

Submission
No 37

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

Organisation: The Australian Workers' Union

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NSW Parliament Inquiry: Impact of Renewable Energy Zones on Rural and Regional Communities and Industries

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Summary of Recommendations



Establish a NSW Renewable Energy Industry Skills and Workforce Development Working Group



Expand and Protect Portable Long Service Leave



Develop a strategy to increase supply of skilled and local workers



Fair conditions and pay for REZ workers



Establishment of a strong NSW Jobs First Commission and framework



Implementation of fair procurement practices



Establishment of further REZs in strategic locations across rural and regional NSW

Introduction

The Australian Workers' Union (AWU) is one of Australia's largest unions, representing around 20,000 workers in New South Wales and 76,000 nationally. Since our formation in 1886, the AWU has continued to advocate for improved pay, conditions and job security across Australia. We are the union for metallurgy and materials manufacturing, with our members found at the steel mills, asphalt and cement plants and aluminium smelters that underpin our built environment. Our members in civil construction deliver the roads, railways and energy infrastructure that our cities and regions depend on. In fact, our presence is strong up and down the supply chain, from mines to steel mills. With significant representation in such industries the AWU has deep connections to the large-scale renewable projects that will power New South Wales for decades to come. Additionally, the AWU NSW maintains representation on the NSW Renewable Energy Sector Board and have been vocal advocates for increased investment in large-scale renewable projects, particularly where benefits are shared with rural and regional workers. [1] We therefore welcome this opportunity to further contribute to the continued development of an internationally competitive and fair renewable energy sector in NSW.

Potential Benefits of REZs

It is undeniable that Renewable Energy Zones (REZs) have the potential to create major local benefits – delivering cheaper, more reliable renewable energy while transforming entire regional economies in the process. In NSW alone, five of these 'modern-day power stations' have been earmarked for development: the Central-West Orana REZ, New England REZ, South West REZ, Hunter-Central Coast REZ and the Illawarra REZ.[2] According to updated estimates by the NSW Government's EnergyCo, expected costs can reach \$5.45 billion for a single REZ, making it one of the biggest investments into local and regional communities.[3] In the case of the Central-West Orana REZ, this figure is almost double the size of their entire local economy.[4]

Combined, these REZs represent a historic milestone in Australia's long journey toward a renewables-driven economy, standing shoulder to shoulder with the Snowy Hydro in scope and scale. But the creation of this industry must be built on solid foundations of best practices and high-quality jobs. This has not always been the case with instances of short-term contracts and precarious working conditions plaguing the initial phases of the renewable energy boom. These instances have led to an unfortunate conclusion by prominent scholars, that "not all green jobs are good jobs".[5]

We therefore believe that securing the opportunities and benefits from the construction of REZs is contingent on a fair and just development process with measures to ensure benefit sharing for regional workers. Only through regulatory and legislative improvements, including responsible and local procurement practices and investment into skills and long-term employment opportunities, can local communities and economies capitalise on the transformational opportunities that REZs create. In this submission, we outline a series of recommendations which can be applied to existing and

[1] Electricity Infrastructure Investment Act (2020). NSW Government. No 44. Available at: <https://legislation.nsw.gov.au/view/whole/html/inforce/current/act-2020-044#sec.7>

[2] Renewable energy zones (no date) EnergyCo. Available at: <https://www.energyco.nsw.gov.au/renewable-energy-zones> (Accessed: 21 November 2024).

[3] (2024) Central-West Orana Renewable Energy Zone. NSW Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water. Available at: <https://www.energyco.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-05/cwo-rez-public-report-infrastructure-planner-recommendation-may-2024.pdf> (Accessed: 21 November 2024).

[4] (2023) Mid-Western Regional Economic Development Strategy - 2023 update. Parramatta, NSW: Department of Regional NSW.

[5] Webber, S. and Bryant, G. (2023) The politics of an unsettled energy transition, The University of Sydney. Available at: <https://www.sydney.edu.au/sydney-environment-institute/news/2023/03/13/the-politics-of-an-unsettled-energy-transition.html> (Accessed: 21 November 2024).

future large-scale renewable projects in NSW. These recommendations will represent significant steps toward ensuring benefits to local communities and workers in regional NSW are maximised, during and beyond the development of the five proposed REZs.

With benefits to local communities and workers maximised and secured, we strongly support the development of the proposed REZs across NSW. Indeed, the AWU NSW encourages the creation of additional REZs across NSW in areas that are rich in critical minerals and relevant raw materials, multiplying the benefits to local workers, communities and economies.

‘Current and projected supply and demand levels of ... human resources required’

Labour and skills shortages are by far the most significant and common barrier to the fair and just construction of REZs.[6] This issue is exacerbated by the fact that REZs are located in rural and regional areas, with much of the work done in remote areas of NSW.

A 2022 report by the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), commissioned by the NSW Government, into the barriers and challenges faced in the construction of REZs in NSW found that skills shortages ranked as the most common constraint to businesses capitalising on the economic opportunities created by renewable infrastructure projects.[7] When asked, “stakeholders identified crucial skills shortages for specific trades and professions” – many of which are specialised for the renewables sector. [8] These include windfarm maintenance personnel, transmission line workers and, importantly, construction workers. Indeed, far more attention must be paid to the importance of construction workers as discourse has tended to focus on specialists up to this point. Some key drivers of labour shortages within the renewable energy sector include the conditions of employment, making jobs comparatively unattractive for trainees and prospective specialists. Features of work in the renewable energy sector include short-duration projects and frequent mobility of labour. This means workers would lose out on employment entitlements, such as long service leave, that would otherwise be available in the building construction industry, making jobs in renewable projects less attractive.

Lack of funding and accessible opportunities for training and upskilling is another key driver of skills shortages. Here, too, a lack of coordination within the sector exacerbates the issue as industry levies and training funds are not pooled within the industry and thus, unable to meet the high costs needed to set up specialist training.[9] This is an issue that has stifled the fledgling renewable energy industry more broadly, with Tasmania having encountered the same issue when developing their own Energy Industry Workforce Development Plan in 2020: “the industry does not currently have a collective vision of itself, and there is a need for an organised, long-term and unified approach with strategies and ideas that are supported by industry”. [10] In regional areas where demand for specialist training is low and spread out, a ‘thin market’, costs are particularly high and present a significant disincentive for private training

[6] Briggs, C., Atherton, A., Langdon, R., et al. (2022) Employment, Skills and Supply Chains: Renewable Energy in NSW – Final Report. rep. University of Technology Sydney and SGS Economics and Planning. Available at: <https://opus.lib.uts.edu.au/bitstream/10453/180627/2/employment-skills-and-supply-chains-renewable-energy-in-nsw-final-report.pdf> (Accessed: 21 November 2024). P.89.

[7] Ibid p.90

[8] Ibid p.90

[9] Ibid p.91

[10] (2020) The Tasmanian Energy Industry Workforce Development Plan 2020 to 2027. Tasmanian Energy and Infrastructure Workforce Advisory Committee. Available at:

https://www.skills.tas.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/274903/Workforce_Development_Plan_for_the_Tasmanian_Energy_Sector_Stage_1.pdf (Accessed: 21 November 2024). P.7.

organisations to operate in such communities.[11] Meanwhile, public training organisations such as TAFE are unable to supply the demand for specialist training due to historic and recent cuts to funding.[12]

Short and unclear timeframes of construction phases can also act as a disincentive for developers to take on apprentices and invest in training.[13] These boom-bust development cycles are particularly pronounced in regional and rural communities, where the five REZs are proposed to be built. In the case of the Central-West Orana REZ, a study found that employment would ratchet up to a peak construction workforce of 3,000.[14] This number is even greater in the New England REZ, reaching 5,000 before falling to a much smaller number of ongoing maintenance workers.[15] These troughs would see employment cut by 80%, meaning most jobs would be short-term and thus, unappealing for specialists given the high costs of relocation to regional and rural areas.[16]

Solutions to this skills shortage for existing and future REZs, as well as other large scale renewable infrastructure projects, must therefore consider the aforementioned underlying factors.

Recommendation: Establish a NSW Renewable Energy Industry Skills and Workforce Development Working Group

One of the key drivers of skills shortages in the renewable energy industry, made evident during the development of five REZs in regional and rural NSW, is the lack of training opportunities exacerbated by poor coordination within the sector. This group would be comprised of unions, training providers, industry representatives and representatives from relevant LGAs.

Working under the Renewable Energy Sector Board, the Working Group would provide more local and qualitative insights, monitoring development of REZs and local implications.

The NSW Government has a critical role to play as a central body to facilitate cooperation and communication across renewable energy infrastructure projects, with the aim of:

- developing strategies that have support and alignment across the renewable energy industry in NSW,
- improving communication between infrastructure projects (i.e. REZs) within NSW to assist with workforce mobility and redeployment across boom-bust cycles,
- identifying needs and opportunities for workforce and skills (including transferable skills) development,
- identifying opportunities to expand existing training programs, such as Legacy 100,
- identifying and creating long-term employment opportunities for workers within the renewable energy sector beyond boom-bust cycles,
- assess implementation of training and workforce development strategies.

[11] Briggs, C., Atherton, A., Gill, J., et al. (2022) 'Building a "fair and fast" energy transition? renewable energy employment, skill shortages and social licence in regional areas', *Renewable and Sustainable Energy Transition*, 2. doi:10.1016/j.rset.2022.100039.

[12] Wheelahan, L. (2024) TAFE cuts will affect everyone: State governments should think again, *The Conversation*. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/tafe-cuts-will-affect-everyone-state-governments-should-think-again-9687> (Accessed: 21 November 2024).

[13] Briggs, C., Atherton, A., Langdon, R., et al. (2022) *Employment, Skills and Supply Chains: Renewable Energy in NSW - Final Report*. rep. University of Technology Sydney and SGS Economics and Planning. Available at: <https://opus.lib.uts.edu.au/bitstream/10453/180627/2/employment-skills-and-supply-chains-renewable-energy-in-nsw-final-report.pdf> (Accessed: 21 November 2024). P.91.

[14] Briggs, C., Atherton, A., Gill, J., et al. (2022) 'Building a "fair and fast" energy transition? renewable energy employment, skill shortages and social licence in regional areas', *Renewable and Sustainable Energy Transition*, 2. doi:10.1016/j.rset.2022.100039.

[15] Ibid

[16] Ibid

Recommendation: Expand and Protect Portable Long Service Leave

Unattractive working conditions, partially created and exacerbated due to boom-bust and short-term employment cycles, mean workers are less incentivized to invest in the skills that the construction of REZs require. With a high degree of mobility, workers often lose out on accrued benefits such as long service leave that would otherwise be offered in traditional construction jobs.

With the construction sector already covered by portable long service leave, more must be done to expand the scheme to maintenance workers and other workers involved in the construction of REZs.

Recommendation: Develop a Strategy to Increase Supply of Skilled and Local Workers

Directly addressing the immediate skilled labour shortage in REZ sites is a priority to meet construction timeframes and mitigate the risk of future cost blowouts. Further, investment in upskilling and developing a skilled local workforce can help reduce community backlash over renewable projects through benefit sharing and thus, building the social license of REZ projects. We therefore recommend that the NSW Government develop a strategy to increase the supply of skilled and local workers (including supporting existing programs such as Legacy 100), in partnership with industry, RTOs, TAFE and universities for the following occupations:

- Engineers
- Wind and solar farm technicians
- Construction workers

Recommendation: Fair Conditions and Pay for REZ Workers

With unfair, unclear and unappealing working conditions being a key cause of skilled worker shortages in rural and regional REZ projects, the AWU NSW recommends that the NSW Government oversees the following on worksites:

- Compliance with industrial relations law, WHS standards and other legal obligations to its workforce,
- Implement industry standard for 'same job same pay', and
- Limited use of labour hire and casual employees.



‘Adequacy of the shared benefits being offered to neighbours of large-scale renewable projects’

REZs are among the biggest single investments in local communities and economies, as well as domestic industries. In fact, the cost of a single REZ could be double the size of their nearest local economy.[17] In order to secure and maximise these benefits for local communities, responsible and local procurement policies must first be implemented and enforced across the supply chain. Strong local content representation up and down the supply chain in mineral processing, manufacturing and maintenance can contribute to increased industry across neighbouring regions and, importantly, across the state.[18] Additionally, maximising local benefit sharing will also help projects gain social license with local communities in the face of significant physical, geographic and economic changes.

In response to the NSW Government’s inquiry into procurement practices of government agencies, we expressed our view that procurement “is a powerful yet sorely underutilised tool of government”. [19] As discussed in that submission, key barriers to the realisation of such responsible procurement practices include inadequacies of current NSW Government procurement policies in how they define ‘value for money’, lack of coordination towards local content goals and poor enforcement mechanisms. The Victorian Government’s Local Jobs First is an example of strong local procurement policies and their benefits to local communities.[20] Commenced in 2014, Local Jobs First includes the following key components: the Local Jobs First Policy (comprised of the Victorian Industry Participation Policy and Major Projects Skills Guarantee) and the Local Jobs First Act 2003 (including its establishment of a Local Jobs First Commissioner).[21]

In the Victorian Industry Participation Policy (VIPPP), SMEs are given full and fair opportunities to compete for Victorian Government contracts by embedding consideration toward local industry capability and local content requirements into Local Jobs First projects. Similarly, the Major Projects Skills Guarantee (MPSG) mandates the use of Victorian apprentices, including for inputs manufactured externally.[22]

In its first seven years, this policy had resoundingly delivered on its promise of local industry and job growth, celebrating 40,000 statewide jobs created in 2021.[23] During this period, 200 identified Local Jobs First Strategic Projects had local content requirements set, representing a combined value of \$100 billion.[24] Critically, in addition to these benefits, the Local Jobs First policy grew Victoria’s sovereign capabilities and shielded the state from international supply chain disruptions as the COVID-19 pandemic exhausted domestic supplies of medical-grade equipment and products.[25]

[17] (2023) Mid-Western Regional Economic Development Strategy - 2023 update. Parramatta, NSW: Department of Regional NSW.

[18] Briggs, C., Atherton, A., Langdon, R., et al. (2022) Employment, Skills and Supply Chains: Renewable Energy in NSW - Final Report. rep. University of Technology Sydney and SGS Economics and Planning. Available at: <https://opus.lib.uts.edu.au/bitstream/10453/180627/2/employment-skills-and-supply-chains-renewable-energy-in-nsw-final-report.pdf> (Accessed: 21 November 2024). P.74

[19] (2024b) NSW Parliament Inquiry: Procurement practices of government agencies in NSW. publication. Granville, NSW: Australian Workers’ Union NSW Branch. P.1

[20] (2021) Local Jobs First Annual Report 2020-21. Available at: https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Flocaljobsfirst.vic.gov.au%2F__data%2Fassets%2Fword_doc%2F0025%2F179026%2FLocal-Jobs-First-Annual-Report-to-Parliament-2020-21-docx-353-kb.docx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK (Accessed: 21 November 2024).

[21] (2022) Local Jobs First Policy. Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions. Available at: https://localjobsfirst.vic.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0022/190093/Local-Jobs-First-Policy-October-2022.pdf (Accessed: 21 November 2024).

[22] Ibid p.3

[23] (2021) Local Jobs First Annual Report 2020-21. Available at: https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Flocaljobsfirst.vic.gov.au%2F__data%2Fassets%2Fword_doc%2F0025%2F179026%2FLocal-Jobs-First-Annual-Report-to-Parliament-2020-21-docx-353-kb.docx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK (Accessed: 21 November 2024).

[24] Ibid P.1

[25] Ibid P.1

In stark comparison, the NSW Government's approach to procurement – including a ban on local content requirements for Government contracts - during this period led to major controversies with imported ferries that couldn't travel under bridges and light rail carriages that cracked when running on local lines.[26]

While the Minns-Labor Government's commitment to reinvest in local procurement practices and redefine the principle of 'value for money' is admirable, we believe that the NSW Government can and should adopt a more ambitious approach with the five proposed REZs. Indeed, it is our view that the need to simply provide an explanation as part of the Government's 'If not, why not' rules do not secure the potential economic and cultural benefits that REZs can share with local communities.[27]

Recommendation: Establishment of a Strong NSW Jobs First Commission and Framework

Announced during the 2023 NSW Election, then-Opposition Leader Chris Minns MP committed to the establishment of an NSW Jobs First Commission. Informed by the successes of Victoria's Local Jobs First, we recommend the following measures to ensure the establishment of a strong Jobs First Commission:

- Development of a NSW Industry Participation Plan that explicitly outlines minimum content requirements and sets out measures to ensure local SMEs have full and fair opportunities to compete for Government contracts,
- Development of a NSW Future Skills Guarantee that outlines participation requirements for NSW trainees, apprentices and cadets in identified projects and importantly, their supply chains,
- Appointment of a Jobs First Commissioner with strong and effective punitive powers to ensure enforcement of procurement policies, and
- Empowerment of Jobs First Commission to effectively monitor and enforce procurement policies.

In the implementation and development of a NSW Future Skills Guarantee, consideration must be given to ensure that businesses do not solely rely on or exploit trainees or apprentices to avoid paying skilled workers. The NSW Jobs First Commission and Framework must therefore consider undertaking compliance and monitoring responsibilities.

Recommendation: Implementation of Fair Procurement Practices

To ensure fair procurement practices that secures benefit sharing to local workers and communities, we recommend the following actions:

- Alignment of procurement policy to consider a supplier's compliance with industrial relations laws and legal obligations to their workforce,
- Requirement for all building materials used in government projects to comply with relevant product standards,
- Ensure that all purchasing decisions consider economic and employment outcomes to NSW and implications for sovereign capability, and
- Implementation of strong and effective monitoring and enforcement measures.

[26] (2024b) NSW Parliament Inquiry: Procurement practices of government agencies in NSW. publication. Granville, NSW: Australian Workers' Union NSW Branch. P.2

[27] (2024) Supporting local jobs, boosting local businesses with Jobs First Commission and 'If not, why not' government spending rules [Preprint]. Available at: <https://www.nsw.gov.au/media-releases/supporting-local-jobs-boosting-local-businesses-jobs-first-commission> (Accessed: 21 November 2024).

‘Historical, current and projected future financial costs associated with the construction and maintenance’

As demand for renewable energy continues to fuel large-scale infrastructure projects in NSW, long term planning must commence to grow and capitalize on Australia’s potential to become a renewable energy superpower. We therefore strongly recommend the NSW Government use the five announced REZs as proof of concept and begin exploration for future sites. In doing so, the NSW Government must consider the economic and financial benefits of co-location with critical minerals supply and manufacturing sites.

Port Kembla and the Illawarra REZ represents a useful case study of how co-location can provide economic and logistic benefits. The Illawarra REZ is slated to produce 10 gigawatts of energy alone.[28] A 2023 study looks into the Illawarra REZ as a case study for the economic opportunities of regional offshore wind projects: “existing steelmaking capacity positions the region to play a key role in supply chains for local and potentially national projects”.[29]

In particular, the article notes that the Illawarra is “host to Australia’s largest industrial-infrastructure complex at Port Kembla” and that “the Illawarra’s skilled industrial workforce and steelmaking capabilities are seen as central to the development of an offshore wind facility locally”.[30] This is especially important given a single offshore wind turbine would require approximately 3,000 tonnes of steel and each offshore wind project 300,000 tonnes.[31] For Australia’s largest steel manufacturer, Illawarra’s BlueScope steel works, this alone represents 10% of current annual steel production.[32] However, it must be noted that BlueScope currently is only capable of producing bases and due to the limitation of Australia’s renewables manufacturing capabilities, importing components may be necessary in the short term. Here too, the Government must play a role to invest in domestic manufacturing capacity.

Unsurprisingly, co-location of steel works with manufacturing facilities and the REZ itself yields significant economic and logistical benefits for the project itself, while local content rules could ensure that opportunities created stay local. Future REZs must capitalize on opportunities for co-location, expanding the benefits that they can produce for regional and domestic communities.

It must be noted that a key challenge remains acute labour supply shortages, exacerbated by structural and geographical constraints. Already, the Illawarra region faces low unemployment levels, reflecting the fact that the labour market – as it currently stands – faces capacity constraints in the short term without significant reforms to grow.[33] While there is the potential for workers in sunseting industries such as fossil-fuel energy production to move towards jobs created by the REZ, it could only occur with significant investment and high levels of attrition.

[28] Larkin, N., Carr, C. and Klocker, N. (2023) ‘Building an offshore wind sector in Australia: Economic opportunities and constraints at the regional scale’, *Australian Geographer*, 55(1), pp. 45–68. doi:10.1080/00049182.2023.2276144.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid.

Recommendation: Establishment of Further REZs in Strategic Locations Across Rural and Regional NSW

With the benefits of REZs for communities, workers and economies both locally and across the state firmly established, we recommend the NSW Government begin exploring additional sites with a view to maximise benefit sharing by looking at REZs as potential vertically integrated renewable manufacturing hubs. To enable the expansion of REZ projects, the Government must also consider investment in manufacturing capabilities by domestic manufacturers.

We believe this can be achieved through collocation with one or more of the following:

- Critical minerals and metals supply,
- Metalliferous processing sites, and
- Manufacturing sites and facilities.



More Information

The AWU NSW views the development of REZs across NSW's regional and rural communities as an opportunity to invest in local workforces, create new skilled employment opportunities and develop local economies. For this reason, we strongly support the development of the five proposed REZs while noting the importance of a fair and just process. We would welcome the opportunity to contribute further to the inquiry and respond to further queries regarding this submission.

Please contact Kai He, Researcher and Political Campaigner at the Australian Workers' Union NSW Branch, at _____ or _____.

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(2021) Local Jobs First Annual Report 2020-21. Available at: https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Flocaljobsfirst.vic.gov.au%2F__data%2Fassets%2Fword_doc%2F0025%2F179026%2FLocal-Jobs-First-Annual-Report-to-Parliament-2020-21-docx-353-kb.docx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK (Accessed: 21 November 2024).

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