

Loss of Agriculture

It is our strong family view that agriculture and productive rural lands should be protected to retain food and fibre production in times when a significant part of our country is suffering from severe drought. Irrigation areas are encountering minimal allocations and the Murray Darling Basin is on its knees. This area achieves significant results through sufficient rainfall and soils that are suitable for crop production. Greater Hume has the capacity to produce whilst others may not. It must be considered that the cumulative impacts of drought added to the loss of agriculture for other reasons including large scale solar developments has a possible impact to the end consumer of increased food prices and limited availability. Instead of complaining about increased electricity prices people will soon be crying about food prices and a need to import food potentially may bring bio security risks such as Asia has seen with the African Swine Flu epidemic. Food security should be an increased emphasis at this time of agricultural struggle in our country and hence I object to the further loss of productive agricultural land. Fodder production in our state and country is also extremely important to protect and secure the retention of breeding livestock to ensure primary production can continue reliably into the future and provide for increasing food needs.

Our family operates a hay contracting business and the financial year in year out loss of income will occur due to the loss of agricultural production on this land. We have always considered the "Bega Plains" property proposed to be developed in this application as one of the best farms in our area. There are also other contractors that will lose business on this productive cropping land. The loss of agricultural work will be significant and over a long period of time in comparison to the jobs created by the solar development which are predominantly only short term and further, we do not believe these jobs will be filled by local people however from regional areas and experts from further afield. We have heard that the companies have teams that move from area to area undertaking these contracts.

The short term construction opportunities can not equate to the loss of long term production of cropping land. The multiplying economic value of agriculture must be appropriately considered. Agricultural businesses will lose sales, contractors will lose work, machinery dealers will lose sales and cumulative production impacts will hit food manufacturing and retail consumers,

I do not believe that the suggestion of grazing some sheep around panels can be justified as the retention of agriculture and see this simply as a marketing effort by the developer. Land in Greater Hume has strong mixed farming capacity allowing for the growth of crops which enhances the productivity of the local area. If this area is covered in solar panels the capacity of production is diminished. Where will the sheep feed come from? Sheep do not generally do well on the nutritional quality of weeds that may potentially grow in the poor shaded soil that may occur under the panels? There is research that confirms that the soil is impacted by the installation of solar panels and also that micro climate impacts do exist. It is important to consider that finished lambs require good feed, where will the grain and hay come from to feed these sheep if the capacity to make these products no longer exists on the property covered in panels. There is absolutely no way that this property under panels could near equate to the carrying capacity as is at present.

Greater Hume Shire's submission to this development determined at their November meeting of Council advised that this land will be mapped as Important Agricultural Land which is listed as an area of constraint in the NSW Large Scale Solar Guidelines. I do not however see any constraint in the installation of 900,000 panels on 605 hectares of productive agricultural land.

The important agricultural land mapping data needs to be completed by the NSW Department of Primary Industries prior to the determination of any solar developments in the area to ensure the appropriate consideration of agricultural land. The utilisation of the Land Soil Capability Scheme as requested in the SEARS is not adequate as this data is proven to be inaccurate and outdated. In addition the developers word their applications to market in their favour downplaying the agricultural significance and value of the land.

I do not believe that the economic analysis will adequately cover the loss of agriculture in the equation.

Climate Change

There is much conjecture and conflicting research in relation to climate change however I understand one truth in relation to the changing climate and that is that IF Climate Change is true then the biggest impact will be a significant reduction in our countries capacity to grow food. If we want to believe that action is necessary in relation to Climate Change then that action should include a primary response to protect and secure reliable food production in this country and NSW. Personally, I wish to make it exceptionally clear that I am not opposed to renewable energy projects and am in favour of such developments WHEN they are placed in the correct location and not at the expense of agriculture that feeds our country.

Orange Grove Gardens

Orange Grove has become a well known business providing for functions and weddings thriving from the promotion of a rural atmosphere which is enjoyed by many. I have family working at this venue and the recent installation of cabins has increased the capacity of this business resulting in further employment and tourism for our local area.

I strongly believe that the construction of a large scale solar development nearby and being overlooked from the rear deck of the function centre will have a drastic effect on bookings with people already rethinking bookings. Screening with tubestock will do nothing to mitigate the view of the large construction zone notwithstanding the long term industrialisation of the area. Serious consideration should be given to reducing the size of this development to avoid the paddocks in view from the function centre from being covered in solar panels which are an industrial eyesore.

Aesthetic Impact

I strongly believe that if approved, this industrial development will cause significant impacts to the numerous receptors including possible mental health issues from the many impacts including aesthetics, dust, noise, financial impacts and even devaluation that should not be underestimated. Surrounding landowners enjoy a rural lifestyle that will be significantly changed should such a large industrial type facility intrude into their community. I am concerned that one elevated landowner will have a view of the substation which again would take years to be screened with tubestock plantings.

This development has caused significant fracture and community angst which is detrimental to the health and wellbeing of people living in the area. In contradiction to the EIS document, I believe the large scale solar proposals in Greater Hume Shire have seriously opposed the Renewable Energy Action Plan – Goal 2 “to build community support for renewable energy”.

Flora and Fauna

I understand that many trees require removal in the development of this project and that displacement of flora and fauna may be a result. Personally, I cannot understand when the push for renewables is a consideration to save the environment why we would cause great disruption to the environment to do so, it is hypocritical. This area is known to be the home of the squirrel glider, flame robin, curlews and many other wildlife species that should be protected and trees should not be removed to allow this development to proceed.

Ongoing Viability

It is my great concern that there is no scrutiny of the actual ability of the company to remain viable throughout the full course of the project or that the energy produced from this facility will actually be required to fulfil supply. There is no financial guarantee of remediation of the site at the end of its tenure or should the developer become insolvent. I understand that remediation would then become the responsibility of the landowner however this still provides no guarantee that there will be the financial capacity to remediate the site should insolvency occur. I have great concern that at some point in time there may be a solar waste land left for the community to deal with.

I am uncertain about the comment in the EIS that this development is not required to meet projected electricity demand and question if not required then why would our country put at risk such a valuable feed source.

Traffic Impacts

The impact of increased traffic, specifically truck movements, through the township of Culcairn warrants significant consideration to ensure the safety of local people. I feel that the truck movements will impact the roundabout and Culcairn traffic and have concerns about the Olympic Way and Benambra Road intersection becoming dangerous with so many trucks turning in addition to the quarry trucks already turning there. Additionally, I have great concern that damage may potentially occur to Greater Hume roads from these significant truck movements. The consequential financial impact this would have on Council may have a further affect on Councils ability to attend to the many other shire roads that are greatly in need of repair.

Bush fire impacts

Many members of my family participate as volunteer members of the Rural Fire Service in our local brigade. This development is situated in the area of our brigade and would be the first responders to an incident in this area. I personally have great concern about the installation of these solar developments as brigade members have learned that Solar PV Plants have significant workplace health and safety issues with it being unsafe to enter a Solar Plant due to high voltage, fumes and entrapment issues caused by infrastructure and fencing. It has been confirmed that members would not be expected to enter the development and would be required to fight any fires on the outside perimeter should a fire in the plant occur. This poses a significantly increased fire risk to neighbours and nearby landowners and the nearby towns of Culcairn and Walla Walla. The Walla Walla Solar Farm will be in the nearby proximity of an area that has previously suffered from the Walla Walla Gerogery Bushfires on 17 December 2019 that burnt out 17000 hectares of land. The fire destroyed five local homes and damaged another four, killed over a thousand sheep and more than 100 cattle, and decimated sheds, vehicles, fencing and local crops. I can only imagine that if there was an area of 560 hectares on which RFS firefighters would be unable to undertake fire protection, the consequences that day could have been much worse.

I believe it is a responsibility of Government to assess the possible impact or increased possibility of fire risk during the assessment process and that a fire management plan completed AFTER approval is not sufficient to ensure the safety of people in the area. A small fire break of 20 metres does nothing to alleviate intense fire as we have seen in the past especially when prime land containing dry crops will potentially neighbour the area.

Water

The EIS advised that water will be sourced from either the Quarry or Greater Hume Standpipes, I note that the Quarry cannot guarantee supply for water as indicated in appendix B1. I would consider that dust mitigation would require significant amounts of water and would like to query that if quarry water is not available is potable water then required for dust mitigation and how will this be undertaken if ongoing dry causes water shortages as seen in many areas and restrictions are applied. Dust mitigation for a such a massive area of development appears a significant waste of water resources in these severely dry times and reliance on any dams could also not be guaranteed.

Conclusion

I wish for it to be noted that I strongly believe that there are many better places for these developments to be situated. Greater Hume, with its agricultural strength IS NOT THAT PLACE and as long as we allow the opportunistic approach of targeting existing transmission lines it does not push government to construct such lines in places where they would be more appropriately placed in the west or north of NSW where nothing grows. I understand that there is the argument of transmission loss and other factors however all business suffers from some loss and this is just the cost of doing business. There are many communities north and west struggling with minimal ability to produce agriculturally in these tough times of drought. These communities would benefit from solar development whilst in our area, after the construction period is complete, this development will result in a net loss to the community through the loss of agricultural production and agriculture's multiplying benefits. Please, use some common sense and direct these developments to where they should be, NOT ON PRODUCTIVE AGRICULTURAL LAND!!