Chapter 11 – The solar option

Why would you build a wind farm when the alternative is a walk in the park?

On February 4, 2016 the Sunraysia solar farm went on public exhibition. Not having much to do, I read the main section of the EIS that morning. The more I read, the more I convinced myself that I could support that particular renewables solution.
In case the solar planners don't talk to their wind farm colleagues, let me share the arguments I made in my submission of support on February 5. It contrasts vividly with the Jupiter wind farm in particular and wind farms in general.

Submission main points:

In NSW, the sun shines everywhere. Site selection is therefore much more flexible. You are only governed by a reasonable proximity to the grid.

Solar can't be blamed for a "South Australian like" grid collapse between dusk and dawn. In that period, they are predictably reliable. Wind farms never are. (although both suffer from unpredictability and intermittency during daylight hours on cloudy and/or still days)

The Planning process is much simplified. The SEARs were issued on June 17th, 2016. Epyc has been wasting everyone's time for over three years. The Sunraysia Solar Farm caught up in 6 months.
Solar farms support the political desire to fast-track renewables projects.
There will be fewer submissions and even fewer submissions in opposition.

This solar farm proposal, and others, are unlikely to generate reams of correspondence to the Secretary and departmental management and planners.

The Department's involvement with the application will be most likely finished at approval stage. The Department and its management won't be drawn into appeals before the Land and Environment Court. Nor into ongoing scuffles when the wind farm breaches its terms of consent.

No "Solar Farm Guidelines", draft or otherwise, are required.

Fewer ongoing modifications should be required. They may even be accomplished by "administrative action" as opposition will be light or non-existent.

There should be less stress on departmental planners and management. Those Jupiter people who you could be saddled with for life will be silent, or heaven forbid, on your side.
The same goes for politicians.

The Sunraysia solar farm has 3 non-associated residences within 5 kms (compared to our 273), only one under 2kms (compared to our 63). It proves that renewable energy projects can be built in the right place. There will be no Residents Against Sunraysia Solar Farm (RASSF). If there is, he or she will be very lonely.

The maximum height of infrastructure on the farm itself will be 8 metres (just like a large rural shed). The solar panels themselves will be in the 3 to 4 metre range. Solar farms don't need to be closer to the sun, so can stay off the ridges and be built in less conspicuous areas. They lend themselves, technically,

to a flat and boring landscape. Even if there are a handful of residences around a solar farm the Visual Impact will be at a much lower level.

Vegetation mitigation will be where it should be, next to the development, not up against the walls of the one visually impacted residence, with all its attendant issues, not the least being bushfire danger. If the solar farm burns, it will be insured. There will be no family possessions to lose. There is no emotion if it goes. No-one is going to say, "we lost our beautiful solar farm in the fire".

Aerial firefighting is not disrupted. Neither is general or agricultural aviation.

A solar farm is highly reversible on decommissioning. It doesn't leave a hundred thousand tonnes of concrete just under the surface. There also may be some scrap value. Not all 750000 solar panels will be defective. Not all will be 30 years old.
There is no noise during operations, therefore no ongoing arguments and litigation about excessive noise.
There will be no barotrauma, because solar farms don't move.
The odd passing pelican may come in for a landing on this glass lake, but none of our precious wedgetails will be sliced and diced.

Solar farms last longer and are easier, simpler and cheaper to build and maintain. A defective panel is much easier to fix or replace than a turbine.

Traffic and transport is much simplified. The largest sections of plant will be the skids that hold the localized transformers.

There will be no need for a Planning Assessment Commission meeting as this solar farm is unlikely to attract 25 objections.
There is no need for a Community Consultative Committee.
There is no community disruption. There may well be community acceptance

A solar farm will actually create local jobs. You can't wash panels from a control room in Dusseldorf. There is also a lot of local skilled labor, typically available in a rural area, required during construction. Of course there is no Community Enhancement Fund as there is no need to bribe the local populace. There may be one Benefit Sharing Agreement.

There will never be the need for a Senate enquiry on solar farms.
There will never be the need for a Solar Farm Commissioner.
There will be no political pain, as with a wind farm, only gain. Solar renewables will not influence local election outcomes.

The renewables industry has already decided. Wind farm developers like Epuron and Infigen are proposing solar projects as alternatives.
Solar farms are much more acceptable to the local communities. They don't divide them.
The economic benefits are more rational. Local property values are not destroyed.

The Sunraysia developer seems to know what they are doing, having developed the recently commissioned Mugga Lane Solar Park.

This of course is of no help to Epyc. If they switched overnight to a solar proposal, it would still be in the wrong place.

Long before oil became a dirty word, Castrol ran a hugely successful series of advertisements based on the theme of differentiation; "Oils aint oils, Sol"
Similarly, renewables aint renewables.

Therefore I support this solar farm, but not the maniacal economy destroying rush to renewables whilst the three biggest emitters, China, India and the US laugh at us.
I support it, because the only alternative renewables solution on offer, a wind farm, is demonstrably much worse.

End of Sunraysia submission.

Back to Jupiter.

s7(1)(c) of Schedule 2 of the Environmental Planning and Assessment Regulation 2000 states that an environmental impact statement must include:

> "an analysis of any feasible alternatives to the carrying out of the development, activity or infrastructure, having regard to its objectives, including the consequences of not carrying out the development, activity or infrastructure"

The revised Jupiter SEARS require the EIS to include:

> "an analysis of feasible alternatives to the carrying out of the development, having regard to its objectives, including an assessment of the environmental costs and benefits of the development relative to alternatives and the consequences of not carrying out the development, the suitability of the chosen option and whether or not the development is in the public interest.

Note the requirement, in both cases, is to provide an analysis of "feasible alternatives", including not having the development. If the Sunraysia developer finds solar farms a feasible form of renewable power generation, and the case is powerful, why doesn't Epyc? Why has Epyc not analysed this feasible alternative as they are required to do?

Perhaps Secretary McNally might like to talk to her new Minister about the benefits of solar renewables, in the right location of course.