

**Submission
No 18**

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

Organisation: Merriwa-Cassilis Alliance Incorporated

Date Received: 14 January 2025

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Dear NSW Government,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback into the Impact of Renewable Energy Zones (REZ) on rural and regional communities and industries in New South Wales. Merriwa-Cassilis Alliance Incorporated (MCA) is a united group formed in February 2021 by local landowners to protest the location of the eastern portion of the Transgrid / EnergyCo transmission study corridor which lies between Merriwa and Cassilis. Our 110 members represent mixed-farming properties and the broader local landowners and communities of Merriwa and Cassilis.

Current concern

The Central-West Orana (CWO) REZ and infrastructure plans (including transmission lines and work camp sites) are dividing regional communities, disrupting farming businesses and forcing generational family farms to be sold. It has caused undue stress on whole communities including Merriwa, Coolah, Cassilis and Dunedoo. There is a massive imbalance in power in the planning and development of these projects between EnergyCo and private landowners due to the critical state significant infrastructure legislation and overriding threat of compulsory land acquisition.

EnergyCo fails to understand and cost the serious risks this new transmission infrastructure will have on landowners, businesses and our rural community.

Biosecurity Risks

There is an immediate biosecurity threat as construction gets underway in the Cassilis/Ulan region. Impacted landowners have not seen any biosecurity plans and/or contractual commitments by EnergyCo or subcontractors building the transmission lines. This is a highly productive agricultural region. Weed control is integral to production efficiency and operating costs. Food safety is integral to our livelihood and industries reputation.

Recommendations

The Renewable Energy (RE) projects and their infrastructure including transmission lines need to be planned and built wherever possible to -

- Utilise public land
- Utilise already-disturbed mining land
- Utilise existing infrastructure
- Utilise wind and solar farm hosts land
- Utilise industrial areas
- Protect Biophysical Strategic Agricultural Land (BSAL)
- Protect important agricultural land
- Have less impact on homes and rural communities.

We also consider more strategic and cost effective locations for RE projects need to be prioritised closer to high usage, metropolitan areas ie ocean. This would significantly reduce the land use conflicts and transmission line costs, and minimise the impact on agricultural businesses, homes and rural communities.

No Compulsory Acquisition

The current transmission proposal still impacts private land and agricultural operations, and every effort should be made to genuinely consult and work with these landowners to minimise impact. Under no situation should compulsory acquisition be used. This creates a massive imbalance in power, little or no genuine consultation or fair and just consideration towards private landholders.

Fair Compensation

The Just Term Act is not fit for this purpose. Those landowners negatively impacted by these renewable energy projects and their infrastructure need to be fairly compensated. The new legislation, although now an annual payment, does not go far enough. The economic impact has not been calculated fully. It is also limited to 20 years but the infrastructure remains on the private land forever. Compensation also needs to be given for neighbours impacted, not just those landowners with easements.

Future Recommendations

MCA recommends the following;

- **CWO REZ be capped at the current level (Stage 1) with NO further plans or development of Stage 2.** The location and scale of stage 1 of the CWO REZ is already having a huge negative impact on the economic and social well being of these rural communities. The threat of a stage 2 development introduces a new level of uncertainty to communities and landholders that will continue to cause anxiety and negative impacts well beyond the completion of the stage 1 development. The uncertainty of the scope and location of a stage 2 will cripple the ability of landholders to make important proactive business decisions that will negatively impact landholders and communities for years.
- **Map important agricultural land as NO GO zones for these RE developments.**
- NSW Government need to **ensure the consultation process with rural and regional communities is significantly improved.** The first step by NSW Government / EnergyCo should be to understand the values of communities in the areas under consideration for these RE developments; not just draw a line on the map from a desktop study for the transmission lines. Strategic agricultural land should be considered a significant constraint to development and ranked accordingly within the planning process.
- EnergyCo needs to follow **international best practise for this consultation process and project methodology**; carry out preliminary independent (objective) social impact assessments and then determine the most suitable study corridor location with better planning and understanding of the impacts of these RE projects to agricultural operations and rural communities.
- Strict biosecurity procedures and protocols on impacted agricultural land for EnergyCo and subcontractors. Standardised mandatory contractual agreements designed by impacted landowners.

This is an opportunity for all Governments, whatever the party, to change their approach to energy production and security. We need a **national approach following international best practise** where communities are genuinely consulted in the planning, development and construction stages that is transparent and fair. The community must be able to trust our government will not sacrifice the collective long-term interest by choosing options which appear to be the quickest, cheapest or easiest in the short term.

Regards,
Heidi Inder
Secretary

