaking about before. It's our investment into the economic growth of local communities we impact—so what is our local and regional spend, not just for Transgrid but also for our delivery partners and our contractors and subcontractors that follow? It is our apprenticeships, jobs, skills. They're the longer lasting legacies that we can leave as an organisation, and that's the information and data we can help support what comes after Transgrid as well, rather than kind of providing just a financial investment.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: On the sentiment side of things, what do you believe sentiment in the South West REZ community is?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: I guess, in reference to our projects, our sentiment is very much very strong neutral to positive in this instance, and we've found that is a testament to our engagement approach. We've had many comments from councils and community members that they really appreciate that Transgrid takes the time to come to community, to spend time with community and speak face to face, rather than just being on the other end of a phone or an email address. We prioritise knowing the landowners that are impacted, because it is the relationships that we have to keep with Transgrid. We're a lot different to just a construction organisation; we actually have to live with community, in community, post-construction. We've found that the sentiment of this region is very much neutral to positive, and we're very accountable and transparent with that on our website through our landowner code of conduct, the information we give landowners about living with transmission lines and the support we offer them through mental health as well as how they can really have an influence on the project design, construction, into operations.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Can you just clarify for us the capacity of the transmission that is being built in the South West?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: In regards to VNI West and Project EnergyConnect, it's a 500-kV transmission line. With Project EnergyConnect, it's connecting South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales as an interconnector. For VNI West, it's very much connecting Victoria into New South Wales, in that instance.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: And then what would be the capacity of, say, the wind, solar and the battery projects that you expect to be built around here?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: I'll have to get back to you in regards to that kind of capacity, but the capacity in those conversations are usually kind of controlled by the Australian Energy Market Operator.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: And are you aware of additional projects that will be built close by but not in the REZ?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Again, I'll have to take that one on notice.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Thank you, gentlemen, for coming along. It's been very helpful evidence. On the matter of understanding the economic impact of such large initiatives in terms of the projects that we're talking about in this part of the State, are you able to provide—and it might be just at high level; that would be fine—an explanation of the economic benefits, such as they are, in the short term, the medium term and perhaps the longer term, if you're able to do that? Just give us some insights to what Transgrid, who obviously looked at this very closely, with other companies involved—what economic benefits do you apprehend?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: I think what we've really kind of uncovered and identified, and as I've previously mentioned in regards to the foundations of social licence, it's really focusing the energy transition on not just what the investment in the community is but what is really driving the transition. Part of it is a brand-new industry coming into regions that haven't experienced that before, so the economic value of these projects and the transition that is coming through is a significant longer lasting legacy than an initial financial investment for just community up-front. In many instances, having foresight to look at the longer kind of benefit you can provide—and we've really gathered this information from the communities that we've been impacting and councils.

They don't want Transgrid or any other developer to be the sugar hit that comes into a community and then leaves, where community upskill resources and provisions to find out that there's a significant drop in work or opportunity following that. We've really been kind of focusing our attention on what can we offer to communities as we kind of come through for our project, making sure that we're coordinated enough to make sure our tenderers, our delivery partners, our contractors are taking the same approach. What we tend to do as part of the economic growth that we could offer to the local communities is we inform through our tender process that our contractors have a stipulation in regards to what their local spend will have to be and their investment will have to be into local workforce.

Following that, they can then pass that down to their subcontractors as well, so we can start demonstrating and identifying the benefit, that it goes from growing, say, a mum-and-dad business to a small- to medium-size business, but then the role that we actually have in what comes after Transgrid. So if it's a distribution network, if it's a generator as part of the transition—that we're informing community that Transgrid's role and opportunities may have a finite kind of ending with our project, but, following that, here is the pipeline of projects that will come afterwards.

Then community can be better aware when they're doing their economic growth proceedings and looking at their planning of community investment and community assets that they can take into consideration the data that's coming through and the pipeline that's coming through to create more sustainable communities as part of the energy transition, rather than just something that's imposed on them in a short period from each individual project. In kind of summarising part of those horizons, it's the actual passing down of those stipulations, and what we want to be seen as in regards to our role in the transition. It's sharing the information for what also comes afterwards to communities, being really effective and understanding that it's a longer term kind of social legacy or economic growth that they can really benefit from in those circumstances.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: That's very helpful.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: My final question, because I want to leave my colleagues to also ask some, but this covers the whole range of things. Having been involved in local government for many years and now on this inquiry, the issue of roads keeps coming up. All of the equipment et cetera is not going to be flown in by helicopter; it's going to be on what amounts to local roads—particularly the concept of the last mile, when it's no longer on State roads. You may not be the appropriate people to answer this, but who should we be talking to who could actually give us an understanding—this is for me, and I know my colleagues may be interested as well—about what considerations are being taken and what issues will be resolved to ensure that the local roads are able to meet the obligations that will be required and then will be left in a state when they're no longer required, particularly for moving very heavy equipment, so the local councils can continue into the future to be able to maintain those roads?

It just keeps coming up and up and up, and I can't believe we're the only ones pondering it, so someone must have sat down with a slide rule and a computer, who's a traffic engineer, and started to work on these issues. Who should we be talking to? Where do we obtain that information? Because it's a question that keeps coming up endlessly.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: I think in the instance of this, and evidence provided previously before from council was talking about Transport for NSW in regards to those, is the road authority. In many instances in these regions—and we've identified this from our engagement with council—the road authority for a lot of them has been kind of handed over to council for the ease of that. Transgrid's been in many kinds of conversations around the cumulative road impacts, very much from our early engagements through EnergyConnect, but even now, more recently, with VNI West in that instance. We've been in conversations with the Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner, Tony Mahar, in regards to cumulative impacts. We've been sitting with council and working through that as well. I think Transport for NSW would have to be one in regards to the appropriate authority to look at cumulative impacts.

What we've been really attempting to do with council under that instance is—as part of our construction environmental management plans or conditions on our projects, we have to abide by a traffic and transport management plan, which is signed off by council. In that, it's actually the road maintenance and what happens as

part of the impact of the project has to be actually paid for and looked after by our proponents and our delivery partners. So we've been working with council on making sure that that process is being followed, not just from when we start construction but during construction as well. There's a process that we follow with our delivery partners and councillors to make sure the roads do get fixed as those impacts happen, so community doesn't have to wait until the end of a project. Nathan, I might get you to speak more directly in regards to what we've been doing with council for VNI West.

NATHAN MENSER: Sure. Specifically on the roads issue, I did allude a moment ago that we were meeting with councils last week. That was to initiate a more robust, detailed conversation around the specific impacts on local roads within the LGAs. We were able to obtain data through technical studies, share that information with councils, and also provide them with a draft recommendation on our thoughts on what we could propose as a road treatment or a localised widening, or some other treatment in that way. We've tabled that with Murrumbidgee Council. Mr Garry Stoll was here this morning. He informed us of the council policy that they have. We spoke about that policy last week in the meeting and we're fully aware of council's position, and we've agreed to continue the conversations to better understand what implications there would be for a developer such as Transgrid.

We're now in discussion with three councils in the area, being Murrumbidgee, Edward River and Murray River, where we will be sharing our information with them through a number of reports that we'll release in draft form. We'll then get a response and feedback from them to build up that picture, as Michael was noting, around what goes into our final assessment, which then gets approved by the department of planning. Those conversations are ongoing now. We're very much speaking with the officers who are controlling and managing all of those processes at the councils, so that we can get a beneficial outcome from a Transgrid perspective, noting that councils are also looking at the cumulative aspect of road management in the LGAs. So we've got an open dialogue with them to work through all of these issues.

The CHAIR: I've just got one final one. Could you respond to concerns by the previous witnesses around what they described in terms of the transmission corridors as a bit of a spaghetti junction and this concern around developers being locked out, or people being locked out of the corridor and whether there needs to be a greater coordination of transmission corridors, when it comes to the REZs.

MICHAEL JOHNSON: I guess, speaking on behalf of—EnergyCo very much are the authority for the renewable energy zones and then controlling in regards to the connection points that those proponents would actually have as part of into connecting to our projects, which connect in those renewable energy zones. I guess in reference to that kind of comment, it would definitely be EnergyCo that would be coordinating those kinds of connections. In reference to our connection outside the renewable energy zone with our projects—being VNI West, in this instance, or Project Energy Connect—we run a very transparent and accountable route selection process, which is heavily influenced by social impacts from community as well as environmental and engineering. We have evolved that process and, as we've previously mentioned, it's much more informed by where community have really called out some of those alternatives and where we can reduce the amount of transmission lines or visual impacts in those instances to better support an outcome that is accepted by community.

The CHAIR: How would you rate EnergyCo's coordination in the South West REZ, if you had to rate it?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: I haven't directly been involved with those kinds of coordinations.

NATHAN MENSER: From a community engagement perspective—because I've been in discussion with the EnergyCo team on that level—I've found that it's been a very good relationship that we have established. There was sort of a point in time where the engagement increased, and that was after the announcement of the proponents who were granted access under the EnergyCo access scheme. I believe that was April last year. Since then, certainly the engagement teams at each of the various developers and EnergyCo have been meeting on a routine basis to discuss issues as they arise and to also map out our planned consultation activities with communities. One of the key things that we're all very acutely aware of is consultation fatigue and not overloading communities with everybody trying to get the same people and talk to them at different times.

Certainly the first activity that we did undertake, I think it was around about May/June 2025, was a coordinated information session series where we came to Hay, Coleambally and Jerilderie and had all of the developers from the renewable energy zone and Transgrid and EnergyCo all in the room together as a sort of pop-up information session, where certainly the gentlemen that were here earlier from community, from Bundure, they were also in attendance at that session. They were well attended—good information sharing. So from that perspective, we're working well together. There's a lot more work to do; we recognise that.

The CHAIR: Is there any intent to do any more of those group combined sessions, between you, the developers, EnergyCo?

NATHAN MENSER: Mr Chair, at this point we haven't got anything locked onto a calendar that says we're all going to do it at this point in time. But we are looking for those opportunities as we move forward, particularly as projects start to become more real on the ground and closer to construction. But we will take that on notice and liaise with EnergyCo and developers.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: It hasn't come up so much in this visit, but in other areas we've been to—we might have even spoken about it in the Hunter—there are issues around insurance and liability. Now, obviously we were at the substation yesterday. The landscape's a bit different here than it is in other parts of the State. In terms of if there is a fire or an incident out there and there are challenges with that or it starts on a neighbouring property and it does end up coming there, what happens? Who's liable? Because that's something that's come up quite a bit in other hearings and we sort of haven't touched on it down here today. Is that something that you talk to the community and adjacent landholders about as well?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: Definitely from the insurance and liability perspective, for a landowner that hosts our easements, then it's definitely covered through the conversation and insurance with that landowner as part of the easement acquisition. The kind of clause on those is definitely being discussed and communicated well with landowners that do host our easements. In reference to neighbouring properties and those things, it's more of a conversation that continually comes up with community members. But it's something that's currently being investigated more with the government through authorities and through tax and what that looks like.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: This is not a reflection on your company, but we haven't really been able to get a straight answer anywhere—and part of it is more probably the developers and the proponents of the actual projects, not necessarily you guys with the substation and the transmission lines. But, definitively, who is responsible, who takes that sort of insurance liability and risk on—it's really hard to get to the bottom of that. Is that something that government needs to be more across? What's your view on that?

MICHAEL JOHNSON: I can't comment any more than what we can control for at Transgrid. It's definitely a government discussion that's currently being had, is my understanding.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for your time. You did take a few questions on notice and we may have some supplementary questions. The Committee secretariat will be in touch with you in regards to those. Thank you once again.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

The Committee adjourned at 12.10.