

Submission
No 47

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

Organisation: Sydney Knitting Nannas

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The Sydney Knitting Nannas and Friends are committed to the Australian achievement of real zero emissions from fossil fuel mining and use. We believe this is the only way to ensure a safe future environment for our children and grandchildren. Our group of 70 senior women and friends living across Greater Sydney are in regular contact with and travel to many regional areas, including Narrabri and the upper Darling River.. There are 20 Knitting Nannas groups across NSW and 20 more in other states.

We welcome the opportunity to make a submission on this vitally important topic. The NSW government has made some excellent progress towards its goals however recent reports of projections for NSW's emissions reductions show that the targets for 2030 and 2035 will not be reached! It is clear from recent energy crises in NSW that our aging coal fire power stations are becoming ever more costly and unreliable.

The timely rollout of renewables, if done with appropriate community consultation, seems to us as concerned citizens to have only positive results: reduction in the direction of climate change and its consequent impact on the land, water and air, economic benefits to communities and reduction in energy prices. As we reach 100% renewables, in Australia our energy will be sovereign and world oil and gas shocks will not be able to destroy household budgets as we have witnessed in the current cost of living crisis.

We commend efforts to improve the REZ system but urge decision makers to ensure the pace of the renewable roll out is not delayed in any way and indeed allows the pace to increase as we are living in a climate emergency, as the IPCC has made abundantly clear.

We wish to make the following detailed points, which address only those of your terms of reference relevant to our concerns:

1. current and projected socioeconomic, cultural, agricultural and environmental impacts of projects within renewable energy zones in New South Wales including the cumulative impacts. [your term of reference (a)]

Socioeconomic impacts

The current rollout of renewables is already delivering socioeconomic benefits to communities and it is clear that lessons are being learnt by best practice of those proposals which have had good consultation with local communities. Understanding the aspirations and concerns of communities can lead to agreements that benefit all concerned. Predictions of growth and prosperity in REZ areas are very promising. Modelling by the Regional Australia Institute shows that up to \$68 billion in economic activity could be generated across Australia by 2030 from large scale wind and solar projects.

On the other hand, continual updates from the IPCC indicate not just NSW but across Australia the serious economic, social and environmental impacts of not taking action will be devastating.

Agricultural impacts

Already we are witnessing how farmers and landholders have been able to increase their income to further invest in their enterprises or stabilise or diversify their intermittent income streams. Predictions are that \$2.6 – \$3.3 billion between 2024-2050 in direct landholder payments will be generated. Examples of farmers innovating are coming to light through the renewable roll out. For example, the co-existence of solar panels and sheep farming enhancing the bottom line for both enterprises.

Environmental impacts

The greatest threat to the environment in NSW and across the globe is inaction on climate change. Rolling out renewables therefore is a meaningful response to our global crisis. Renewable developments do have impacts on nature and planning guidelines need to be implemented to ensure the highest standards with the least possible environmental impact for each development.

Current laws recently passed and now implemented such as the NSW Biodiversity Conservation Amendment (Biodiversity Offsets Scheme) Bill 2024 are a step towards integrity in our duty of care to protect the environment for future generations. There needs to be vigilance that loopholes are not created for corporations to create projects that compromise on the goal of the least possible environmental impact and the compensating enhancement of the environment (elsewhere?).

2. Post-mining opportunities for land use and for workers [included as 'cumulative impacts' in your term of reference (a)]

We recognise that many regional communities fear loss of employment and economic security in the transition away from mining. We believe that the transition away from coal mining and the development of renewable energy zones in areas like the Hunter and the Illawarra can offer great opportunities for both strengthening employment opportunities and increasing biodiversity outcomes.

We strongly encourage post-mining development plans that will both increase biodiversity outcomes and increase employment opportunities for working people in local communities. The success of renewable energy zones will require the participation of many working people and we urge the government to commit resources to the employment of local people in REZ clean energy industries – including retraining where necessary for both technical and leadership roles. Just as strongly, we support the employment of local people in development which will increase biodiversity within the REZ. In order to achieve the most extensive increase in both biodiversity and employment, we urge the government to ensure that mining companies do not evade their obligations (as set out in their mining development consents) for fully rehabilitating all the land covered by their mining leases.

3. Community Consultation and Engagement [your term of reference (i)]

We urge the State Government to ensure that all REZ developments are PRECEDED by genuine community consultation of all sectors of the local communities involved. We regard this as essential to effective REZ planning and development. Rural and regional communities are composed of a number of varied cultural groups and all of them need to be included in early consultation – well before development begins – in which community opinions are genuinely sought. We will stress that there may be barriers to this early communication, such as language differences or technology differences (such as lack of internet access), and these must be addressed in order to ensure early and genuine community consultation.

It is of particular importance that First Nations groups in rural and regional communities (including towns) are consulted early and effectively. Social and political tensions in rural and regional areas have often limited the flow of information to First Nations groups and, given the long interest First Nations peoples have had with environmental concerns, it is of particular importance that they are consulted in the early stages of any REZ development. For these reasons also, it is important that both local communities and wider First Nations

organisations are involved in this consultation. For the purposes of the NSW Government, an important body with which to be in full consultation is the First Nations Clean Energy Network (<https://www.firstnationscleanenergy.org.au>) which is a network of community organisations, land councils, technical advisors, legal experts and others, led by a steering group including cultural elders.

We submit that while early consultation is essential for all groups, it is just as essential that such consultation be meaningful. Developers must demonstrate their commitment to continuing consultation and to encouraging community participation in development as both workers and advisers. We believe that community participation is essential to ensure that all REZ projects are subject to ongoing assessment and improvement based on continuing community consultation.

4. Nuclear power as an alternative to large scale wind and solar renewable energy sources [your term of reference (h)]

We are committed to supporting urgent action to reduce emissions and achieve net zero by 2050. We recognise that NSW is well underway with this process. We see a mixture of utility scale renewables, rooftop solar, large-scale and household batteries will be needed to achieve a reliable energy system. We believe that solar and wind-powered renewable energy will offer the most effective means to achieve the goal of net zero.

We are deeply opposed to the use of nuclear energy – including ‘small modular reactors’ – being used as alternatives to wind and solar renewables. We believe nuclear energy generation will worsen climate change impacts by delaying the renewable energy transition and furthering the lifetime of polluting coal-fired and gas-fired power generation. We believe that nuclear energy is a dangerous distraction from the commitment the current Federal and State governments have made to furthering the pace of the renewable energy rollout.

5. Future visitation to rural and regional areas with REZ [your term of reference (g)]

We submit that planning for REZ must include planning for increased biodiversity and for guaranteed rehabilitation of all fossil-fuel mined land. These two measures will INCREASE visitation to regional areas with REZ in place which have altered land use.

We recognise the fears of remote and regional communities that REZ will undermine employment in former mining areas and alter land use in agricultural areas which may reduce visitation.

It is therefore essential that all planning and development of REZ mandates full rehabilitation of all previous fossil fuel mining leases to ensure increases in biodiversity. The Clean Energy Council has shown that less than 0.027% of land used for agricultural production would be needed to power the whole of the eastern states through solar projects. So the amount of land affected at all would be minimal. And even on that, there are ample examples of the continuation of existing agricultural practices alongside renewable energy infrastructure.

To allay remaining concerns, we urge the state government to undertake strategic siting of renewable energy projects onto degraded land or in locations that minimise disruption to continuing enjoyment of rural and regional visitation sites.

Submitted by

Professor Emerita Heather Goodall

and Cathy Gill

On behalf of the Sydney Knitting Nannas