

## THE CWO-REZ - ROBODEBT REVISITED?

At first glance it would seem ludicrous to equate the CWO-REZ with Robodebt. But closer scrutiny reveals an alarming number of similarities.

Robodebt was planned with good intent. But it soon came apparent that it was UNJUST, ILLEGAL and caused PERSONAL TRAGEDY. Rather than dismantle the scheme the authorities COVERED UP these deficiencies until public opposition finally forced the scheme to be dismantled. Millions of dollars are now being spent on compensation to clean up THE MESS. The politicians and public servants who planned and approved this scheme are now being held to account. It would be hoped that the same scenario is not repeated within the CWO-REZ.

### UNJUST

To function renewable energy production requires two essential components; wind or solar farms to produce electricity and power lines to transfer this electricity to the consumer.

Landholders are approached by wind and solar farm developers and asked whether or they will or will not host these projects. If they agree an appropriate level of compensation is then negotiated. Landholders are approached by EnergyCo and told that under current legislation they must allow power lines to be built on their land. And any compensation payments are at the discretion of the planning authorities.

So renewable energy projects create two classes of citizens; the first with the right of refusal and negotiated compensation; the second with mandatory acquisition and no right to negotiate compensation. How can that be just?

### ILLEGAL

In the original plan of the Hunter offshore REZ wind turbines were not to be allowed within 10km of the coast. Submissions from the local community persuaded the Federal Minister for Energy Chris Bowen to extend this distance to 20km. In doing so he has effectively set a precedent as to what is an acceptable setback for residences from wind turbines. Under Australian anti discrimination law public servants must “consider the rights of equality and non-discrimination whenever you are working on legislation, a policy or program that draws distinctions between people or groups based on place of residence within a country”. The precedent of a 20km setback from wind turbines for coastal residents must then be considered for regional residents as well. It will be almost impossible for any wind farm to be built in the CWO-REZ if a 20km setback from residences is applied.

### PERSONAL TRAGEDY

The Federal Energy Minister Chris Bowen has reduced both the size of the Hunter offshore REZ and the allowable height of wind turbines for reasons of air safety. The AEMO has given a bushfire rating of E, the highest available, to the CWO-REZ. Climate change will exacerbate this risk. Electrical infrastructure including solar farms, wind farms, batteries and transmission lines start fires. Bushfire control has become increasingly dependent on aerial water bombing. The conundrum then is; should aerial water bombing be used in areas with wind turbines and transmission lines and so risk pilots lives, or should the fire be allowed to escape and increase in size and so put more property and potentially more lives at risk. It is irrational to approve renewable energy projects and

so add to the existing high bushfire risk in the CWO-REZ, but at the same time effectively reduce the means of bushfire control.

## COVERED UP

1. The original pitch for the CWO-REZ was that host communities should welcome renewable energy projects because of the employment opportunities created and the economic stimulus provided to the region. But communities are fast realising that any benefits will be small and transitory while the adverse effects will be large and permanent.

EnergyCo is preparing “guidelines on orders PROHIBITING CONNECTION to the REZ network where COMMUNITY SUPPORT HASN’T BEEN ESTABLISHED” (September 2022 Project Update). Realising it is losing community support EnergyCo has now been forced to allocate large sums of money to essentially bribe people into accepting renewable energy projects.

But this money is misdirected.

The first initiative was to effectively muzzle local council opposition by paying them a fee based on the total construction spend on wind and solar farms in the council area.

The second is to create a Community Benefit Scheme funded by an access fee tied to the total annual electricity production of the renewable energy projects in the region. This approach has two major flaws. Firstly; who will decide how this money is allocated? Will another level of bureaucracy have to be created and who will elect this body? Would it be simpler to transfer money direct to council? Plenty of opposition to that one!

In addition it must be remembered that any money spent on services that normally would and should be funded by the existing rate and tax system removes the governments obligation to fund those services. That is net zero gain.

Any available money should be directed to the people most impacted by these renewable energy projects. That is nearby neighbours and the landholders forced to host the power lines that service these projects. If this compensation was paid annually and linked to land title it also would help ameliorate the loss of property value associated with these projects.

2. The original plan for the CWO-REZ was to provide additional transmission infrastructure to support an extra 3GW of renewable energy projects above that already supported by the existing transmission network in the region. After much prevarication EnergyCo has finally admitted that this will be 6GW rather than 3.

The proposed 500kV power line from Wollar to Wellington duplicates the existing 330kV Wollar to Wellington line. As such renewable energy projects will be clustered along these lines, creating a cumulative impact that the guidelines specify must be avoided. And all the electricity produced by this new line must be fed into and is limited by the existing 500kV Muswellbrook to Wallerawang power line at Wollar. This existing line is approximately double the length of the proposed 500kV line from Wollar to Wellington. Think about it. If renewable energy projects were directly “plugged in” to the existing Muswellbrook to Wallerawang line the cumulative impact would be much less and the CWO-REZ made redundant. What is going on?

Rule of thumb. A single circuit 500kV power line will support approximately 3GW of renewable energy projects. It is proposed that two 500kV dual circuit lines be built between Wollar and the

Merotherie Hub. This means that up to 12GW rather than 6GW could be supported by the CWO-REZ.

It gets worse. The two dual circuit 500kV power lines are to be extended from the Merotherie Hub to the Elong Hub. The rationale for this must be that there is enough electricity flowing into the Elong hub to justify these two lines. If the Elong Hub has the capacity to “load” these two lines it must also have the capacity to “load” the lines from the Merotherie Hub to Wollar. The Merotherie Hub and all the projects feeding into it then become redundant.

Highly unlikely! To make any sense at all the two dual circuit 500kV lines at the Elong Hub must be extended in a loop back to the existing 500kV transmission network, presumably at Wallerawang. The CWO-REZ will then be capable of supporting not 3, not 6, not 12, but up to 24GW of renewable energy projects in the region. Imagine the uproar this would cause if widely known. It is doubtful if even the politicians who are in charge of the CWO-REZ are aware of these ultimate ambitions.

EnergyCo is essentially operating a “boiled frog” strategy in the roll out of the CWO-REZ. An incremental increase here, a bit more there. Not enough to incite too much unrest. That is until the whole region is effectively “cooked”. This deceitful and deceptive behaviour must not be tolerated.

## THE MESS

If wind and solar farms are viewed as unsightly then imagine how they will look if abandoned. The stupidity of the planning authorities in not implementing a bond system for the eventual decommissioning and rehabilitation of renewable energy projects is unfathomable. They are relying instead on guarantees given by the developers. Renewable energy projects are regularly on sold so these guarantees must be transferred to successive owners. And if any of these owners goes bankrupt the responsibility for the cleanup transfers to the host landholder who, in all likelihood, will go bankrupt as well. If this is the case then responsibility must ultimately transfer to the people who failed to enforce a bond system.

A simpler approach would be for the government to underwrite these guarantees, both existing and future. If the government is not prepared to do this, it gives a clear indication of their assessment of the validity of these guarantees. No renewable energy project can be approved until this situation is resolved.

## CONCLUSION

Poor planning inevitably produces poor outcomes. Effective planning establishes rules and regulations that protect the public from exploitation by developers. In the rush to renewable energy the planning authorities appear to have forgotten these basic planning principles. They and by inference their political masters should be aware, that just as with Robodebt, that the consequences of their actions can and will be called to account.