

**Submission
No 80**

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

Name: Mr Nigel Roberts

Date Received: 29 January 2025

Nigel Roberts

B. Sci Ag Hons (University Of Sydney)

The Hon. Mark Banasiak,
NSW Parliament

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

Thankyou for providing me the opportunity to outline the impacts the CW REZ has had on my family, my business and the greater community in this area. The past 3 years has been nothing but horrific. The mental toll from living in this area has been enormous. It has made the business of farming which is what my family and I purchased this property 8 years ago take a back seat. This has occurred as we deal with 3 proposed solar projects that will largely surround us totalling 10,500 acres (including the two biggest proposed projects in NSW that share a boundary), a transmission line that's area has been compulsory acquired by energyco and a windfarm that we as a family have decided to host a number of turbines with. The decision to host these turbines has come as a decision that will financially enable us to leave this area and community we call home if the proposed projects were too all be developed. The proposed projects are as follows

- Sandy Creek Solar (Lightsource BP 800mW)
- Dapper Solar (Origin Energy 400mW)
- Cobbora Solar (Marble Energy and Pacific Partners 700-800mW)
- Spicers Creek Windfarm (Squadron Energy)
- Energyco Transmission line

My family and I currently operate Dunbogan Merino Stud which is 6400 acres alongside and part of many of the 5 proposed projects. We have three children aged 11 (Angus), 7 (Marnie) and 2(Sally). We operate an intensive mixed farming business running 10,000 merino sheep and cropping 1500 acres of cereal and canola crop each year. We employ a full time staff and rely on multiple part time and casual employees as well as a number of contractors. I am a 4th generation farmer here on the land where our family property boundaries two of the proposed solar sites as well as the transmission lines. As a resident we will be heavily impacted by these projects as well as the other projects intended for this area. The property was purchased from the state government in 2017 after the failed Cobbora Coal project. The property was sold to the state government by my parents.

I will try to keep this response short as we have spent many hours meeting with developers, pouring over developments , EIS's , social impact studies and meetings with solicitors, consulatants and associates. At present we estimate that we if we were to pay ourselves a wage of this time we would be looking in excess of \$200,000. This is time we have taken away from our own busy business and away from our family and children. Further to this we estimate the impacts of taking this time out of our business and the associated production losses to be in excess of \$200,000. We have spent this

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time educating ourselves as to what is going on so we can make informed decisions and hope that the time we spend with developers, solicitors and consultants will improve the processes and minimise the impacts that we are to experience as a family and business if we were to stay here.

The CW REZ and associated projects has engrossed us for the last 3 years and has provided us with nothing but uncertainty for our family and the asset we call our business. It is with sadness that as a family we have made the decision to **leave this great community** if these projects are built. The proposed projects bring nothing but negatives to our lives, they alter the beautiful environment that we currently bring our children up in, the environment our family have cared for the last 120 years and the environment we operate our businesses in.

The main issues are detailed below.

1. **Cumulative impact of projects in the region**

The CW REZ was originally intended to be developed at a zone producing 3.5GW renewable energy. Here we are now in 2025 and the intentions of government are to now produce 7.5GW from the same area. When will the increases stop?

It is important to consider the effect of multiple projects on the visual character of the landscape. Multiple projects near each other can result in cumulative impacts that affect the way a landscape is experienced. Cumulative visual impacts can arise from the presence of similar projects that may have a low impact individually, but when viewed together can have a significant visual impact on the landscape.

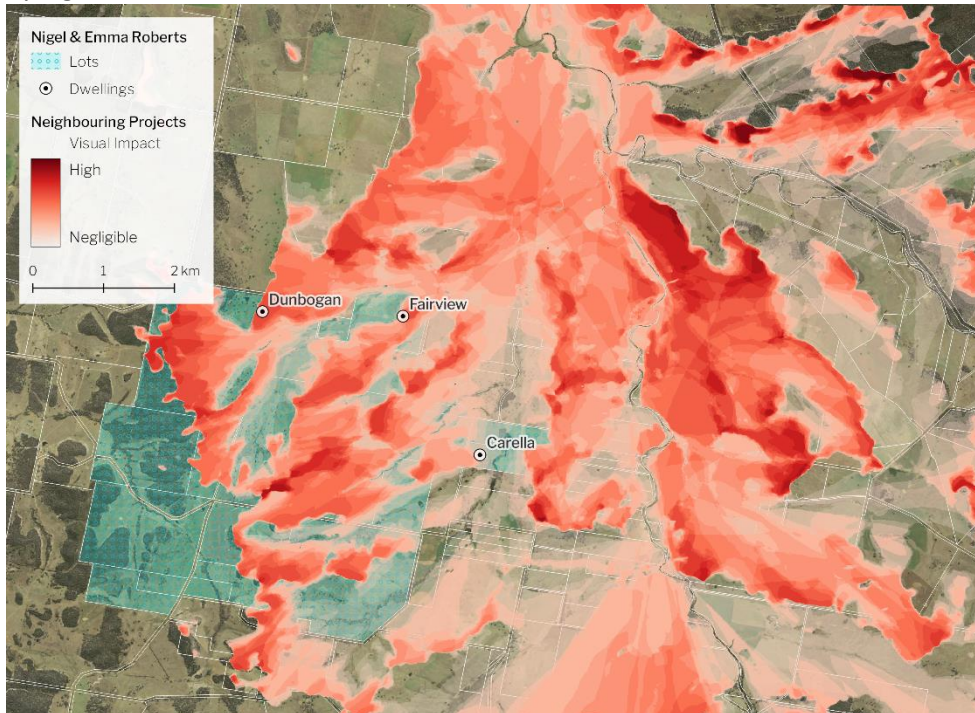
The impacts of these projects combined will decimate the landscape. Particularly as we continue to increase the capacity of the REZ. EIS are still been performed on an individual project basis. In the case of the proposed projects here near Elong we have 3 solar projects (Lightsource BP, Origin Energy and Marble Energy/Pacific Partners in one large conglomeration with shared boundaries totalling a proposed 10,500 acres or 4250 ha). Are all these projects intending on extracting water from the same groundwater aquifer that water our sheep? Lightsource BP intends to withdraw up to 90ML of groundwater from this untested aquifer. Will the developers of these projects guarantee that stock water is available if they are to extract this water.

The cumulative impacts further need to be investigated as to native vegetation clearing, emergency services and key medical services and infrastructure.

2. **Visual Impacts**

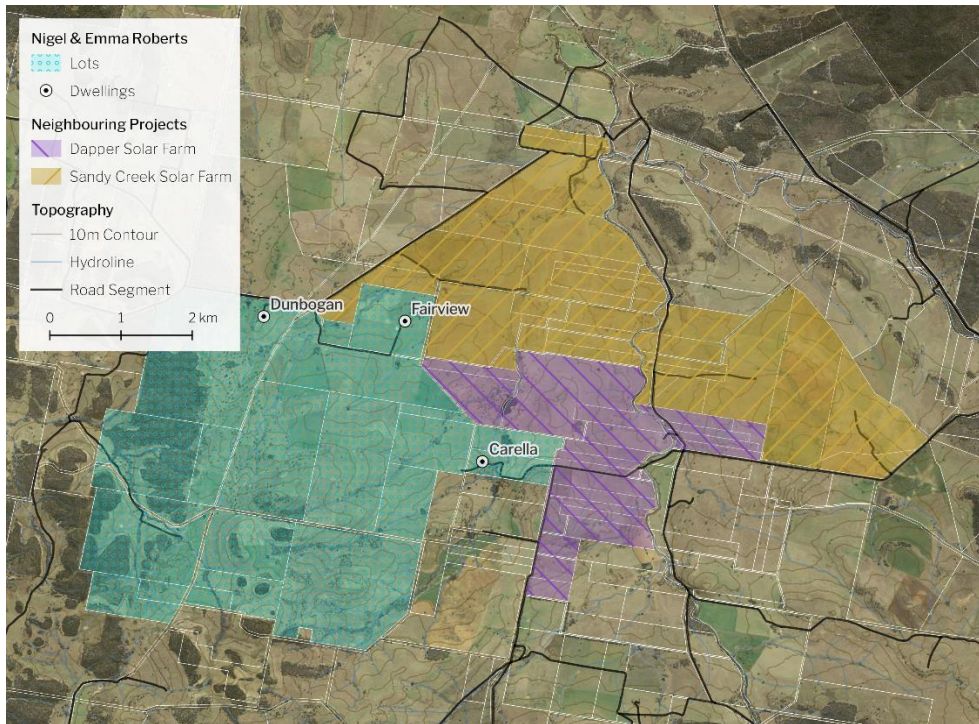
The visual landscape character of the area will change from predominantly rural agriculture to renewable energy infrastructure. As farmers we go through some incredible tough times, the two things we have on the land is our families and the incredible landscapes and environments that we work in. It is simple this will be lost forever.

Figure 1: Indicative visual impact assessment of solar farm to our own property showing the high impacts of the proposed project. Our main residence is labelled "Dunbogan". These assessments were shown as minimal impact by Lightsource BP and the EIS that was paid for by Lightsource BP



The Zone of Visual Influence (ZVI) in Figure 1 was generated in QGIS using a 5m digital elevation model and assuming typical design parameters for solar farm infrastructure.

Figure 2: View of our property adjacent to Sandy Creek Solar Farm (marked yellow) (and neighbouring Dapper Solar Farm in purple). The proposed Marble Energy project (700mW) will adjoin these projects to the north east.



3. Public Liability Insurance

The issue of Public Liability Insurance continues to be avoided. I took this unanswered issue to Energyco on 28th November 2022. This issue was also taken to Lightsource BP and Origin Energy to be addressed and still we have no answers. The issue was also taken to Dugald Saunderson MP with no response.

Our business expects to be surrounded by in excess of \$4 billion of solar panels that includes the 3 solar developments only. My insurer has informed me that the maximum level of PL insurance I can obtain is currently \$20 million. If I or an employee here in our business starts a fire and is deemed liable for starting that fire that burns these solar farms down who or where is the difference coming from? We also need to consider the loss of income from the proposed solar farms.

Further to this all businesses surrounding these projects will be heavily affected as contractors will avoid the risk of damages to these projects as they too will only have \$20 million PL cover. Our current business contracts out harvest and hay contracting (both quite fire prone). Who is going to perform these jobs for our business with the added risks associated with the infrastructure losses from these projects? This issue is common to all mixed farming businesses in the area.

4. Engagement/Consultation

The entire consultation of all projects with the exception of the project we are involved in has been horrific. The vast majority of information about the projects has come from word of mouth from neighbours and others involved. "Consultation" is a process of formally consulting or discussing. It is not putting a table on the main street of Dunedoo and expecting those affected to come in and chat about the project.



As the Lightsource BP Sandy Creek is quite advanced we have had the most discussion with their developers which has been minimal. The entire process has been horrendous and at NO stage have we been consulted as to the project. The arrogance shown from what is meant to be a global leader in the renewable space is atrocious. As I have outlined to the Project Developer "You have been able to propose to develop a \$1.3 billion solar project yet you have failed to address the simple concerns or needs of those that neighbour the project and live with the projects impact". At no stage have we been asked what we would like to see re the development or what can be done to minimise the impacts of the project. Every meeting with LSBP has been merely a box ticking exercise to for fill the "consultation" process.

I am happy to share the email trail of the "Consultation" process. There are 13 emails of which the majority have been from us approaching Lightsource BP for clarification on issues. Many of these issues such as public liability insurance are yet to be answered. I cannot see how going forward we can operate a business next door to these developments without this issues been resolved. As of today (29/01/2025) we are still yet to have the initial concerns from the 9/12/2021 addressed. These concerns were set out in an email that I will attach to the submission.

Our own valuers believe that if developments are to proceed we will see a decrease in the value of our asset of between 10-30%. In our situation we will see reductions in values of between \$2 million and \$6 million dollars. To give you some idea of the "neighbour benefits "that we have been offered to counteract this issue we have been offered \$20k per annum for 10 years. This offer is well below what is required for these projects to go ahead. Again we see the guidelines for solar developments being largely inadequate for many situations such as this.

If this is how a global renewable developer consults with a neighbour that is going to be heavily impacted by a proposed project then this is atrocious. The arrogance of LSBP to not address community and personal issues and fail to convey any consultation is appalling. It is my business that is affected by this project, it is my family that is affected by this project and it is our asset that is devalued by this project yet they cannot even have a fair level of consultation and address the needs of its neighbours. It is time to put a stop to the box ticking consultation required in the guidelines. Continuing to approve projects such as this one only increases the arrogance and complacency of Lightsource BP and the consultation process that it lacks. I can only hope that the processes from Origin Energy and Marble Energy/Pacific partners improves.

There has been only limited contact and consulatation with Sandy Creek Solar and Cobbora Solar Farm as these projects are behind in comparison to Sandy Creek Solar.

5. Proposed Temporary Workforce and Labour Shortages

At present one of the biggest challenges to our business and those in the area is the supply of affordable labour. There is very limited available employees in Dunedoo and in the surrounds of the project. The majority of people in the community are employed within the agricultural space or the affiliated businesses that already support agriculture. The thought of a further 10,000 people workforce in the area will only further limit available labour to our business and at the same time drive up salaries and wages for the workforce that is available. At present Agricultural businesses such as ourselves are struggling to maintain profitability as expenses across the board continue to

increase. This will affect the availability and affordability of labour within a large area of the project and across various industries.

6. Water Requirements

There are a number of concerns with the Lightsource BP project around the its water requirements. As per Lightsource BP ES5.9 of there EIS 150 ML of water is required per year in the worst case scenario to be sourced from “multi ground water bores”. It would be presumed that the other projects in the area will require water also from similar sources. What are the requirements of the 4 other projects in the area? Again a cumulative impact study is required to determine the requirements of other projects and if the aquifer is capable of these levels of extraction.

Our business at present depends on two bores and an extensive water system that water the 8000-11,000 head of livestock that are run in our business at any time. Are there assurances that the withdrawal of this water from the same aquifer will not affect water supply in our business? If the withdrawal of this water from the groundwater system does affect our livelihood and the wellbeing of our sheep, is Lightsource BP going to truck in water to ensure that sheep daily water requirements are met? This could be a horrific animal welfare issue if guarantees are not met. This is a concern for all businesses in the area.

7. Loss of Agricultural Land and Agriviolitics

It is expected that the CW REZ will see upwards of 800 wind turbines and 28,000 acres of solar developments in the area as well as transmission lines, battery storages and other associated infrastructure. What will this do to agriculture and the greater community.

As per “Farms for food” It is expected that agricultural production is required to increase by 70% by 2050 to feed the world. Why are we reducing the available agricultural land by placing these developments of soils that are suitable for ag production when they can be in areas that produce no food.

Every EIS study compares the production levels of soils here to that of other in the same LGA such as Nyngan and west of Dubbo. This area proposed for these projects is suitable for high intensity sheep and cattle production as well as high production cropping enterprises. A times our intensive pasture systems are capable of sustaining 100DSE/ha. The area that is to be removed is amongst some of the best soil and production areas in the respective LGA s. Just last year in 2024 we had barley crops yielding 8.45t/ha. These crops shared a boundary with the proposed Lightsource BP project (which in my opinion are even better soils to that here). It is false and irresponsible to compare this calibre of country to that of those in the same LGA and presume they are all of the same productivity. These soils here may be treble the production capacity of other soils in the LGA. There is only 7% of Australia landmass that is suitable for intensive sheep/beef and cropping enterprises.

We have also experience developers purchasing country next door to us (Origin Energy). Whilst this is great for our land values it has pushed land prices up to unaffordable levels (for agriculture). Our families dream to expand in this area has been halted as we compete with highly profitable multinational businesses.

Further to this the presumption agriviolitics is the future within solar projects is further floored. We have seen EIS studies from Lightsource Bp indicating the levels of sheep to be run under the panels are to be at 75% of current levels (this includes improved pasture). Improved pastures are not able to be grown under panels and thus we see only native grasses grown under panels and the carrying capacity of the area greatly reduced. In this EIS Lightsource BP does not even have enough land in the project site to run 75% of the existing capacity.

As a qualified agronomist I would expect that carrying capacity under panels would be somewhere in the range of 20% of existing carrying capacity when conditions are favourable. These projections would decrease as time goes by and as more nutrition is removed from the soil. There is no way at present for nutrients to be spread back on these soils after they have been removed by grazing. Thus soils will be depleted particularly in phosphorus.

8. Social Impacts

By far one of the biggest social issue if the project was to proceed is that families will leave the community. As already outlined our family intend on leaving the area if the project is to proceed. As well as ourselves we are aware of several families that intend on leaving the area if the proposed developments are to proceed. As well as this there are a number of long term rentals in the area that will leave given the changes. I am yet to see a social impacts study that touches on families leaving the community!

Further social issues include

- the division and conflict within a small community.
- Housing
- Access to medical facilities
- Roads and infrastructure
- Increases in Crime and prevention as result of increased population

There are minimal cumulative benefits to the local community. The majority of workers will be FIFO or transported in. They will spend minimal money in the community, and have minimal contribution to the community. Given there hours outlined in the EIS these workers will not contribute to the community. The community benefit scheme is nothing more of a payout to the local community.

9. Weeds and Feral Animals

At present there are a number of noxious weeds on the proposed Lightsource BP site including St Johns Wart (*Hypericum perforatum*), Scotch Thistle (*Onopordum* sp), Blue Heliotrope (*Heliotropium amplexicaule*) and spiny burr grass (*Cenchrus* species). How are these weeds not going to be spread further across the site over the construction period? The entire catchment of the project area runs into Sandy creek and into the Talbragar river. The spread of these weeds into these catchments could have devastating affects on those downstream of the project.

There are large expanses of the proposed area that have heavy infestations of St Johns Wart (*Hypericum perforatum*). How will grazing under the panels with sheep be affective where St Johns Wart is present? Where sheep are left to graze in these areas there will be associated animal health issues that can at time lead to acute poisoning and death (see Weeds DPI: [NSW WeedWise](#)).

Already we have seen increased feral animals throughout the area as landowners in the area become absentee farmers across the proposed projects. There is approximately 7000 acres of area to go under solar panels from the three projects. The feral animals from these areas will move to neighbouring areas as a result of construction and fencing. Is it fair that neighbouring farmers inherit the feral animals that already inhabit these project areas. Does LSBP have a feral animal plan for pigs, foxes and rabbits across the project area?

10. Bushfire Risk, Hail, Mitigation and Flooding

There has been 3 (1992, 2001 and 2012) major fires in the area over the last 25 years of which 2 have burnt large areas of the proposed site. The fire in 1992 was next door to the proposed site on Tallawonga Ln. Two of these fires were started by lightning whilst the third started by farm machinery. If consultation for the Lightsource BP project was adequately performed with neighbours and the local community developers such as LSBP and consultants such as EMM would be aware of these fire issues. The proposed developments are in a fire prone area.

At present there has been no consultation with Elong Elong Fire Brigade. Elong Elong Fire Brigade is made up of volunteers from the area. I am a member of the Elong fire brigade. Elong Fire brigade are not trained to fight fires in high voltage areas neither do they have the training or equipment available to them to fight fires in the proposed development. Will the volunteers of Elong and Laheys creek fire brigades be happy to fight a fire within the proposed development given the high voltage electricity proposed.

Who do the developers intend to fight the bushfires in the area if the projects are to proceed. Community members such as ourselves intend on leaving the area if the proposed development is to proceed. Are employees of the projects going to be members of our local fire services? Will they be here on a Sunday or after hours to fight a fire. The precedence of fires would be expected to increase with a larger workforce and the increased presence of high voltage energy present in the area. Again the cumulative impact of projects in the area will remove large numbers of residents that at present make up the local fire brigades.

The other area of concern is if these panels were to be damaged in a fire and a watershed event was to follow the implications to the Sandy Creek, the Talbragar River and in turn the Macquarie river could be catastrophic to large communities and the associated habitat. If such an event was to occur would heavy metals from the solar panels enter the associated waterways? The toxic nature of panels and in such a large area make this a real risk that needs to be considered.

11. Roads and Traffic

How do developers intend to ensure that local roads will not be inundated with traffic. Our family and staff regularly travel down Tallawonga rd, Dapper rd and Sweeneys lane daily to essential services such as educating our children. How can we be assured that project traffic will not be using these routes? The cumulative traffic impacts from all 5 projects in the area need to be considered in this area. How can the safety of my family be guaranteed with the huge increases in personnel in the area. Already our roads receive little maintenance attention and are commonly dangerous under the various weather conditions. In 2023 the increased traffic over our roads combined with inundated roads left us unable to educate our children for numerous days as we could not physically get our children on the bus. This has never happened prior to this and was the result of increased traffic

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from EIS and developers. At present we drive 45 kilometers per day on unsealed roads just to get our children on a school bus.

12. Land, erosion soils and Salinity

As a qualified agronomist and farmer of 20 years I have major concerns as to the suitability of some soils in the project area. There are no second chances with erosion events and as outlined in Lightsource BP EIS the potential impacts over the construction period are "large and unavoidable".

There are already areas across the proposed site (see Photos below) that have exhibit the visual affects of salinity. Further removal of deep rooted perennial trees as planned by developers will further exacerbate these areas. Why would we remove deep rooted perennial trees from an area already under the affects of salinity. Will developers be held accountable if I have areas of saline begin to appear across our soils and asset. Will I be compensated if these areas appear ? These areas will only increase in size and nature if this project is to progress.

13. Hail Risk

The proposed site has a high risk of hail. At present we pay the highest form of insurance cover for broadacre cropping in NSW and Australia. Our business has had 3 hail claims for crop losses over the last 12 years due to hail. Has LSBP and the associated insurers looked at the risk of hail in the area? If a hail event is to occur which is likely, is there associated risks where heavy metals and toxins can move into the waterways as runoff from rain events?

14. NSW Planning

An issue I can see is the system of progressing these projects through NSW Planning. The whole system is flawed. We have Multinational companies purchasing their own Environment Impact Statements that from what I have seen are largely inaccurate and very quite flawed. My family and I have farmed here for 120 years you would think that we would be great sources of information for studies. (An example of this is the Social Impact studies conducted by EnergyCo and Lightsource BP where I have clearly explained our families intent to leave the area if these proposed projects are developed. I am yet to read a social impact study from both companies that details that families intend to leave the area if the projects are developed).

Further to this we have NSW Planning approving projects to connect into a government project transmission line. Energyco and government need these projects to connect to the line thus we see further issues.

Further to this we have and Independent Planning Commission acting as a third party that is merely another government arm approving these projects in the area.

I invite yourself and any other members of parliament to visit our family property and to see the impacts that this project will have on our family, our business, our land asset and livelihoods. Contact details are below and I look forward to showing you how the various projects will impact us. As shown the visual impacts alone to our family home are high. There are panels 600 m from our family home. Our property shares a boundary with the proposed Lightsource BP project for 3400m as well as the Origin Energy "sandy Creek" and the transmission lines. The impacts of these projects are so high that we intend to leave the area if these projects are to proceed. The disdain by Developers to warrant the comment that we will have "Minimal Impact" show the arrogance and ignorance of particularly Lightsource BP. It shows an EIS paid for by LSBP.

It has been clear from the outset that developers are only interested in profiteering from these projects. There has been NIL Consultation from their employees and questions taken to them 3 years ago go unanswered. In hindsight we have had meaningful consultation at times with other neighbouring project developers. We are in favour of the development of renewable projects however they need to be in the right landscapes. Solar projects can be developed on land that do not produce any agricultural commodities. The last 3 years of my families lives have been extremely stressful and overly burdensome. Our mental health continues to deteriorate as we take time away from our families and business to deal with the "Next Project".

It has become quite clear that unless you live near these projects or are impacted by these projects the Impacts will always be quite minimal.

I have attached a number of photos below to give some understanding of what we are dealing with.

Kind Regards

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Photo1. Highly productive soils capable of intensive food production (wheat and Lambs) taken on our property. The proposed development site is located in the background.



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Photo 2: Flood event in 2020 at Sandy Creek. This combines with broken leg creek on the proposed development site.



Photo 3. Flooding in 2020 on broken leg creek (Sandy Creek Solar Project). This combines with Sandy creek and a number of smaller waterways before moving into the Talbragar River and the Macquarie River



Photo 4: This is a photo of the proposed development site showing St Johns Wart (Brown Coloured weed in the foreground) and an area exhibiting severe salinity in the background.



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Photo 5: Shows the encroaching weeds St Johns Wart and Blue heliotrope on the current proposed site and the proximity to our own property boundary.



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Pictures 6, 7 and 8 Show the capability of the soils **on the proposed site**. These crops and pastures include intensive lucerne wheat and canola. These photos were taken from Tallawonga rd and Dapper rd. These are the site of Sandy Creek Solar the Lightsource BP Project.



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Photo 9 and 10. The front entrance of our property (facing west and east) where panels are proposed showing our family home in the background a mere 600 m from the site. This particular paddock yielded 8.45t/ha in 2024



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