

Submission
No 24

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

Organisation: Hi Neighbour
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Impact of Renewable Energy Zones (REZ) on rural and regional communities and industries in New South Wales

I never anticipated that state infrastructure planning and execution would cause me distress and anguish. I certainly didn't think it would keep me up at night and yet here I am preparing to pour my heart out to a State Parliamentary enquiry.

5 years ago my life changed forever when the Black Summer bushfires ripped through the south east coast of our beautiful continent. Ancient lands burned in an inferno the likes of which the country and its people had not seen before. The intensity of the catastrophe was beyond human ability to tame. The protection of life, property and the rich natural wealth of the environment and its precious wildlife appeared to be beyond our control. In facing an event like this, the imbalance of the biosphere becomes impossible to ignore and many of us are woken to an alarm that demands we must do everything in our power to wind back the anthropogenic causes of this maladaptive variance in climate.

I set out to do what I could to be part of the solution, be an active citizen, a community member and a parent protecting her children. I turned my energies away from my profession as a professional actor to learn as much as I could, as quickly as I could. Adopting the triage mindset of a casualty nurse it seemed our most pressing need was to shift away from climate polluting energy generation, so this is where I put my focus. This obsession resulted in my founding Hi Neighbour, a not for profit with a social focus on supporting the community level shift to renewable energy in the regional setting of my home, the Illawarra.

By listening to and learning from local people I began to see that at the very heart of this change was the regional centers like ours, where fossil fuel industries of coal mining and steel making have moved the big wheels in our economy and had done so for over a century. The generational jobs in coal and steel were at the heart of these communities and if this transformation was to be successful on any level it must support the people who would be facing the biggest change.

Alongside this opportunity I witnessed the pressure of community level separation at a social level of those for and against renewables needed to be given attention. To these ends I sought to try to support workers in their transformation to renewable energy jobs and bring all facets of the community together to witness, enjoy and celebrate the positive aspects of this shift. With a vision to move us forward as a community in clean energy generation as a united region.

A key anchor point for Hi Neighbour was the February 2023 announcement of the Illawarra as one of 5 Renewable Energy Zones. With 43 Billion dollars worth of potential investment in renewable projects, committing our work to upskilling local workers to be included in this clean

energy boom seemed to be the very best thing we could do to build social license and enthusiasm for this significant shift in the face and character of the region.

Two years on from the announcement and we seem to have no Illawarra REZ projects to consider. Hi Neighbour has no new REZ industry partners to work in collaboration with. No large scale renewable projects to point to with the promise of jobs for the future. On behalf of our organisation I would like to share a deep disappointment at this and a hope that this inquiry will remember the Illawarra in its reflections. We are still here, still waiting, still trying to prepare a local workforce for change. We ask you not to forget us and in the words of Hi Neighbour board member and retired coal miner, Darryl Best, “We have to change and ... to develop a new industry for these people to go into and those industries are going to be renewables.” without major renewables projects “There is no pathway and no obvious answer for those people”. It would be extremely disheartening for the Illawarra to be less supported in the energy transformation than other REZ locations by the misguided notion that this region will not be impacted. I refer to local energy specialist and University Of Wollongong and Hi Neighbour supporter Ty Christopher when he declared that coal workers in the Illawarra were facing the same future as miners in other REZ’s, he said "I think we need to be very careful not to be complacent about that because we are still subject with all coal industries to global markets and global market forces”.

There is a deep sadness for some of us working in this space locally that the promise of the REZ is yet to bear fruit for our seemingly forgotten region. While other regions stream ahead with projects in the 10’s we have nothing solid to speak of on the horizon. We are certainly hopeful that the Offshore Wind Farming zone will come to something but it seems there is a general feeling that proponents' interests have chilled to the point of inaction.

Fortunately for Hi Neighbour this is still a great deal of very fruitful work to do while we wait for major REZ projects. Local innovation in renewables is ripe with groups like Green Gravity, Hysata, Sicona and trailblazing actions like Electrify 2515. Heavy industry is also engaged around energy transformation with groups like Bluescope making their moves toward decarbonisation and supporting Hi Neighbour’s mission. There is certainly a great deal of work for Hi Neighbour to tackle in up-skilling local workers for renewable jobs. We forge ahead on a tiny budget doing the important, on the ground work to engage and prepare the community for energy transformation.

We know that our work is critical and there has been no State government engagement in the way one might expect given the weighty consideration and importance of declaring a REZ in a regional community. Given the NSW commitment to the Net Zero Plan, with the implementation driven by the Electricity Infrastructure Road Map one would hope groups like ours would be sought out and uplifted. Hi Neighbour welcomes partnership with the NSW government.

I have worked as a volunteer since the beginning of Hi Neighbour, I am uplifted by the generosity of other committed local volunteers, with wonderful local contract players stepping in when fundraising and philanthropic grants allow for modest, paid roles. It will be challenging for us to continue to operate with this anemic budget. With hope for the future and deep commitment to this region I appeal to this inquiry to remember the Illawarra as a viable and dynamic center for energy transition and know that those laying the ground work on a community level need more support to build social licence for future renewable projects. We would be delighted to collaborate with the state government as this inquiry looks to improve engagement with regional communities like ours.

We believe it is fair to expect good jobs and a livable climate and we are willing to work for it. We believe that there is vast industrial knowledge in our region that must be invested in for a highly skilled workforce for future renewables projects. We believe that actively pursuing the upskilling of women, gender diverse, First Nations and young people for careers in renewables will make for a dynamic and robust workforce that more equitably distributes the benefits of a renewables revolution across our community. For all of this to happen, we need the promise of large-scale renewables to be fulfilled and we need financial support for our work to help build from the ground up.

Thank you for considering my submission on behalf of Hi Neighbour as the Founding Director,