

Submission
No 57

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

Organisation: Climate Action and REEACH groups of Sustainable Living
Armidale

Date Received: 31 January 2025

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To: The Inquiry into the impact of Renewable Energy Zones (REZs) on rural and regional communities and industries in New South Wales

On behalf of Climate Action and Sustainable Living Armidale (SLA) and our focus working group Renewable Energy, Education, Advocacy and Community Health (REEACH), we thank you for the opportunity to provide this submission.

Who are REEACH?

In September 2022, we formed an action group called Renewable Energy, Education, Advocacy and Community Health (REEACH). This grew out of the Climate Action group of Sustainable Living Armidale and with a specific focus on engaging with Renewable Energy development on the ground living in the activated New England Renewable Energy Zone (NE REZ).

The objectives of REEACH includes renewable energy education and literacy, advocacy, community benefit, community ownership, and community resilience. We are about enabling/promoting good action locally, facilitating community engagement from ordinary citizens in public policy and planning with a view that attention to environmental health in all decision making is the bedrock for achieving community health. See <https://slarmidale.org/energy>

The group aims to play both an educative and advocative role for our community and within the NE REZ. Its goal is to support a vision for renewables that will benefit our communities and their well-being, provide opportunities for us all to participate, and ensure that the REZ will be regenerative and enhance sustainability rather than follow an extractive industry model.

The Convenor of Climate Action Armidale, Ms. Annette Kilarr has recently been appointed to the Community Reference Group of the New England REZ (North). The Convenor of the REEACH, Dr. Sanaz Alian -is a University of New England(UNE) lecturer in Urban and Regional Planning. Both groups have been collaborating over the past 3 years with the Community Power Agency (CPA) and networking and/or collaborating with Uralla ZNET, UNE Smart Region Incubator (SRI), Armidale Regional Council (ARC), New England Visions 2030, EnergyCo, DPIE, AEMC, UNE Renewable Energy Hub, Armidale Regional Ratepayers Association, Armidale Tree Group, StringyBark Ecological, the Black Gully Festival Committee and Sustainable Living Armidale holds a monthly climate conversations stall at the PCYC Sunday markets here in Armidale.

Key Recommendations to the Inquiry:

Recommendation 1. There is a need for an **accessible presence on the ground** in the New England so that our townsfolk and rural residents have places where REZ info and renewable energy generation info more generally is disseminated and where they can go to ask questions, access information, get involved and be heard. Both connected to our local government services and a voice up to State, DPIE and EnergyCo, and ideally across

other agencies, resourced and independent. This could be through the ordinance of an initiative such as [Local Energy Hubs](#).

Recommendation 2. Sufficient notice of consultation activities and much better dissemination of **notice through community networks** including local government channels is needed. An emphasis on involving the community rather than simply informing. Taking the whole community along as cumulative impacts and opportunities are understood or develop, rather than simply a landholder by landholder approach.

Recommendation 3. Programs to directly engage and enable **households, farms, communities and businesses to pursue renewables as well** – creating an energy shift where there are many access points for people to be part of the transition rather than it being simply an impost to be mitigated. Support for localised energy and transmission literacy and a circular economy (through an initiative such as [Local Energy Hubs](#)).

Recommendation 4. Governments address misinformation about the energy transition by funding broad community awareness and education programs with trusted institutions about energy systems/ technologies and the need for energy transition.

Recommendation 5. Understanding that the REZ is an impact both from renewable energy developments and an altering transmission landscape is complex. While these two areas for development may have different policy and government processes this needs to be taken into account by the NE REZ communications, engagements and State systems, **the general public see it as one force of energy transition.**

Recommendation 6. Resources need to be allocated to coordinate the many different organisations needed to turn what is currently an infrastructure construction project into a regional development project. In other words community engagement needs to be developed across government agencies not simply the energy or planning components of the public service. A concerted focus is required on networking and hosting strategic discussion to bring the large number of organisations needed on the ground together, perhaps this role could be hosted through the RDA network or other Federal agency but with an emphasis on the staff being located locally. NSW State government has both an advocacy and direct role to play here also.

Recommendation 7: Local communities need to be facilitated for involvement in their future and all development. Local knowledge needs to be accessed early and in an ongoing fashion. Developers should not be encouraged to have a fly in fly out approach but rather a long-term connection to community should be the expectation and norm.

Recommendation 8: Renewable Energy Community Benefit Frameworks are a significant part of the kind of community and partnership building that we need in this context. This area needs more work –

- a) the governance mechanisms here need to both involve both communities and local government (not local government- or State- alone)
- b) the regulatory requirements from development proponents needs to establish social relationships between communities and proponents understood as a long-term (and intergenerational) process and commitment, not a one-off benefit that is negotiated at construction and not visited again.

Recommendation 9. Supplement community engagement and benefit sharing practices with initiatives (such as [Local Energy Hubs](#)) to support communities to engage in REZ consultation processes, and enhance best-practice standards and a ‘race to the top’ for benefit sharing and community co-ownership of renewable energy assets across NSW

NOTE: The above Recommendations 1-9 refer predominantly to the Inquiry Terms of Reference items a),c), f), h) and i)

Recommendation 10. The Community Power Agency has been engaged with our community

for at least the past 4 years and has strong expertise and knowledge of the issues here on the ground. The submission that they have prepared for this Inquiry is comprehensive a very clearly articulates concerns and solutions within the specifics of the Inquiry. We highly recommend the submission of the Community Power Agency and strongly support the 40 Recommendations made in that submission .

NOTE: The above Recommendation 10 refers to the Inquiry Terms of Reference items a) through to k) inclusive.

Recommendation 11. The Nature Conservation Council of NSW (NCC) has worked with our members and key community stakeholders in the New England and Hunter REZs to develop policy recommendations for the NSW government. These recommendations will ensure a timely rollout of renewable energy generation, storage, and transmission across the REZs that benefits both nature and communities. Climate Action and REEACH of Sustainable Living are signatory to this statement and we highly recommend and support the 4 Recommendations therein and the statement *Strengthening NSW Renewable Energy Zones: Joint policy recommendations to improve outcomes for nature and communities* to the Inquiry.

NOTE: The above Recommendation 11 refers predominantly the Inquiry Terms of Reference items a),g), h) and i)

Further information about Climate Action and REEACH of SLA and as relevant to the Recommendations

Since its inception REEACH has made submissions to:

- ☐ ARC draft Renewable Energy Action Plan (REAP), September 2022.
- ☐ Draft Network Infrastructure Strategy for NSW prepared by EnergyCo, September 2022
- ☐ ARC draft Renewable Energy Community Benefit Sharing Framework, September 2023
- ☐ AEIC Review of Community Engagement Practices – October 2023
- ☐ ARC draft Renewable Energy Community Benefit Sharing Framework - revised, October 2024
- ☐ ARC draft Armidale Region Community Plan 2025-2034 – January 2025

Key Learnings from Climate Action and the REEACH groups around the REZ and renewable energy - September 2022 – 2024

Over this past two years the key learnings that we have made include the following:

- ☐ The complexities as to which jurisdictions each level of Government is responsible for in creating a cohesive energy transition and as it relates to both the energy systems and planning systems is at best challenging to understand and at worst confusing, unhelpful and illogical.
- ☐ Generally, energy literacy by the general public is not high. Rather than just expecting to “turn the lights on” there is an opportunity here to advance a more energy educated public who can adapt, create opportunities and efficiencies and have community ownership of and inter-generational connection to the

renewable energy resource transition with cohesive community benefit orientation from renewable energy developers and the transmission line provider.

- ② While we have come to see that the REZ involves impact from both renewable energy developments and an altering energy transmission landscape this is a highly complex and technically dense arena, the general public see it as one **behemoth force** of energy transition and in the lack of clarity often respond with frustration accordingly.
- ② There is a strong anti-renewable sentiment developing often now with a “pro-nuclear” solution. This space is often difficult to navigate and particularly when misinformation or non-contextualised statements of “fact” are left un-checked. There are a large number of engaged stakeholders more interested in the question and action towards “how do we create a space for voices of engagement and problem solving” and who are actively in support of the energy transition, specifically in the agricultural space. However, when community engagement has not been done well and when there is uncertainty around environmental concerns, community/social engagement concerns including First Nations concerns all coming to the forefront and utilised within a “threat framework” by those with a straight “anti-renewable stance” this can be a very difficult space. – Proactive government assistance in fact checking, contextualization of claims of “harm” and demonstration of a solutions approach are very important here.
- ② Community engagement opportunities that we have found presented by EnergyCo and DPIE often do not give sufficient notice to get involved. Notification, - where it does appear - does not often come through our local government or community channels effectively if at all. There has been improvement in the year 2024 however there is room for more.
- ② Community engagement that we have experienced is predominantly understood by the relevant authorities as telling of “information” process rather than one of genuine involvement and engagement in problem solving for “wicked problems” utilising local knowledge bases.
- ② Currently, at a Federal Level and thus also across the States, we lack an overarching national narrative that gives households and communities the ability to see themselves as part of the energy transformation and to understand the critical need for transmission for energy security and climate action. Rather than seeing themselves as agents and beneficiaries in the transition, people often see it as something happening to them, their friends and families, with impacts that need to be mitigated. The fact that households that have bought into solar have the prospect of that solar being worth nothing when returned to the grid has also not been helpful.
- ② Renewable Energy Community Benefit Frameworks are a significant part of the kind of community and partnership building that we need in this context. This area needs more work –
 - a) the governance mechanisms here need to involve both communities and local government (not local government- or State- alone)
 - b) the regulatory requirements from development proponents needs to establish social relationships between communities and proponents understood as a long-term (and intergenerational) process and commitment, not a one-off benefit that is negotiated at construction and not visited again.
- ② Communities require a coordinated approach to training, workforce capability building, procurement and accommodation strategies that is supportive of people of low socio-economic background and facilitates economic opportunity across the

region. It is imperative community engagement processes are designed to view local stakeholders as valuable contributors and recognise the work that locally-based organisations are already undertaking.

- ☐ We have noted that the work of EnergyCo in embracing a more wholistic approach (beyond a poles and wires approach) to the cumulative impacts of numerous developments has been stepped up in a positive fashion in the year 2024. This work should continue and be supported across the relevant NSW government portfolios (health, education, housing, training, the environment etc). Most importantly the framing and incentivization that is required needs to embrace the idea of cumulative *opportunities* which will best be facilitated by the strategic coordination or aggregation of benefit sharing programs in REZs, referred to as regional benefit sharing.

Additional Climate Action and REEACH actions of note

- ☐ The Climate Action and REEACH group has supported and participated in the establishment of the New England Biodiversity Reference Group, facilitated by the CPA community engagement coordinator Heidi McEInea. In 2023, this group developed draft recommendations for EnergyCo and prospective developers in relation to biodiversity protection along planned development and construction of transmission lines with further meeting with EnergyCo in 2024. See <https://slarmidale.org/2023/08/18976>
- ☐ Members of the Climate Action and REEACH group were consulted in by CPA, Stringybark Ecological and UNE to develop a [Guide to Building Better Biodiversity on Solar Farms](#), outlining innovative strategies to enhance biodiversity and integrate regenerative farming practices within solar energy projects.
- ☐ The Nature Conservation Council of NSW (NCC) has worked with our members and key community stakeholders in the New England and Hunter REZs to develop policy recommendations for the NSW government. Titled *Strengthening NSW Renewable Energy Zones: Joint policy recommendations to improve outcomes for nature and communities*, this statement is planned be taken to Macquarie Street MPs in March this year. NCC has made a submission to this Inquiry incorporating that statement.
- ☐ Recently CPA on behalf of SLA (and “Electrify Armidale for a Renewable Energy Future”), were successful in our grant application to the Foundation for Rural Regional Renewal (FRRR). We will receive \$20,000 for the year 2025 to support our project ‘Armidale Community-Driven Shift to Renewable Energy and Sustainability’. The Foundation for Rural Regional Renewal (FRRR) has awarded grants for projects that will empower rural communities across Australia to adopt practices and solutions that reduce emissions and address the impacts of climate change and demonstrating how local NFPs and community organisations want to play a bigger role in creating sustainable and enduring climate solutions for their communities.

Conclusion

We thank you for the opportunity to make this submission to the Upper House committee for regional NSW’s Inquiry into the impact of REZs on rural and regional communities and industries in NSW.

We would welcome the opportunity to follow up and provide additional detail on any of the points made herein, either in person at an Inquiry hearing, or in writing.

Kind regards,

Annette Kilarr
Convenor Climate Action of Sustainable Living Armidale (SLA)

Sanaz Alian
Convenor Renewable Energy, Education Advocacy and Community Health (REEACH) of SLA



We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of this land and pay our respects to elders past, present and emerging. Our community pays tribute to their love of land, love of people and love of culture.