

Voice for Walcha Submission

Voice for Walcha is a community group that was established in response to a lack of developer engagement in our town. We have a developer proposing 3400MW of wind development and the community was largely in the dark. The less the community knows about wind developments, the more likely they are to be compliant – this has been the approach of developers in our LGA. Voice for Walcha was set up with the goal of keeping the community informed about developments and the short- and long-term effects they may have on the community. When the group was initiated, we did not have a position for or against the developments, we just wanted to understand their impacts on the community.

Our community are frustrated at the apparent one-way forward progress through the planning process for renewable projects and the lack of protection for communities.

Part A: Overall Concepts

As a group, we would like to see the following points addressed and considered in the guidelines.

1. **Is the REZ concept still relevant and the best pathway to the energy transition?**
2. **How can social license be achieved to protect communities and prevent delays to project approval? By having well designed projects in appropriate locations with scrupulous developers.**
3. **Our natural resources – National Parks, Wilderness areas and World Heritage Areas need to be protected.**

1. Is the REZ concept still relevant and the best pathway to the energy transition?

REZs were declared based on renewable energy resources as well as proximity to existing transmission infrastructure.

- i. Was the initial design of REZs based on reliable information? Mesoscale modelling without physical measurements is not reliable. Is there any raw data available to validate the wind claims used in REZ design? Are we basing Australia's renewable energy roll-out on unvalidated information. The DNV-GL report that was commissioned by AEMO titled Multi-criteria scoring for Renewable Energy Zones, 30th April 2018 goes to lengths to discuss the uncertainty and unreliability of the modelling presented. DNV-GL recommends the results are used for pre-feasibility purposes only.
- ii. This information is outdated, based on superseded technology. Taller, more efficient wind turbines are capable of generating electricity in areas of lower wind quality. There is now an opportunity for project locations to be based on strategic land planning rather than solely on wind and solar resources. It is no longer necessary to locate wind projects in inaccessible, highly productive, high value biodiversity locations.
- iii. The proposed scope and cost of the transmission infrastructure investment required by the Government also brings into question the importance of projects being located near existing infrastructure. Could it be more efficient to have renewable projects in more remote and less productive areas where they may be welcomed by communities. Transmission infrastructure may be cheaper to build in kinder terrain with fewer delays due to more obtainable social license.
- iv. The declaration of REZs without strategic land planning has resulted in unacceptable cumulative impacts. Projects are not spread evenly throughout the REZs resulting in some communities being severely impacted by over development. Already the most suitable areas of land for projects have

been exhausted meaning developers are now trying to develop projects in less suitable areas resulting in community conflict and irreconcilable environmental and cumulative impacts. The 2018 AEMO ISP recommended State Governments conduct strategic land use assessment. Was this done?

- v. The REZ system has resulted in inequities for communities and LGAs within and outside REZs. Given the departments acceptance that projects will need to be developed outside REZs, why is there still a need for REZs? Hills of Gold Wind Farm for example is only 17km south of the REZ boundary. Why is it considered any different to projects within the REZ? What is the value of the REZ boundaries?

2. How can social license be achieved to protect communities and prevent delays to project approval?

Social License is required not only to prevent delays in the approval process, thereby protecting investor interests, but also to protect regional communities. Projects that lack social license face lengthy delays in the approval process and result in communities that are hostile to projects and resentful of the planning process. This has resulting economic and political costs.

As outlined in the recent draft 2024 ISP from AEMO, one of the main risks causing delays to the transmission roll-out is lack of social license. This needs to be addressed in these draft guidelines. Social capital is being rapidly depleted in regional communities by unscrupulous developers and poorly planned and located projects that are being propped up by a “tick the box” process deployed by the Planning Department.

These delays can be avoided, and communities protected by:

- i. Projects being heavily scrutinized by the Planning Department, agencies and communities **at the Scoping Stage**. This is the stage that inappropriately located and planned projects should be excluded from further consideration. Government and agency resources and community goodwill are being exhausted on projects that should not be in the planning process. A more detailed report (including preliminary bushfire and flood risk assessment, BDAR, soils and water assessment, noise and vibration assessment, ACHAR, visual assessment, traffic impact assessment, aviation impact assessment, social impact assessment and decommissioning and rehabilitation assessment) should be prepared for department and community assessment at the scoping stage. Projects that are obviously non-compliant or are not going to gain community acceptance should be excluded immediately. This would result in compliant, bankable projects with community support and a high probability of approval entering the planning process. It would exclude poorly planned speculative concepts, resulting in better use of resources and avoidance of community contempt for the renewable industry.
- ii. **Regulation of the renewable energy industry** to prevent damage to communities by unscrupulous cowboy developers and developer friendly consultants would improve community outcomes and confidence in the renewable industry. It would result in fewer delays through the planning process. Accreditation of developers with focus on appropriate community respect and ability to follow due process in the planning pipeline should be mandatory. Likewise, consultants participating in the renewable industry should be registered to avoid compliance failure.
- iii. Adherence to deadlines within the planning process. Well designed and planned projects do not need ongoing extensions and time delays. Compliant projects that respect the planning process and communities should be able to comply with time constraints imposed by the Planning Department. Again, this will prevent delays in the approval process and protect communities from the approval process being drawn out for many years. Project licences need to have expiry dates. Eg 2 years from SEARs to Response to EIS submissions. This is to ensure the developer looks to have proper place and protocols established from the outset. For example, the Winterbourne Wind Project will have a delay of over 43 months between scoping report submission and response to submissions (if they submit their submissions response after the 2nd extension in April 2024). This is the result of poor initial planning and consultation, followed by an incomplete, inaccurate EIS resulting in continual delays.

3. A 10km buffer is required around National Parks, World Heritage and Wilderness areas.

Project developers are targeting areas adjacent to these environmentally sensitive areas because it is easier to get approval from one government department than it is to get signed agreements from multiple private landowners. These are sensitive areas that are essential habitat for our native fauna and need to be protected. It is also a buffer required to protect against accidental chemical spills, erosion and run off as well as the introduction of invasive species (weeds and feral animals). Destroying significant habitat and ecological communities cannot be offset by protecting adjacent areas. If one area is worth protecting, surely all these sensitive biodiversity corridors are worth protecting.

The hierarchy of impact management (avoid, mitigate, offset) should be addressed at scoping stage, not EIS. Siting of wind projects in inappropriate locations results in poor outcomes in terms of biodiversity impacts with a reliance on biodiversity offsets rather than avoidance of impacts.

Part B: Addressing Specifics of the Draft Wind Guidelines

2.2.2 Regional Cities

Provisions for regional cities should be extended to regional towns. Why is the capacity to grow, the scenic quality and the landscape character any less valuable to regional towns than regional cities. Anyone with knowledge of regional communities would understand that residents of regional towns often have a much stronger connection with the character and quality of their town than their regional city dwelling cousins. This is a numbers based political policy, rather than one based on fairness.

2.3.1 Development Applications

“The EIS must be prepared in accordance with the SEARs. The SEARs identify the information that must be provided in the EIS, and the community engagement that must be carried out.”

What are the consequences if the EIS is not prepared in accordance with the SEARs? Why are developers allowed to submit incomplete EISs when a very clear SEARs is provided? Lengthy delays are occurring because developers are relying on community and agency submissions to finalise their EIS. This needs to occur around scoping and early planning – not response to EIS stage. **This should be a reasonable point to reject projects - if the EIS does not fully address the SEARs.**

Section 2.3.1 Development Applications

The exhibition period of 28 days is not adequate. EISs are thousands of pages long. How can the community read and adequately respond to an EIS in 28 days?

Section 2.6 Critical State Significant Infrastructure

“The Minister will consider requests to declare wind energy development to be CSSI if it includes a significant energy storage system (for example, a delivery capacity of 750 megawatts or more).”

This is opening the door for compulsory acquisition of land for wind farms and should not be included.

While the planning department have said at a public meeting that wind farms will not be built without landowner consent, this is **not** what this document says. 750MW storage may currently be a big battery, but no doubt, in time it will be very achievable by wind farm developers. In addition, the guide uses this as an example, not a threshold. Compulsory acquisition of private land is a very real threat to landholders, as the guide stands. This is totally inappropriate.

Section 3: Community and Stakeholder Agreement

These guidelines are vague and do not protect communities from developers' intent on progressing developments that have serious community impacts. It is too easy for developers to tick these boxes

without providing meaningful information to communities or seeking and listening to community feedback. **We would like to see independent community reviews or surveys, undertaken by the planning department to gauge the level of community engagement by the developer and the level of community support for the project.**

It is also important to note, the community is more than its elected Council. The Planning Department puts a lot of emphasis on Council as representing the Community. Unfortunately, Council's requirement for funding may mean the Council's expectations and appetite for projects are not aligned with their community's.

4.2 Process of Site Selection and Project Design

"proximity to airports and regional aircraft flight paths" **This should be expanded to include the reliance of the local community on aerial services such as firefighting, rescue and retrievals, vermin control, aerial agriculture, etc.**

5.1.1 Landscape and Visual Impacts Key Principles

Landscape character, visual impacts and cumulative impacts should be included in the scoping report with recorded community consultation and feedback.

5.1.2 Visual Impact Assessment

"a view from a rural residence is more sensitive if it is from principal living spaces and the front and rear of the dwelling than from other areas". **This point should be removed.** Views from all rooms are significant to homeowners and frequently used areas in gardens may not be in front of living areas. A person's home and view need to be protected. Significant places on somebody's property should also have this level of protection. Eg. Lookouts, picnic areas.

Given wind farms are located in rural settings where there is no other artificial night lighting, **a night-lighting assessment should be undertaken.** It could be argued that the worst of the visual impacts are at night when turbines are lit up.

Setbacks from private residences should be subject to landscape features and should correspond to the size of the turbines. **As a minimum, setback should be**

2.5km for wind turbines up to 3MW with hub height <100m

5km for wind turbines up to 5MW with hub height <130m

7.5km for wind turbines over 5MW with hub height >130m.

Setbacks for National Parks should be 10km.

Transmission lines greater than 300kV should be undergrounded.

5.2.1 Noise and Health

Noise levels at passive recreation areas within National Parks should be limited to 35dB(A) and windfarms should not be built close enough to declared wilderness areas to have any audible impacts.

This directly impacts on the experience and the very definition of a Wilderness Area.

There should be strict compliance with the SA Noise Guidelines. Accreditation of acoustic consultants should be mandatory.

5.3 Aviation Safety and Lighting

Wind turbines also cause a risk to aviation safety in areas reliant on aerial agriculture, in bushfire prone areas reliant on aerial firebombing, and areas where aerial rescue and retrieval is likely to be required, for example, National Parks. They also pose a risk to any low flying aircraft. Where wind farms are located adjacent to bushfire prone land, the use of aerial firefighting is going to be precluded. With strong winds and low visibility, features of bushfires, it is hard to believe that any pilot would consider it safe to firebomb, even if turbines are shut down. Many submissions have been written by commercial pilots, strongly making this point. Direct submissions from aviation operators to Winterbourne Wind Farm EIS, for

example, support this position. Sources of water for firebombing and the route from water source to fires also needs to be considered. The comment “*Aerial firefighting can continue to be undertaken around wind turbines¹² if appropriate strategies, emergency management systems and communications protocols are in place¹³*” (AFAC 2018 Wind Farms and Bushfire Operations) is in contrast to advice received from experienced local firefighting pilots. Given the change in the size of turbines since 2018, maybe some more current, and accurate, information could be provided.

The risk of wind projects in areas prone to heavy fogs also needs to be considered, particularly if the turbines are located along ridgelines. Areas along the Great Dividing Range are particularly prone to persistent low cloud and fog, and wind turbines add increase danger to aviators in these situations. This has not been recognised in the Guidelines, and needs to be.

There needs to be realistic and industry informed consideration of impacts to aerial operators, including agriculture, firefighting, rescue and retrieval, and general aviation.

5.4.2 Bird and Bat Impact Assessment

Wind projects should be situated at least 10km from National Parks. This is not just for protection of birds and bats (where 100m is hardly an appropriate distance) but also for the protection of irreplaceable biodiversity corridors. These corridors contain threatened ecological communities as well as habitat for threatened fauna. These areas adjacent to National Parks should be protected with the potential for them to be added to the park or added to the biodiversity conservation trust.

The hierarchy of impact management (avoid, mitigate, offset) should be addressed at scoping stage, not EIS. Siting of wind projects in inappropriate locations results in poor outcomes in terms of biodiversity impacts with a reliance on biodiversity offsets rather than avoidance of impacts.

“Where impacts cannot be avoided, minimised or mitigated, offsets or other measures that benefit threatened entities and their habitat can be considered, however these are not mandatory.” What does this mean? Surely offsetting impacts should be the bare minimum. Again, vague comments that can be interpreted by the developer how they like leaves the community and environment totally unprotected by these guidelines.

5.5.1 Traffic Impacts

Consideration needs to be given not only to the capacity of the roads, but also the impacts of projects on other road users. Some roads may have the capacity to carry project traffic, but if they are winding roads with no overtaking areas, the impact on local traffic and other industries in town can be significant and result in the loss of local existing businesses. An example of this is the impact of the Winterbourne Wind Farm on the Oxley Hwy and the existing businesses in Walcha.

Access routes for transport of turbine components as well as raw materials and construction staff should be considered and included in the scoping report to enable assessment of impact on communities and to avoid high traffic impacts on towns and significant sites. Again, **this should be addressed at a high level in the scoping report** – it is too late to be considering this in the EIS and subsequently in response to submissions.

Project traffic should not be going through local towns.

5.6.2 Benefit Sharing

Communities should have an input into the Benefit Sharing for each project. Given that benefit sharing assists in building community support by ensuring that projects deliver a net positive outcome for local and regional communities, the value of the benefit is going to vary for each project. A good project will not need to have a benefit as high as a poorly located project. Communities (including but not limited to councils) should have an input into the value of this benefit. The community, being the main group to be impacted, need to feel there is a net benefit from the projects.

5.7 Decommissioning and Rehabilitation

It was very evident at the Walcha information session held by the Planning Department that our community is very concerned about decommissioning of wind projects. There is a very real risk that the company holding the wind project at the end of its life will be non-financial. If this is the case and there is no bond, who will be left with the decommissioning costs? – the local community. This question was raised

at the meeting and the response was that this windfarm would still have value and would be purchased. This seemed a commercially naive response as a windfarm at the end of its life has very little ongoing value and is a liability. **The only safe way to protect communities from abandoned assets is to have decommissioning bonds starting early in the operational life of the project.** The EP&A act has no power to enforce the decommissioning conditions if the company owning the wind project is bankrupt.

5.8 Waste Management

The EIS should outline how the project developer plans to dispose of waste at decommissioning, based on today's technology. It is not good enough to claim blades will be recyclable at the end of the project life. If blades are to be cut up in situ, the contamination risks (particularly if the project is located in a sensitive area) need to be addressed before approval.

Downplaying the waste management is irresponsible. It is to be expected from the developers but should not be acceptable from the planning department. 300 000 tonnes of waste from turbine blades is totally unacceptable, especially given this is toxic waste.

The key principles in this section are again vague, non-committal and open to interpretation and dismissal by developers. Any project can minimise waste and reuse as much material as possible. Any project can be approved under these principles.

We need guidelines that protect a community's waste management facilities from being overwhelmed by wind project developers.

In conclusion,

As a community group, we were disappointed at the lack of protection of communities in these draft guidelines. The guidelines are developer friendly, designed to progress project DAs through to approval. The guidelines allow the Planning Department to continue to hold the developers' hands, step by step, leading them through the approval process, regardless of the quality and merit of the project. Poor, non-compliant projects will continue to clog the planning pipeline with the Planning Department helping them to tick all their boxes. All the while, communities will be paying the price.

We hope that the community concerns are heard in this process of making submissions. There is a widespread and growing sense of helplessness in the regional communities that are being asked to host these developments, and the upswell of frustration is growing into a palpable force. We need to see that these efforts in feedback are being received and being acknowledged.

Importantly, there needs to be balance in the planning process, progressing good projects, and protecting communities against poor developers and poorly planned developments.

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