



Submission - Hills of Gold Wind Farm (SSD-9679)

Friday 29th January 2021

The RE-Alliance (REA, formerly Australian Wind Alliance) is a community based organisation of around 500 financial members, with an extensive supporter, online and social media following. Our members include farmers, small businesses and members of the community. RE-Alliance encourages best practice community engagement and benefit sharing in all renewable energy projects as keys to maximising benefits to regional Australia and lowering Australia's carbon emissions.

After consideration of the details of the proposed Hills of Gold Wind Farm, RE-Alliance supports the project. The proposed wind farm will supply up to 420 megawatts of battery-firmed clean energy and help move New South Wales towards its target of zero net emissions by 2050.

Having visited Nundle and Hanging Rock communities on three occasions over the last two years, I can confirm that the level of vocal support for this project is stronger than any project we have seen in NSW. While it is not unusual for community members around wind farm projects to quietly support a project, the willingness of a significant number of local community members to attend public meetings, put signs up on their fences and speak up in public in support of this project is not something we've seen to this extent before. The Department should consider this when weighing the number of submissions opposing the project. This also puts an onus on the developer to follow through on promises around local jobs, local procurement and community funding. The key theme that supporters communicated to me was the desire for greater economic activity and improvements to their town from the project so it will be important that these expectations be met.

In summary, we see the project benefits as follows:

Climate and environment

- The project is expected to generate enough power for over 185,000 homes, saving 650,000 tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions every year. The urgency of the climate

crisis is only increasing, making our transition to clean energy all the more important and urgent.

- This proposal is very much in line with New South Wales' Energy Roadmap, which committed the state to replacing its coal-burning fleet with clean energy.
- Environmental surveys show that the land is predominantly cleared land, used for grazing cattle, with much of the understorey converted to exotic pastures some time ago. The majority of project infrastructure impact will take place on non-native land. Rehabilitation of clearing for the transmission corridor with native grasses is a welcome feature.
- While there are flora and fauna unique to the area and there will be some biodiversity impacts from the project, they will be offset in accordance with the NSW biodiversity offsets system, including site rehabilitation.
- Similarly, while native birds are present in the area, only the raptors, Nankeen Kestrel and Wedge-tailed Eagles, are flying at rotor height. Of those species, there is low collision risk that does not threaten population numbers. Any consideration of impacts to flora and fauna needs to be weighed against the significant environmental benefits of a project that can power the equivalent of 185,000 homes with emissions-free power and replace environmental hazards associated with coal mining and power generation such as coal ash waste.

Energy

- The project has the capacity to be ready before the implementation of the first of the state government's Renewable Energy Zones, at Central West Orana.
- The project is located in a high wind area and proposes to connect to a strong part of the grid through an existing transmission line between Tamworth and the Liddell power station. Not relying on new transmission or transmission upgrades means the project is more likely to come online earlier.
- A 100 megawatt battery would continue technological improvements that are already seeing wind and solar power plants contribute to grid services and increase the flexibility of their supply to the grid. It would further demonstrate wind farms' ability to contribute to vital system security and reliability and again, contribute to the secure electricity supply required under the NSW Roadmap's Energy Security Target.

Community benefits

- We are satisfied that community consultation as outlined in the EIS and as I witnessed in person has been thorough, detailed and professional, allowing all views and concerns to be canvassed and addressed through the EIS process.
- The project is expected to create 216 direct and 430 indirect jobs during the 2.5 year construction period, which could begin in 2021.
- Experience at similar projects suggests a wind farm of this size would employ around 12 full-time equivalent jobs to operate the wind farm, though the proponent's modeling suggests a higher number might be possible. We would like to see further clarification around the jobs modelling submitted as part of the EIS.

- An economic boost would be expected to the local economy around Tamworth and Nundle during construction, from work going to local contractors and suppliers. Economic modelling suggests a total \$370 million would accrue to the local regional economy, which would be a huge shot in the arms for local businesses.
- As well as lease payments to farmers and voluntary agreements with neighbouring landholders, a community fund is proposed to pay for community projects over the life of the wind farm. The fund would receive \$2,500 per annum per turbine, amounting to \$175,000 each year for the 25 to 30 year life of the project. This would have a material impact on the local community's ability to fund projects of importance to the region. We note, however, that while the \$2,500 per turbine per annum figure is in the general range offered by wind projects in the state on a per turbine basis, the EIS assumes use of 6 megawatt turbines. This would result in a much lower \$/megawatt contribution than previous projects that based their contributions on similar amounts for smaller turbines. We would like to see this issue addressed in future discussions with the local community.
- We welcome the publication of the full text of Neighbour Benefit Sharing Agreements in the EIS, which has not been common practice in wind farm projects to date. This provides a valuable increase in transparency around this important program.
- There will be significant improvements to the local road network, including proposed upgrade works to Barry Road, Morrisons Gap Road and Head of Peel Road

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