AWA submission to public exhibition of the Crookwell Wind Farm development application and the associated modification

14/11/2016

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The Australian Wind Alliance supports the Crookwell WInd Farm.

About AWA

The Australian Wind Alliance (AWA) is a community based organisation that has over 600 financial members and around 11,000 Facebook followers. Our members include landholders, farmers, small businesses, and members of the community, including many neighbours to existing wind farms. The Wind Alliance encourages best practice community engagement and supports wind farms for the contribution they make to reducing Australia's carbon emissions and the benefits they bring to regional Australia. We are satisfied that this wind farm is well sited and is well designed and will be positive for the surrounding community. We believe the proponent has adequately addressed all the issues arising with this project with this amended proposal.

AWA supporters in the Southern Tablelands region

The Australian Wind Alliance has numerous members and supporters in the Southern Tablelands area. Most of these supporters have no financial interest in the Crookwell Wind Farm and still support this development in their own backyard. Wind Alliance representatives have been speaking with community members and local businesses over the last month to assess the mood of the region towards the Crookwell Wind Farm. We have spoken to over 150 people and businesses in that time. The overwhelming response to our enquiries is one of support for the project. The main issue raised with us is to ensure that the local community gains the maximum possible benefit from the turbines.

In the interests of transparency, we note that one of our employees, NSW Organiser, Charlie Prell, is an interested landholder in the project. This has had no bearing on our support or otherwise for this project.

NSW Renewable Energy Action Plan

The NSW Government's Renewable Energy Action Plan supports the achievement of a target of 20% renewable energy by 2020 by attracting renewable energy investments and projects to NSW. The role wind farms such as the Crookwell Wind Farm can play is critical to achieving this objective. Wind farms are the cheapest and most efficient form of generation of renewable energy. A recent report from Pitt and Sherry identified that wind generation in Australia reached record levels in May 2016, with South Australia producing 49% of its electricity from wind over the entire month. NSW's generation was a measly 4.8% from the same wind resource. If NSW wants to achieve significant levels of electricity generation from wind then we have to build more turbines. Until the commencement of construction of the White Rock Wind Farm there had been no turbines constructed in NSW for 18 months, mainly due to planning and economic uncertainty.

The Crookwell Wind Farm can assist in significantly boosting NSW's wind generation capacity. The wind farm is expected to generate 659 Gigawatt hours (GWh) per annum. This is enough electricity to power 101,000 homes. AWA notes that you would need to cover about 750 hectares with solar panels to produce the same amount of energy as this project. By contrast, this project impacts a maximum of 100 hectares of the total project site of 3,588 hectares.

A goal of the Renewable Energy Action Plan that AWA strongly endorses is to engage communities early and effectively in renewable energy projects such as the Crookwell Wind Farm. We are satisfied that the proponent has achieved this. Their negotiation of commercial agreements offering remuneration to neighbours of the wind farm is a highly commendable commitment and something the Wind Alliance enthusiastically endorses. The Wind Alliance has been campaigning for this type of benefit sharing for many years now. This initiative should be strongly encouraged by all parties.

NSW Government's Climate Change Policy Framework

The recent release of the NSW Government's Climate Change Policy Framework which includes an "aspirational" target of achieving zero net emissions by 2050 is a very important announcement. For NSW to achieve this target there will need to be a much more concerted effort to facilitate and encourage the construction of new wind farms to replace our ageing coal fired generators. The Crookwell Wind Farm is a significant contributor to this target, and should be approved for construction.

Flora, fauna and native vegetation

AWA strongly supports the conservation of endangered and threatened species of flora and fauna. In the Environmental Assessment there are detailed discussions of the impacts the wind farm will have on various species of flora and fauna. We note that the number of turbines in the Crookwell Wind Farm has been reduced from 75 to 56, a reduction of 19 turbines.

Where any impact on bird species such as the many species of robins, wedge-tailed eagles, and other species is identified, the Crookwell Wind Farm EA has outlined detailed management plans to minimise and manage these impacts.

On-site water usage during construction will be mitigated by minimising vegetation clearance, retaining all contaminated stormwater, processing wastewater on-site and locating stockpiles away from drainage lines and in areas least susceptible to wind erosion.

We also note that the planning for this project has required many flora and fauna surveys to be completed. This will significantly add to the understanding of the natural capital of the area and facilitate further studies such as the monitoring of any future impacts of the turbines on local flora and fauna.

The Australian Wind Alliance notes that the largest threat to these species of flora and fauna is from climate change, not from the wind farm. The construction of the wind farm will assist in minimising the impacts of climate change and thus have a positive impact on the survival of all threatened species. The construction of the wind farm will also allow local farmers to manage their private land in a much more ecologically and environmentally sustainable manner. The passive income stream from the turbines will give landholders, both hosts and neighbours, the financial capacity to install tree corridors and preserve remnant forest on their private land. This will increase the biodiversity of the area and assist all threatened species.

Community Enhancement Fund

The proponent has committed to a formal CEF program with Upper Lachlan Shire Council who have jurisdiction over this wind farm at a generous level of $140,000/annum, indexed to CPI. This contribution from the proponent is larger than any other contribution to this region's economy than has been made in the past. This fund alone will see a significant boost to the economy of Crookwell. We also strongly recommend that a small percentage of this funding should be invested in perpetuity into a trust fund for the future. This will ensure the benefits of the wind farm outlive the physical presence of the turbines.

The CEF program will also allow local conservation groups such as Landcare to apply for much-needed funding for specific projects to further advance the restoration and protection of local flora and fauna ecosystems.

Support from local businesses

AWA representatives have been seeking public comment on the Crookwell Wind Farm from local businesses and people in the Southern Tablelands for the past two months. We have spoken to the Goulburn Chamber of Commerce, and more than 50 small businesses in the area. In addition to this we have canvassed opinions of people in the street. As stated earlier in this submission, we have been pleasantly surprised with the overwhelming support for the proposal, particularly within the business and farming communities. It is worth noting that most of these people will not put a submission forward to the Department as they don't see anything detrimental in it. This point must be noted by the Department when it is assessing the submissions.

This quiet support comes despite a campaign of fear that encourages people to remain silent. In the past vehicles from wind farms have been subject to vandalism. The companies have removed identifying features from their vehicles in order to protect workers identities and places of abode. It prevents companies displaying a positive brand in the community. For business and retailers it's a fear that compels silence in fear of losing customers.

Farming and resilience

For many years the Australian Wind Alliance has been promoting the benefits wind turbines can bring to landholders, both hosts and involved neighbours, in assisting them to run economically, and thus environmentally and ecologically sustainable farms. The passive income stream generated by the turbines underpins these farming operations and fundamentally changes the economic base of the farm and hence the region. This income is not dependant on the vagaries of the weather. Local farmers will receive about $600,000 per year for the next 25 years.This will dramatically increase the financial resilience of local farmers and help them manage periods of drought and fickle commodity prices.

The construction of the wind farm and associated infrastructure will have negligible impact on continued grazing activities. Where possible, the wind farm will upgrade existing farm tracks and all electrical cabling within the wind farm will run underground.

Local Amenity

The developer is required to make good on any road damage incurred through the construction period. Significant additional traffic will only occur during the construction period with operation and maintenance adding little additional traffic to local roads. It is appreciated that there will be some inconvenience to local traffic during the construction however experience from other wind farms in Australia strongly indicates that local council roads are actually improved by the presence of a wind farm. The presence of turbines is a reassurance that roads will be maintained, as there exists a mutual vested interest between city and rural communities to keep the energy flowing.

Neighbour agreements

It is very pleasing to see the proponent has taken the progressive step of offering “neighbour agreements” for the Crookwell Wind Farm to any residence within 2 kilometres of a wind turbine. The Australian Wind Alliance welcomes this move. We enthusiastically endorse the sharing of the benefits of the turbines more widely into the region and encourage the Department to support and further encourage this thinking for other wind farm proposals.

Economic benefits to the area

At the information night held in Crookwell on September 1st, the Department indicated that they will consider the economic benefits and impacts of wind farms as part of their assessment. Points for the Department to note include:

- The Crookwell Wind Farm project is a $320 million project. It has the potential to add economic value of $130 million to the economy in NSW.
- There will be a direct injection of over $1 million per year to the local community through payments to landholders, permanent staff, local councils, and the community.
- The project is forecast to create over 120 jobs in the region during the construction phase, significantly increasing the number of people living and working in the area.
- 20 ongoing full time roles will be created in operations and maintenance, providing long term job opportunities for locals.

- More people working in the community will improve the viability of local schools and sporting teams and mean more money will be spent in the community. This stimulates business and creates jobs.
- There will be an annual contribution of $2,500 (adjusted annually to changes in the CPI) per operating turbine to the Upper Lachlan Shire's Community Enhancement Fund to be spent on community projects in vicinity of the project area. This equates to an annual contribution of $140,000 to the direct benefit of community projects in the local area.
- Local businesses will have the opportunity to supply goods and services including accommodation, catering, meals, engineering, motor vehicle servicing, earthworks services, fuel supplies, fencing and landscaping.
- Local farmers will receive about $500,000 every year for the next 25 years, either in lease payments or through neighbour agreements. This will dramatically increase the financial resilience of the local farming economy and help farmers manage periods of drought and fickle commodity prices.
- The construction of the Crookwell Wind Farm and associated infrastructure will have negligible impact on the existing grazing activities. The wind farm will mostly use existing farm tracks, that will be upgraded by the proponent at their expense. This will increase the efficiency of the existing farming and grazing operations by providing faster and easier access to many parts of farmers' land.

Local Roads

AWA notes that any damage caused to existing roads will be repaired at the proponent's cost. Past experience indicates this repair work is often done by the local council road crews, providing additional work for council staff and easing the pressure on councils' budgets.

Water

The Department needs to be aware of the discussions within the community about the lack of water resources in the region. This has two implications for the wind farm. The first is the amount of water used in construction of the wind farm. The proponent has made it very plain that if the water is not available for construction then the wind farm will not be built. There will be no draw on valuable local water resources unless the water can be used sustainably and the resources used will be recharged, either naturally or by the proponent.

The second implication is far more important for your consideration. Once constructed, wind farms do not use water. Unlike all fossil fuel based generation, they produce electricity without the need for massive amounts of water. In a relatively dry region such as Crookwell, this is just one more reason why this wind farm makes sense.

Unlike coal-burning power plants, wind farms use no water in their operation, leaving local rivers and creeks untouched.

On-site water usage during construction will be mitigated by minimising vegetation clearance, retaining all contaminated stormwater and process wastewater on-site and locating stockpiles away from drainage lines and in areas least susceptible to wind erosion.