

The Human Cost of Renewables

The corrugations on the old hall look tired. The community hall has stood on the outskirts of town since the early 1900's and in that time very little has changed. The first time I visited the hall was as a child for a school dance. I had made the drive from our rural haven to the burgeoning city of Canberra and mum had reluctantly spent \$50 on a pair of shorts for me to wear. As I entered the hall in my new knee length Billabong shorts the world was full of promise and the night would be the best of my life. Only it wasn't. The night was uneventful. The new shorts made me no more enticing to the girls at the dance and the century old wooden floorboards creaked and willed me to sit.

Just under a decade ago I visited the hall once more. This time it was to marry my wife and unlike my experiences as a child, she was willing to look past my horrible dancing and we spent a magical time dancing, laughing and celebrating with friends; it really was the best night of my life.

The hall has been a special place. It's been a symbol of the community, a place of coming together, a place of celebration. Recently that has changed. The hall is no longer a place of smiling and laughter and bad dancing. It has become a war room, a symbol of a divided community fighting against a much larger foe. And the shift that's happened in this old community hall is not isolated. It's happening in community halls all across our region.

My family are sixth generation farmers, and all things going well, my children will be the seventh. I love reading the memoirs of my great grandmother who grew up on the land. She tells tales of riding to Gundaroo for school, the cranky teacher that made life difficult and how at night she would say a prayer that perhaps god could make him fall off his bike so that they could have a new teacher. She tells of going into Canberra in 1913 for the laying of the foundation stone and how in one horrible week her husband and husband's parents all died of pneumonia, leaving her with a two year old daughter and a large farm to manage alone, which she did.

Our farm is special. It sits amongst rolling hills and lush pasture. It's minutes to Canberra and yet, feels like it's miles from anywhere. In summer the sunsets over the hills to the west are glorious, and in winter we look down on a valley blanketed in fog from top our hilltop perch. It's not an easy life, but it's rewarding. The drought means that the cost of feed takes away any chance of profitability this year, but the rain will come eventually, and with it the long grasses that we so desperately rely on. I remember seeing my parents worried faces when I was younger as they would discuss such things. "We need to pray for rain" mum would say. We'd all nod in agreeance. I've seen their worried faces before, but never like this. This year the worry hasn't left their face, and it's not because of the drought.

"They want to build a solar farm on the edge of our property" dad said to me over the phone last year. "Their lawyers came to talk to us. They're going around to all the farmers." Well that's not so bad I thought to myself. I've always aired on the side of environmental and wholly believe that as a society we need to make a shift. As I learnt more my perception began to shift. Not about the need for renewable energy, but about me being ok with it sitting alongside our family farm, the same farm that my great grandmother had held together by herself.

The proposed development is 850 acres. For reference that's a little bit larger than Central Park in New York City. For those who've ever been, it's enormous. Within 2 kilometres of the development the owners of 34 farms will be directly affected. For some, like us, they've been in the area for generations. For others, their farm is the realisation of a lifelong dream to be

on the land, their life savings poured into its purchase. Land in the area is not cheap either. Its proximity to Canberra is highly desired.

The land is home to a number of endangered species and works alongside the Gorooyarroo and Mulligans Flat nature reserves to help provide a haven for the critically endangered golden sun moth and the vulnerable superb parrot.

Aside from the visual impact, the economic impact on land values and the potential threat to our local endangered species there are a number of other things that make me ask "Why here?" Our local creek runs through the middle of the proposed site. It's flooded three times in the last decade, and the recurrence of such events happens more and more frequently. Last year a large fire came through the area, and like the floods, their occurrence appears to happen far more frequently. And then there's the fog. Dad has been out each morning and taking photos of the valley. They're beautiful. The fog hangs in the area to the late hours of the afternoon. Perfect for photos, not for solar!

It's winter and the old hall is a cold place to be on a Thursday evening. An older lady walks slowly through the door, reaches into her handbag and pulls out a couple of \$100 notes. "I don't really do the internet banking stuff, but wanted to help out for the brochures and such." The recipient smiles in gratitude and the lady takes her seat in the hall. I look around at weary, defeated faces. Living on the land the droughts you anticipate, this you don't. A representative from the local council explains after the meeting that fights like this have been happening all across the region. Towns are divided. Some farmers are selling out, others staying put. Generational friendships are falling apart. Sometimes it's wind farms. More recently, it's solar.

The NSW government has identified three suitable sites for renewable energy generation in the state. The identified sites are put against a huge range of criteria to meet. The three sites sit in remote areas of rural NSW. Areas that aren't prime grazing land, that don't visually impact 34 neighbouring properties, that aren't prone to flood or fire, that won't jeopardize the conservation efforts of our local endangered species. These are areas that would benefit from any economic activity the site may bring and where the energy produced will be consumed within the state. And yet, here we sit, huddled in the cold community hall on a Thursday evening.

The huge number of applications that have been submitted to build renewable energy sources in our local area are riding on a wave of government subsidies. The conglomerates vying for these government dollars show no regard for the recommendations that have been put in place by the governments from who they seek the subsidies. They show no regard for the local farmers whose lives are being thrown into turmoil as they try to duke it out with multi-million dollar corporations, and they show no regard for the communities that are left broken in their wake.

In our changing climate the drought isn't the only problem keeping our farmers awake.

Sam Hardwicke



My wife and I on our family farm. The chimney is the last remnant of the house my great grandmother lived in. The paddocks in back ground would be filled with solar panels under the new proposal.



The Sutton Community Hall on the evening of our wedding reception. A stark contrast to the meetings currently being held there.



The Sutton Community Hall



One of my dad's photos of the valley shrouded in fog.