

My name is Camilla Armstrong, and I wish to submit my objection to the Birriwa Solar and Battery Project. I am 37 years old, and live at “Pemcaw” on Birriwa Bus Route North with my partner. Our house (location R1 on the VIA) resides on my family’s farm, of which I am a 3rd generation family member; the first portion of this property was initially purchased by my grandparents in the 1950s, and my parents have continued to acquire neighbouring land through exceptional farm management, dedication and hard work. In total, our property at Pemcaw is 1460 hectares, all of which will be significantly impacted by the solar project. I hope to have a family of my own in the near future, whom I can only hope will enjoy the beauty and lifestyle which this location and community has afforded me throughout my childhood, teenage years and now adult life.

Following my high-school and university education, I lived and worked in Sydney and London for a number of years before returning home to the family farm in 2020. This was not a difficult decision for me, as I was starting my own business and there was nowhere else in the world I wanted to be. I now run a Speech Pathology private practice, which is predominantly conducted via telehealth. Growing up on this property and within our community near Birriwa was idyllic; my two older brothers and I would spend every waking hour outdoors, roaming freely around the farm and often jumping on our bikes and riding over to our neighbours’ places. The lifestyle we enjoyed was based on the beauty of our native flora and fauna, the incredibly close connections we had with our neighbours, and the culture which we had nurtured within our tight-knit community. The children whom I grew up with as my neighbours still live here, and are now raising their own children on these same farms. I am surrounded by families of up to their 6th generation of landholding. It must not be overlooked that ALL of the landowners who have agreed to the acquisition of their land for the purpose of the solar project, do not predominantly live here. They do not share the history or connection to the land which we do; they will not be the ones to face the monstrosity every day, to deal with the change in lifestyle, huge increase in traffic, safety concerns, noise and visual disturbances that we will be left to endure. I feel that ACEN has capitalised on this opportunity with little regard for the impacts it will have on those of us neighbouring the project. Whilst I am aware that neighbourhood agreements have been offered, the prices offered by ACEN are an insult. A one-off payment for our silence, for our agreement to be complicit. The figures offered by no means whatsoever take into account the appreciating market and agricultural value of our land. I do not believe that the ACEN employees or the government policies which are being enforced upon us, have done due diligence in their research into the true agricultural value of this land, or the contribution which these farmers make to their country.

Whilst I am aware that the purpose of this submission is to object to ACEN’s Birriwa Solar and Battery Project, I feel it would be absolutely negligent of the government to view this project in isolation. Within a 25km radius of this proposed project, and our home, there is one operational solar farm, two approved solar farms, three solar farms in the planning stage, one wind farm in the planning stage, and one wind farm on exhibition. Quite simply, this is too much for our community. A community within which some of the best agricultural land in the district lies, and will be unfairly degraded if this project goes ahead. As per the EIS, the indicative capacity of the Birriwa Solar Project is 600MW. Currently, the largest generation of energy from an operational solar farm is 162MW, the Finley Solar Farm. That is a hugely significant increase in size that I find alarming. With this in mind, as well as the cumulative effects of this project mentioned above, not to mention the proposed number of transmission lines (I believe to be 3), our community is feeling devastated about the future of our farm management, financial futures and lifestyle.

The main impacts of the Birriwa Solar and Battery Project which are of concern to me and solidify my vehement objection to the project include:

VISUAL AND NOISE IMPACTS

As mentioned, I live in R1 as per the Visual Impact Assessment. Our house is 70m from Birriwa Bus Route North, the road running on the north side of the solar project. My home is also my place of work, and my office faces directly onto Birriwa Bus Route North. I am concerned about the visual and noise impacts of the solar project for various reasons. My business is conducted via telehealth; I work with clients who have significant communication difficulties following brain injury, and even the slightest background noise can have detrimental impacts on their therapy sessions. Both traffic and construction noises will most definitely negatively impact my business. Furthermore, I suffer from neurological migraines which are often brought on by light sensitivities such as glare. I find the language used in the VIA (and all impact statements) vague and nondescript. The size and placement of the PV modules cannot be confirmed, therefore how can glint and glare be accurately assessed? The photos used in the VIA from various viewpoints are also an inaccurate use of imagery. These photos were taken on overcast days, and have clearly been altered as the perspective and ratios are a complete misinterpretation. I request more genuine photographs be taken, on sunny days and without alterations. I am also aware that the residents at R14 denied permission to use the photograph taken from their garden for this same reason. How can glint and glare be effectively determined when the size of the PV modules is not confirmed? A person living in a township cannot make a submission to council saying their renovations “might be 4 metres” but we won’t know until we start building, so why have ACEN given us similar statements throughout all their assessments? It’s not good enough.

INCREASED TRAFFIC AND PEOPLE WITHIN OUR COMMUNITY / LIFESTYLE IMPACTS

Growing up here, our parents did not have any concerns for our safety amongst this community, because the only people to use our local roads were our neighbours. There is an unspoken understanding that these roads are shared with children on bikes, and those of us who live here drive accordingly. The opportunity for the children growing up here to have that same freedom of lifestyle, once the solar project is in effect, will disappear. I believe the traffic footprint is estimated to be between 300-760 vehicles per day – this is alarming for obvious reasons.

Aside from the obvious concerns around safety (I have never previously felt the need to lock my house, but will do so every time I leave the house if the project progresses), how does ACEN envisage managing the boom in the number of people using our roads? Our local councils are already struggling to maintain local roads, especially in the last 12-18 months following the significant rain events. Our roads are already not fit for many cars to drive along, let alone some 300-700 more vehicles per day! Might I also remind you that these roads are frequently used to move livestock- it is nothing for locals to patiently sit behind stock for up to 30 minutes to avoid stressing the animals or impeding the farmer’s work. Will workers for the solar project and/or construction of the transmission lines be as accommodating? The effect on these farmers’ handling of their livestock will be greatly affected, as will the condition of our roads.

Our social life and lifestyle in general will be negatively impacted by this solar project. As I have mentioned, we currently have a very tight-knit and respectful community here. Some of our neighbours are already feeling that they have no choice but to move, to avoid the detrimental changes this solar project will have to our lives. This is simply not far, to feel forced out of our homes.

WILDLIFE

I try to stay fit and healthy, and frequently enjoy walks and runs along Birriwa Bus Route North and Barney's Reef Road. I do this not only for physical health reasons, but also to maintain my mental health. I enjoy the natural beauty of this landscape, the native flora and fauna. I often see wallabies, kangaroos, lizards, various birdlife and tortoises along the road and amongst the native vegetation, not to mention on the odd occasions where I have seen koalas on Barney's Reef Road. As per the Biodiversity Development Assessment Report, the proposal to clear almost 9ha of koala habitat within the subject land is an outrage. Following the 2019-20 bushfires, koalas were formally declared at greater risk of extinction in this state, and subsequently their conservation status was raised from vulnerable to endangered as per the EPBC Act. How does ACEN justify the careless destruction of their habitat? My research shows that the loss of 20ha of high-quality habitat critical to koalas' survival is *highly likely to have a significant impact*, so tell me what amount of impact will the clearing of almost 9ha have on their survival? What will happen to all the wildlife along these roads once construction commences? These animals all play a role in our ecosystem.

EFFECT ON WIDER COMMUNITY

How will ACEN accommodate the projected number of workers required for the construction and maintenance of this solar project? My concern is that there is already a lack of accommodation locally for itinerant farm workers, so where will hundreds of these workers stay? I refer to you the town of Miles in Queensland, 330km northwest of Brisbane. This town is an example of the detrimental infrastructure and social consequences of boom-bust economies, such as this solar project. The explosion in exploration and mining activity in its surrounding areas saw a huge influx in workforce demand, requiring accommodation and infrastructure to be built, on promises of living and buying locally. The local council spent \$30 million dollars alone on water and sewerage waste management. Developers and investors flooded the town to play the new rental market; 1500 new houses were approved, there was an immediate boom and rental increase; locals described it as a "gold rush". Similar impact statements to the Birriwa Solar Project were provided, all empty promises. To summarise, promises were broken, the mining companies reneged on their agreements during the construction phase, and Miles is now left a ghost town. Those locals who have remained are now faced with rates 4 times what they were, to pay for all the infrastructure that they never wanted nor needed. Is this what is next for Birriwa, Dunedoo, Gulgong and Leadville? How will our local communities be protected from these same financial burdens?

I am aware that when a new mining project is proposed, it is a requirement for the total cost of rehabilitation of the site be made as a deposit before the commencement of the project. I am concerned as after reading through all the impact assessment statements, I do not believe there is any such requirement or planning in place for ACEN to be responsible for the rehabilitation of this agricultural land following the decommissioning of the site.

What about the pressure the influx of workers will inevitably place on our healthcare system? Currently in Dunedoo, it is a 3-4 week wait to get an appointment with our local GP; the hospitals are under pressure to cope with the number of ED presentations due to lack of GPs. People are becoming desperate, particular those in the aged care sector. Working in healthcare myself, I am alarmed to think how our already less than satisfactory local healthcare services will manage should the Birriwa Solar Project progress.

EFFECT OF SOLAR PROJECT ON NEIGHBOURING PROPERTIES

I am concerned about the market value of our land suffering a significant decrease if the construction of the Birriwa Solar Project goes ahead. Currently, the river flats of our property are classed as LSC class 2, according to the Land and Soil Capability (LSC) assessment scheme in NSW, with LSC class 1 being the highest level. Within the Mid-Western Regional Council, there are no LSC class 1 properties, so it safe to say that these river flats are some of the best agricultural land in the district. Having spoken with the local stock and station agents, a significant downturn to the market value of both ours and our neighbours' properties is expected should the solar project progress. Currently, the value of our property has doubled every 10 years; this solar project will put a stop to that. NO ONE wants to purchase a property surrounded by solar and wind farms.

As per the LSC assessment scheme, the country on which the solar project is proposed to be built is rated as LSC class 5, stating that the limitations to this land needs to be carefully managed to prevent long-term degradation. This would mean pasture improvements and fertilisation management, neither of which are possible if the land is covered in solar panels. Not to mention the toxic contaminates in PV solar panels, and the highly toxic silicon tetrachloride which is a by-product of silicon tetrachloride found, which will pose an immediate and future risk to the integrity of the environment.

I am concerned about the quantity of water required for dust control and cleaning panels during the installation and use of the panels. This as well as the high rainfall area in which the project is proposed (meaning increased run off due to the panels) will most likely lead to soil erosion to the neighbouring properties. Is compensation provided to the neighbouring landowners for this? I am not aware of any.

I am concerned about the increased bushfire risk posed by the solar project. I would like to know if this project is being classified as a "priority project" by the government and therefore being pushed through without undergoing normal DA approved channels. I believe this was the case for the Beryl Solar Farm (25km away), and that the local RFS was never consulted for an RFS bushfire or grassfire risk management plan. Fires caused by solar panels pose an increased risk for many reasons; solar panels are deemed "live" as long as the sun is out, firefighters must wait for the fire to extend the perimeter of the panels before they are able to fight it, there are hazmat risk, the increased heat generated from the fire burning the panels, the leaching of chemicals from the panels and wiring. I have been informed that firefighters must wait for the power to fully shut down, although it would still be feeding from the main transformer, and even then the panels still draw current if the sun is out. The RFS is also unable to water bomb solar panels due to the damage the force of the bombing would have the panels. This is madness. ACEN must be responsible for the management of grasses and ground fuel amongst the solar panels to reduce the risk of out-of-control bushfires, which pose a devastating effect on neighbouring properties.

In conclusion, I implore that you take the submissions of objection to the Birriwa Solar and Battery Project into account. The cumulative effects on residents who are not in agreeance with the CWO REZ and its associate projects are enormous. The threat of changes to our lifestyle, farm management, livelihoods and future is already taking its toll on myself, my family, my neighbours, and many members of our local community.

Sincerely,

Camilla Armstrong.