

Submission  
No 115

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

**Organisation:** Nature Conservation Council of NSW, Community Power  
Agency, Hunter Jobs Alliance et al

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# Strengthening NSW Renewable Energy Zones: Joint policy recommendations to improve outcomes for nature and communities

## Introduction

The renewable energy transition is a once in a generation opportunity to bring transformative benefits to our regions in NSW including increasing the protection and restoration of nature.

The use of fossil fuels for energy generation is damaging our climate, environment and human health. We need to build renewable energy in a timely manner to maintain electricity reliability for our state, bring down energy prices to alleviate cost of living pressures, achieve climate targets, minimise the impacts of climate change on our environment, and grow more diversified regional economies with improved job opportunities and security.

Outcomes for nature and communities can be improved through stronger mechanisms in the planning system and stronger nature laws. Establishing policies that ensure the renewables rollout is good for the environment and good for communities will increase the social licence of renewable development in Renewable Energy Zones (REZs) and across the state.

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 the following 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. These recommendations are drawn from the reflections and learnings that people in the regions have of the rollout thus far.

**Local organisations from the New England and Hunter REZs who have worked on and endorsed the following recommendations welcome the opportunity to submit them to the inquiry into the impact of Renewable Energy Zones (REZ) on rural and regional communities and industries in New South Wales.**

## Recommendations

### **Recommendation 1: Genuine engagement and consultation with First Nations communities must remain a central part of the planning, construction, operations and decommissioning of renewable energy projects**

First Nations communities have cared for Country, sustainably looking after the land, waters, air, wildlife, climate and culture, for over 60,000 years. Genuine engagement and consultation with First Nations communities is essential to achieving positive environmental and cultural outcomes through the transition to renewable energy.

Policy mechanisms to achieve this can include weighted criteria in tender processes for local First Nations business participation, and resourcing First Nations ranger programs.

The NSW government should continue working with the Federal government and directly with First Nations communities to meaningfully implement an impactful and well-resourced rollout of the [First Nations Clean Energy Strategy](#) in NSW. This includes the three focus areas of:

- Power First Nations communities with clean energy
- Enable equitable partnerships
- Achieve economic benefits with First Nations peoples

## **Recommendation 2: Identify ecological protection and restoration priorities for each Renewable Energy Zone and require developers to contribute to specific nature positive environmental regional outcomes**

### **2.1 Identify ecological protection and restoration priorities for each Renewable Energy Zone**

This will ensure that opportunities to protect and restore nature are considered from the beginning of the planning process, rather than waiting until the environmental impact statement stage. Nature positive means there has been an improvement in the diversity, abundance, resilience and integrity of ecosystems from an agreed baseline.

These priorities should include:

- Defining no-go zones to protect high value and critical habitat as well as wildlife and climate corridors linked to national parks or areas of high biodiversity value. Assessment of high value and critical habitat should be ongoing and consider cumulative environmental impacts and emerging environmental risks.
- For coal-mining regions in transition, development of region-wide post-mining land use plans incorporating wildlife and climate corridors, with no reductions in existing mine rehabilitation obligations as set out in development consents. Existing mine rehabilitation obligations should be made transparent to the public.
- The NSW government and developers working collaboratively with landholders to restore habitat including through provision of financial incentives to landholders.

### **2.2 NSW Department of Planning and EnergyCo to play an active role in contributing to specific nature positive environmental regional outcomes**

To have the most positive environmental impact, EnergyCo and the NSW Department of Planning should work more closely and collaboratively to coordinate renewable energy developments within REZs to contribute to protection and restoration priorities.

For local communities and landholders to also help contribute to these priorities, practical guidance should be developed on ways nature protection and restoration can be integrated into projects. This will allow landholders to be well equipped to negotiate with developers for the integration of these initiatives as a condition of private landholder agreements.

The NSW government should actively encourage and develop strategies to move towards a circular economy of materials in renewable energy projects, including advocating for a national recycling and reuse scheme for end-of-life materials to ensure public confidence in the energy transition in the regions.

### **2.3 Establish mechanisms to hold developers accountable to contribute to regional ecological protection and restoration priorities**

To incentivise developers' contributions to positive environmental regional outcomes, the NSW government should:

- Add a guideline to the Renewable Energy Planning Framework on practices to incorporate positive environmental outcomes into developments. As complying with the Renewable Energy Planning Framework is part of the secretary's environmental assessment requirements (SEARs), this will require developers to include strategies that have positive environmental benefits.
- Include positive outcomes for the environment and biodiversity as merit criteria in tender processes for renewable energy developments. This will prioritise development proposals that go above and beyond the current environmental requirements and lead to better outcomes for nature.
- Establish a transparent and public verification process post-project implementation, tied to grid access, to ensure that developers have implemented the impact mitigation and restoration strategies they committed to.

The NSW government should work with developers to ensure that developers are playing an active role in contributing to specific nature positive environmental regional outcomes. Existing planning rules require developers to avoid and minimise impacts on nature before resorting to offsets. However, in practice, communities often identify missed opportunities for impactful nature mitigation, protection and/or restoration. To remedy this, developers should consult with local environment organisations and ecologists to determine how best to apply the mitigation hierarchy throughout all aspects of the development. This includes, but is not limited to:

- well-considered site selection, such as on predominantly cleared land,
- implementing mitigation strategies and technologies,
- pursuing on-site ecological restoration opportunities, and
- using offsets as a last resort

It should be a requirement for environmental data to be shared between developers and local environment groups, and for developers to align their offset strategies with the region's environmental priorities.

The NSW government should update relevant guidelines and work with developers to ensure the above recommendations are implemented.

### **Recommendation 3: Develop regional community benefit plans and strengthen developer consultation with communities**

Regional community benefits plans should prioritise the aspirations of both the local and broader communities in REZs and include benefits such as discounted power for residents and co-ownership of assets like community batteries.

The NSW Renewable Energy Planning Framework should provide clearer guidance as to what “early and meaningful” community engagement looks like. For example:

- Early: some regional community members face barriers for participating in consultation processes, such as lack of internet access. When providing notice for a community meeting, developers need to take the specific barriers and needs for that community into consideration and ensure plenty of notice is given to allow full community participation. Early consultation also means early education for communities on the process and the options for defining benefits and how they work.
- Meaningful: developers can demonstrate a culture of genuine community consultation through providing resources to help communities participate in the assessment of projects, including consideration of nature and cumulative impacts. Community consultation should also incorporate opportunities for capacity building and engage diverse representatives from within the regions.

### **Signed**

1. Nature Conservation Council of NSW
2. Community Power Agency
3. Hunter Jobs Alliance
4. Hunter Renewal
5. Sustainable Living Armidale
6. National Parks Association of NSW
7. Climate Action Newcastle
8. Hunter Wildlife Rescue
9. Armidale Tree Group
10. Coal-ash Community Alliance
11. Stringybark Ecological
12. Clean Energy Association of Newcastle and Surrounds (CLEANaS)
13. Wando Conservation and Cultural Centre
14. Ahoy Traffic Control and Labour Hire Services
15. Hunter Community Environment Centre
16. EcoNetwork Port Stephens



**Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this consultation.**

Your key contact point for further questions and correspondence is Eve Altman, Clean Energy Campaigner, available via [redacted]. We welcome further conversation on this matter.

On behalf of the organisations who have signed onto this statement.

Yours sincerely,

**Jacqui Mills**  
**Senior Climate and Energy Campaigner**  
**Nature Conservation Council of NSW**