

I am writing to raise very serious concerns and my strong objection to the proposed Hills of Gold Wind Farm. My family own land in the Timor community, who will be directly and adversely affected by the proposed Project.

The windfarm will sit on a ridge not far from my families' properties, with a direct line of sight to the ridge. The proposed turbines are so huge they will cast a shadow on the entire valley and will appear frighteningly close to my parents' properties. Yet my family (and the rest of the Timor Community) have had no consultation on the Project at all – there has been no public photo montages from the Timor Side to even understand the visual impact of the construction of the 70 turbines (a visual impact which will be immense, given the location and proximity to the Timor community), no noise or vibration impact testing to understand any disturbances to the Timor community, no testing of potential health impacts (including sleep) or safety.

This lack of crucial (or indeed, any) community engagement is a reason alone why the proposed Project should be dismissed. There has been a complete lack of natural justice and fairness to the Timor community, including my family, who will undoubtedly be negatively impacted by the proposed Project. This is a fundamental breach of law.

At a general level I am not against the idea of windfarms, provided they are implemented with proper planning and consultation and they are not constructed in a way which causes irreparable harm or damage to the local community and environment. However the proposed Hills of Gold Wind Farm meets none of these criteria and must be rejected or dismissed. Alternatively, the Minister for the Environment should be called on to make a decision that the Project is "clearly unacceptable" because of its potential impact on threatened and endangered native flora and fauna. A decision of this kind must be made imminently, before further unlawful/unauthorised clearing of the habitat of endangered species continues before the consultation period is even over.

In addition to the lack of crucial community engagement, the principal reasons for which I object to the proposed Project are based on the very real and significant risks which the EIS itself clearly identifies the Project will have in relation to:

1. depriving the local Community and nearby landowners of precious water supplies (at a time and to a Community that has suffered unbelievable emotional, financial and physical hardship due to drought conditions over the last 5 or so years) and the
2. threatening endangered or threatened/vulnerable species and their habitats (including but not limited to the wedge tail eagle (now endangered), booroolong frog (now endangered), and koalas – among a list of many others).

I address each of these points briefly below. I need to preface this by saying how completely outrageous it is for the relevant local Councils and State (and Federal) Government to even be contemplating a Project of this kind at a time like this in the area it is proposed, when the very communities who will be most adversely impacted by this huge commercial Project (including my family and the Timor Community and our native endangered and threatened species) are still suffering so terribly from the effects of the drought of the last few years. It is almost criminal that the local Councils and State Governments whose functions are to protect very communities like these, are planning a project of this kind that will cause serious and irreparable harm to the community.

1. Threat to Precious Water Sources – to be diverted (on an industrial scale) from an already suffering community/landowners to save construction costs for the Project

My family, like so many others in the Timor community and the Upper Hunter Shire Council area generally, have suffered extreme financial, emotional and physical hardship over the past four or so years while all their water sources were completely depleted. My family and most others in the region had to sell most of the animals they owned for next to nothing, just to avoid the horrible alternative of starving their livestock. They had to buy vast amounts of water at great cost for the past few years, just to have water to survive – this was made all the more difficult while bushfires ravaged the east coast of Australia for so long over the Summer of 2020. They could barely shower, they had to hand feed the few animals they had left and could not travel to see anyone for years (including close family and new grandchildren) because they could not afford to lose any more animals and yet there was absolutely nothing for the animals to eat or drink without them.

The devastating effects of this extended period of drought cannot be underestimated and it will be a long time before families and the community and the Upper Hunter Shire Council recovers. So many lost everything, including their mental health. Lives were lost to suicide as a result. Families destroyed. And the worst part of all is that we know it is likely to happen again, and possibly more severely, in what could be the very near future. I honestly don't know how the Community will cope.

What this terrible period of time taught families like mine and the Timor Community (and surrounding communities) is how sacred and critical water access is for survival.

And where are the local Councils and State Governments when we need them most?

Rather than protect and support these regional communities, and while we are still in the wake of the horrendous drought conditions, this Project is being proposed where every one of the identified water sources for construction and maintenance of the Project derive from natural water sources within the area, which will inevitably be at the expense of the local Community/landowners. The Project lists these options as including relying on water access licensing rights from WaterNSW, Council water supply, in agreement with Council(s), tapping into "one or more" new groundwater production bores (that will need to be licensed for industrial purposes) – without even having to quantify *how many* bores this could include. The only water source option which would *not* take water away from the local Community, is the last option which would be to source water from an offsite source using a commercial water tanker but the Report confirms the other measures should be adopted in preference to this because this was anticipated "to add considerable expense to the construction of the Project". Which highlights so clearly the motivation to reduce construction costs for this Project even where it is at the expense of the local community.

It is absolutely shameful that our local Councils and State/Federal Government are even considering a Project of this kind that will rely on taking water from local Communities who are still suffering so much from years of drought and so desperately need to hang onto every drop of water they can to slowly rebuild their lives and, provided there is even time, hope to prepare themselves for the next drought which we know won't be far away and is predicted to be even harsher (if that is even possible) than the last.

To think that if this Project is approved, families like mine and the Timor and other local Communities may have to face the next drought in a position where this Project has been approved with water access rights approved and multiple bores installed – all to enable the theft of precious water sources on an *industrial scale* from the local Community – is just unimaginable. Just look at

similar examples around the nation where cotton farmers and other industrial-scale operations had water access rights during the drought which had the effect of completely depriving local landowners and the community of access to water on rivers that had been the lifeline of those communities since they have been known to man.

This Project must be dismissed for this reason alone. Murrumbidgee and the Upper Hunter Council became well renowned throughout the nation (and abroad) in the media during the recent drought as the Town where all the water dried up. The nation was enthralled by the terrible hardship they were facing without even a drop of water for so long.

Just think what the media would make of a Project being approved in this very area by our local Councils, which threatens to deprive this very same community from water access/sources all in the name of commercial profits (and reducing construction costs).

2. Threat to endangered or threatened flora and fauna (including koalas!) – identified as High Risk

In addition to water, the devastating events of the past few years (in drought and bushfire events) have highlighted how critical it is that we preserve and protect our native flora and fauna, and in particular our endangered or vulnerable species and their habitats. Large-scale destruction of these habitats and the risks this poses to these threatened creatures just ought not be tolerated in the current environment. These habitats have become too precious and by allowing the clearing of these areas will cause irreparable harm.

The EIS and its appendices identify the Impacts on Threatened Species and Communities associated with this Project as “High”. This factor alone should justify dismissal of the Project.

The EIS states that there are no serious and irreversible impacts from the Project for reasons which include that there is sufficient availability in the wider landscape to continue to support threatened species known to occur in the Development Footprint and the Project avoids areas of breeding habitat for threatened microbats. I am told the last point is completely untrue – but I will defer to others with more experience in this area to submit on this. The first point is a ridiculous statement to be making in the wake of the terrible bushfire events in Australia. We do not have the luxury of saying that huge developments and clearing of land of the kind proposed in the Project is acceptable because our endangered and threatened habitats can just move to live in other places. We know how precious these habitats are and how very likely that removal of these habitats will result in the removal/death of these species. There is a huge focus around the rest of the country on trying to *increase* the number of these habitats (most famously that of the koala) – it is verging on corrupt or criminal for our local Councils/State Government to be considering allowing this Project whose construction will depend on the clearing (which has already started unlawfully!) and irreparable destruction of these very same habitats.

The list of identified threatened/endangered species that will be affected/threatened by the Project is very long but notably includes among others koalas (the media will have a field day if this is permitted!), the boorooloong frog (critically endangered!), the spotted tail quoll (endangered), the wedge-tail eagle – and many others. The boorooloong frog, which is now classified as critically endangered, barely gets a mention in the Reports. It is unclear how the Project can ignore the *at least* high risk of threat to a critically endangered species?

Conclusion

If the devastating and unprecedented conditions which Australia and in particular the Upper Hunter Shire Council and local communities (including the Timor Community) have experienced over the past few years have taught us anything, it is that the protection of water sources for our rural communities/local landowners and the protection and preservation of habitats for endangered/threatened species including koalas, must be paramount in considering any future development or other applications. These considerations cannot be outweighed for commercial projects, because their damage will be irreparable and irreversible.

I am not against windfarms, but this Project is not being proposed at the right time or in the right location for a windfarm. As the above hopefully illustrates, fundamental criteria and important environmental and planning laws have simply been ignored and have certainly not been met/complied with.

The Project should be abandoned or rejected immediately.

Alternatively, a decision should be made by the Minister for the Environment that the Project is “clearly unacceptable” because of its potential impact on identified threatened native animal species, including but not limited to the koala, the spotted tail quoll, the wedge-tail eagle, the booroolong frog (critically endangered) and precious local water supplies – the effects of which would be irreparable and devastating. If the Project is not rejected, I suggest the Minister for the Environment be called on to make a decision of this kind, confirming that the proposed action would have a clearly unacceptable impact on a matter protected by Part 3 of the EPBC Act, using her powers under s 74B of the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC Act). In this regard I refer you to the decision made in relation to the Lotus Creek Wind Farm (EPBC 2020/8627), where even fewer endangered species/habitats were at risk by the proposed action than in the current Project, which was dismissed by the Minister under this Power.

Thank you for your understanding.