

Submission against the proposed Bowmans Creek Wind Farm

I am an environmental professional with 15 years experience in environmental consulting and coal mining industries in the Hunter Valley. My husband is also an environmental professional with 15 years' experience in the mining industry. Together, we own three properties in the Muswellbrook Shire of NSW, two of which will be directly impacted by the proposed Bowmans Creek Wind Farm development. Our two properties at McCully's Gap are our home, where we have chosen to raise our two young children. They are also where we breed and fatten beef cattle like most of our neighbours.

I object to the development for many reasons. I believe the true impact of the development is being downplayed by Epuron and the community support for the development is being exaggerated to make the project seem more appealing. Our first contact with representatives from Epuron was a community meeting at the McCully's Gap hall facilitated by the Muswellbrook Shire Council (MSC). The mayor of Muswellbrook introduced the Epuron representatives and then stated that he would not be participating in the meeting due to a conflict of interests. He did not elaborate on the nature of the conflict apart from saying that he lived in McCully's Gap. The meeting was a waste of our time. There was no information presented about the location of the proposed development. We asked for a map of the proposed turbines and were told that one was not available at this early stage of the project. It is very difficult to determine what the likely concerns will be regarding a development if you are not even aware of the location of the proposed structures. We were polite and listened but did not raise any objection at that stage, due to having no information to base it on. After the meeting, the local paper wrote an article claiming that the majority of residents in attendance were supportive of the proposed development. I felt this was a misrepresentation of my views and the views expressed by my neighbours at the meeting. I am not supportive of the proposed development and I never have been.

Our dealings with Epuron have remained similar. We are constantly trying to get more specific information from them (my husband joined the CCC in order to gain accurate information about the project and deliver this to the neighbours we meet with regularly) and they are constantly giving us limited information or inconsistent information compared to what they are telling other neighbours of the development. They came to our house to deliver the photomontage from the visual impact assessment and we asked them about the possibility of acquisition of our property. They were dismissive of the possibility, saying that acquisition was not an option the company would consider and they were not discussing this option with any landholders, as the project would be developed via legal agreements with host landholders and neighbours. We have recently spoken to a couple who own a property neighbouring the proposed development at Muscle Creek and they were telling us that Epuron would acquire their property, but they were unable to tell us why that is. We are aware that the property was included in the Noise Assessment for the project but that the landowners have been unable to get Epuron to give them access to the data that was collected on their property, despite them claiming that provision of the data was an agreed condition of them allowing Epuron to perform the monitoring on their property. The lack of records from Epuron's meetings with landowners make it impossible for me to determine what was discussed and agreed but, given my own experience, I believe that they depend on the individual landowners ability to negotiate and not on any industry standards or equitable approach.

The CCC has also been unable to gain data and information about the project that they have requested. There is no public information about the standard terms of the legal agreements, including how many people have signed them.

It is hard to understand how a company can be allowed to come in and construct an industrial power station (because obviously calling this a “farm” is just a great example of green marketing) without buying any land. Who is responsible for protecting the landowners? The windfarm commissioner does not seem to have any regulatory powers. The landowners should not have to sign legal agreements that allow for the registration of easements over their properties and be expected to believe that this has no impact on the value of their properties. The landowners should be able to make complaints about the development, at any stage, regardless of whether they have signed an agreement. The company should not be able to move the proposed location of any turbine or other infrastructure without altering the terms of the agreements (that is to say, the agreements should include a plan for the project outlining the location of all infrastructure on the property and any adjoining properties which must be altered only by written agreement with the landowner). The landowner should be able to sell their property without the permission of the company. The landowner should never be able to be held responsible for the decommissioning of the project infrastructure, even if the company defaults. Funds should be provided up-front by the company to cover the decommissioning and rehabilitation costs if the company defaults. A bond held by the government (whichever regulator is responsible) would be an appropriate mechanism for the protection of the landowners in this case.

We feel that the impact of the proposed development on our quiet rural area will lead to a loss of amenity with both visual and noise impacts, as well as an unacceptable impact on the flora and fauna of the 17,000Ha project area. The past two hundred years of agriculture and industry in the Hunter Valley has brought us to a point where the remaining woodland and forest habitats are restricted to the ridgelines this development proposes to clear. The value of the existing habitat corridors should not be underestimated due to a lack of survey effort. My six-year-old son asked me why they will put up turbines if they need to clear trees to do it, and I find I cannot adequately answer the question. If you are proposing to install a development that will deliver environmental benefits to the community then surely you should be looking at the impacts holistically and not just focusing on the benefits of lowering emissions during the power generation phase of the project. You should be assessing the full impact on carbon for all aspects of the development. We can find places for turbines that do not require the destruction of trees that are beyond the ability of the project to replace in its lifetime. A windfarm lasts approximately 25 years before needing to be completely rebuilt, so perhaps it would be reasonable to limit clearing to only trees less than 25 years old and offsetting the impact of clearing by improving the connectivity of existing habitat corridors through new plantings of similar species to those being cleared.

The clearing itself should not be considered of benefit to the community. The assessment seems to suggest that bushfire will be less likely to occur after the project is constructed, due to the approximately 515Ha of proposed clearing that will occur. Bushfire is a threat to our community due to the remote location of our properties and the fact that there is only one road in and out. This is the case for residents on Muscle Creek Road as well as Sandy Creek Road. In some sections, the road is barely wide enough for two vehicles to pass in opposite directions. After the horror fire season of 2019/2020, it is not acceptable for any development to fail to adequately assess and mitigate the risk of bushfire to affected residents. The 220m tall turbines will cause the 17,000Ha project area to be inaccessible to water bombing aircraft and thereby increase the level of risk for host and neighbouring residents. A fire in a 220m tall turbine cannot be fought from the ground or the air, so the turbines should have their own automatic fire suppression systems to address the risk of fires where no one can do anything besides watch them burn and hope that the fire does not spread to destroy homes and other infrastructure.

Water bombing aircraft will not be the only aircraft unable to fly near the turbines. The neighbours in our area use small, fixed wing aircraft to spread seed and fertiliser for pasture improvement. Some of these neighbours have not had the impact of the project on their properties assessed at all due to the properties not including a dwelling. A neighbour is a neighbour, regardless of whether or not they live on their block. Impact on agribusiness should be assessed and acknowledged by Epuron.

We do not want this development here. We do not need this development here. Fifteen jobs for 25 years are going to replace the jobs in the mining industry about as well as 60 turbines are going to replace Liddell Power Station when it closes next year. The real jobs in the renewables industry are in manufacturing the components that will need constant replacement. Those components are not manufactured here. The wind resource is not even particularly good here. The only reason this project is being considered is because of the proximity to the power distribution infrastructure associated with the coal fired power stations here in Muswellbrook. Let's replace them with something genuinely equivalent that will not require clearing of hundreds more hectares for only a fraction of the power generation capacity and lifespan that the old power stations have given us. Let's support projects where the proponent is investing time and money in the region by purchasing the land that they will operate their industrial power station on.

Please consider the real sustainability of this project. Please consider the genuine benefit to us from supporting a company that exists only to gain environmental approvals and engage with the community but seems unaware of planning law (to the point where they do not know that their monitoring towers are not exempt developments) and refuses to give the impacted community the information they ask for. I am a working mother of two young children with a farm to help run in my spare time. Having to read the EIS for the project to get the information I need and finding much of what I would like to know simply is not covered has been very frustrating. We are the impacted community and we would like to know who is going to protect us from this development?

Regards,

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