

Concerns re the UPC New England Solar Environmental Impact Statement - Uralla NSW

Whilst in favour of renewable energy, the scale of this project is staggering (2.6 Million solar PV modules) and the placement concerns us greatly. We have a number of objections and concerns about the EIS for the above project which are outlined below.

As brief background, my husband and I moved to the New England area several years ago, attracted to its spectacular scenery, four beautiful seasons and rural lifestyle. We did extensive research with federal, state and local governments, real estate agents, internet research and discussions with locals. We were greatly relieved to hear that no major developments were planned for this scenic area. As “tree-changers” we were very keen to escape the industrialisation of the Newcastle and Hunter areas and settled on a small parcel of land in Salisbury Plains (halfway between Uralla and Walcha), ecstatic to have found our piece of paradise.

We were deeply shocked to hear recently of the UPC New England Solar and Walcha Energy Project renewable energy developments in this area and have since heard of the ‘gag’ orders placed on landholders who had signed leases for both solar and wind plants on their properties. We feel this is very dishonest business practice and should be made illegal. Had they been allowed to discuss their involvement in these projects openly, we may have been able to find out more about these projects before we purchased. Had we known of this development, we would have settled elsewhere.

The EIS stated that there were no signs of koalas in any of the surveys undertaken. In actual fact there are established koala populations on the proposed Central array section, including on properties “Red Hill”, “Kelvin Grove” and “Rock Abbey”. The drought may be impacting numbers at present, but scats and tree markings should be obvious to an experienced mammal researcher. This lack of thoroughness makes us doubt the competency of the whole environmental assessment process undertaken.

The EIS states that 30% of employment for the Uralla area comes from agriculture, fishing and forestry. We speculate that as climate change increases, the areas of Australia suitable for food and fibre production will decrease. The New England project area is a rare location, in that a lot of it is on prime high rainfall agricultural land in a cool climate. We have a finite amount of this precious land type and to have this and

other projects propose to cover up vast areas of this landscape in solar panels defies logic. We suggest that these sort of developments should be targeted in areas of Australia that is very marginal or unsuitable for agricultural use.

The EIS states water used during construction and maintenance of this proposal is potable water that will be trucked in. We could not find in the EIS, where this 'trucked in' water is coming from and we are left guessing it will be extracted from the Uralla Shire Council area. We are in a drought situation with town residents already on water restrictions. This development will likely result in the town water supply being used up much sooner than would otherwise be the case. If town water is not the water source for the proposed project then what impact will this have on other water sources? Construction of additional bores or dams will still impact on water resources in the area. The vagueness in the EIS regarding water supply is concerning.

The impact of the project on property values has been predicted as "minimal" in the EIS. We were shocked to read that this impact level was calculated using no data whatsoever. It even states there are no Australian analyses or reviews available to make a prediction. As a neighbour of these solar projects, we predict our property value will decrease dramatically. We base this prediction on the common sense reasoning that at the moment we have a beautiful long distance rural scenic outlook of native trees and grasslands. Should this view change to an industrial area covered in solar panels (and wind turbines are also predicted from another proponent) we would not want to live here anymore, and nor would anyone else – hence the demand would fall and in turn the property price. Even more offensive is that they acknowledged the lack of data and their action in the LUCRA performance targets is "No action required". Clearly resident's home and property values are of no interest to this project developer whatsoever. The EIS has reported results based on overly optimistic wishful thinking which casts serious doubts over the reliability of the information in this EIS.

We were unable to find any references in the EIS to the impact that fog has on the solar PV modules. The New England area is renowned for its cool foggy winter mornings, particularly on the lower flatter areas. These are the areas that the development is proposed for. Has the impact of heavy fog (sometimes not lifting until late morning) been taken into account at all? It is another reason why these large scale solar plants are totally unsuitable for this area and a factor overlooked by the project developer.

The EIS states that drivers mostly focus on the road ahead whilst driving. This is true, however if the views available to drivers within their peripheral vision were of no consequence then the tourism industry in Australia must be mistaken when they promote scenic drives. We drive the roads in our area regularly and the wonderful rural views available within our peripheral vision do not detract from our main focus on the road. In addition, passengers usually look at the scenery whilst travelling. At the moment our views are of rural agricultural scenes and native vegetation with some localised electricity wires and poles. Areas along the Thunderbolts Way and all the local roads associated with this proposal will be negatively impacted by the unpleasant site of solar panels and larger power lines and poles. The EIS suggests that some setback from the road and screening will mitigate any negative impacts. Setbacks and screening may seem to be a solution however, the long distance views in this area will still be significantly impacted by either of these measures. The loss of long distance views over our scenic rural landscape will significantly impact the enjoyment of travelling in our area, affecting both residents and tourists alike. If screening were to go ahead it will take years to grow to a sufficient height, and if the drought continues, the ongoing watering requirements will be enormous. Will the developer continue to replace dead trees and keep watering the screening plants for the duration of the project? We believe it is naïve to think that plant screening will be enough to offset the negative impacts for any road users.

The EIS has indicated some concessions have been made from the original proposal to setback the development from residential properties and suggested screening plants to mitigate the negative impacts of the proposal. The New England area is a very scenic part of Australia and to blanket this area in millions of solar panels is a travesty. Not only will the visual amenity be ruined, but the infrastructure of the electrical power line upgrades required to transport the power generated will also be impacting the visual beauty of this area (these cannot be “screened” out). We do not believe anyone would want to be a neighbour of a solar industrial plant. People who are receiving rental income from these inappropriate developments may be tempted to overlook the negative impacts in return for financial gain. However, for neighbours forced to be subjected to these industrial views, it is grossly unfair. Many of us have long distant magnificent rural views which will now be lost and replaced by short distance patchy screening at best. We believe the solar PV modules and electricity transmission infrastructure are only suitable on very large scale landholder properties where they cannot be seen by any neighbours or road users, hence they are not a development suitable in the New England area.

Socio economic impacts outlined in the EIS are varied. They include greater demand for rental properties in the area, with potential for rents to increase with such demands. The construction of a FIFO village will help alleviate accommodation demands however that does not cover all workers on the project and therefore renters in Uralla will suffer. Visitors to the area including tourists will also be impacted negatively by the lack of accommodation predicted. The EIS also says the majority of the businesses in the Uralla area are associated with agriculture, fishing and forestry and describes the district as a creative hub set amongst a "historic and pastoral landscape". We have grave concerns this "pastoral landscape" will be changed forever into an "industrial landscape" if this and other proposals like it, get approved. The EIS has not addressed the impact of this change of landscape proposal on people's mental health re the stress caused by this and other projects in the area, particularly those living in neighbouring properties. With already enormous strains on our time and resources, we have been forced to invest in fighting for our futures which are currently on hold with lives that are in the balance. This development company has shown little regard for the lives negatively impacted by this proposal.

The EIS's compensatory "Community Benefit Sharing Initiative" is paltry at best and makes us question why the company would need to "buy" acceptance if it is such a great development for our area. We predict the only positive economic/employment benefit to the community will be very short term, during the construction phase. We believe it will have an overall negative impact in the medium and long term as outlined throughout this submission, with the community paying the price whilst the company and a few landholders reap the major benefits.

The EIS outlines the decommissioning process involved once the life of the project is over. This will come at a considerable cost to the company. Soil compaction, chemical pollution and weed control would also require extensive remediation practices to have any hope of "restoring" the landscape back to pre-development. We have concerns that the company will close down near to the project end date or declare bankruptcy and therefore leave the area permanently scarred with derelict solar panels and associated infrastructure. In the unfortunate event that this project goes ahead, we recommend the company pay into an independent "decommissioning" fund before any building commences. This would ensure thorough and complete decommissioning is guaranteed to occur once the project is completed regardless of the status of the owning company at the time.

Whilst we are of the belief an EIS should be thorough, we have had to skim through some of the content due to its enormous size and may have missed some key points. We have great concerns that the average person impacted by this proposal may not have the time to thoroughly read all 1900 pages of it, digest the results and formulate a logical response. Literacy skills vary throughout the community and extremely large documents are off putting for people of lesser literacy ability. Many rural properties do not have internet access available, therefore making it very hard to lodge a submission on this project. We wonder if the EIS size could be a ploy to discourage most people from truly understanding the massive negative impacts of this proposal.

We believe large renewable energy projects should be located within very large landholdings on very poor agricultural land where the impacts to surrounding landholders and townships would be negligible. Even in these cases, the whole community (not just a select few) should be consulted from the outset so the company could move on if the notion is not embraced by the community. Identifying the New England region as a “renewable energy zone” seems to be an error in judgement by someone. The impact on many individuals and communities is likely to be negative at best and catastrophic at worst. Please consider these concerns when making decisions for the New England area.