

October 1st 2023

To: The Australian Energy and Infrastructure Commissioner

On behalf of Climate Action and Sustainable Living Armidale (SLA) and our focus working group Renewable Energy, Education, Advocacy and Community Health (REEACH), we thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the AEIC's Community Engagement Review.

Who are REEACH?

In September 2022, we formed an action group called Renewable Energy, Education, Advocacy and Community Health (REEACH). This grew out of the Climate Action group of Sustainable Living and Climate Action Armidale and with a specific focus on engaging with Renewable Energy development on the ground living in the activated New England Renewable Energy Zone (NE REZ).

The objectives of REEACH includes renewable energy education and literacy, advocacy, community benefit, community ownership, and community resilience. We are about enabling/promoting good action locally, facilitating community engagement from ordinary citizens in public policy and with a view that attention to environmental health in all decision making is the bedrock for achieving community health. See <https://slarmidale.org/energy>

The group aims to play both an educative and advocative role for our community and within the NE REZ. Its goal is to support a vision for renewables that will benefit our communities and their well-being, provide opportunities for us all to participate, and ensure that the REZ will be regenerative and enhance sustainability rather than follow an extractive industry model.

The Convenor of the Renewable Energy REEACH group is Dr. Sanaz Alian - a University of New England(UNE) lecturer in Urban and Regional Planning. The group has been collaborating with the Community Power Agency (CPA) and networking and/or collaborating with Uralla ZNET, UNE Smart Region Incubator (SRI), Armidale Regional Council (ARC), NEV2030, EnergyCo, DPIE, AEMC, UNE Renewable Energy Hub, ARRA, ATG, StringyBark Ecological, the Black Gully Festival Committee and has had a monthly climate conversations stall at the PCYC Sunday markets here in Armidale.

Since its inception REEACH has made submissions to:

- ARC draft Renewable Energy Action Plan (REAP), September 2022.
- Draft Network Infrastructure Strategy for NSW prepared by EnergyCo, September 2022
- ARC draft Renewable Energy Community Benefit Sharing Framework, September 2023
- AEIC Review of Community Engagement Practices (Survey and Submissions due 5.00pm Sunday 1 October 2023).

Additional actions of note

- A draft Renewable Energy Education Resource has been developed for Primary Schools year K-6.
- The group has supported and participated in the establishment of the New England Biodiversity Reference Group, facilitated by the CPA community engagement coordinator Heidi McElnea, which has developed draft recommendations for EnergyCo and prospective developers in relation to biodiversity protection along planned development and construction of transmission lines. See <https://slarmidale.org/2023/08/18976>
- REEACH facilitated and supported the Armidale Uniting Church's recent application to Rewiring Australia's "Electrify my Community" program (see [this page](#)). We will find out at the end of the month if this application is successful
- REEACH will be presenting a Forum November 2, 2023 titled **The New England REZ and the NSW planning system: An overview for landholders, community and non-planners**. This will be presented by Dr Paul McFarlane, Adj. UNE and Dr Sanaz Alian, UNE. This has been developed as we see that there is a gap in the presentation and accessibility of information and opportunities for Q&A, discussion and problem solving in this area. We will be extending an invitation to local and state government representatives, EnergyCo and DPIE and of course our landholder and community members. If it is appropriate we extend an invitation to the AEIC Commissioner or relevant support person to attend this local community event. It will be available by Zoom.

Key Learnings September 2022 – 2023

Over this past year the key learnings that we have made include the following:

- The complexities as to which jurisdictions each level of Government is responsible for is at best challenging to understand and at worst confusing, unhelpful and illogical.
- Generally speaking energy literacy and understanding by the general public is not high. People just expect to turn the lights on when there is an opportunity here to advance a more energy educated public who can adapt, create opportunities and efficiencies and have intellectual ownership of and connection to the renewable energy resource transition.
- While we have come to see that the REZ involves impact from both renewable energy developments and an altering energy transmission landscape this is a highly complex and dense arena, the general public see it as one **behemoth force** of energy transition and in the lack of clarity respond with frustration accordingly.
- There is a strong anti-renewable sentiment developing often with a "pro-nuclear" solution. This space is very difficult to navigate and the question "how do we create a voice for engagement and problem solving" has been a stressful mental situation to be in. When community engagement has not been done well and when there are environmental concerns, community/social engagement concerns including First Nations concerns all coming to the forefront and utilised within a "threat

framework” and without government assistance for a proactive response, this is a hard space.

- Community engagement opportunities that we have found presented by EnergyCo and DPIE and this AEIC process do not give sufficient notice to get involved and that notice where it does appear does not come through our local government or community channels effectively if at all.
- Community engagement that we have experienced is predominantly understood by the relevant authorities as an “information” process rather than one of “involvement” or engagement in “problem solving” utilising local knowledge base.
- Currently and at a Federal Level and thus across States, we lack an overarching national narrative that gives households and communities the ability to see themselves as part of the energy transformation and to understand the critical need for transmission for energy security and climate action. Rather than seeing themselves as agents and beneficiaries in the transition, today people see it as something happening *to* them, their friends and families, with impacts that need to be mitigated.
- Renewable Energy Community Benefit Frameworks are a significant part of the kind of community and partnership building that we need in this context. This area needs more work – a) the governance mechanisms here need to both involve both communities and local government (not local government- or State- alone) b) the regulatory requirements from development proponents needs to establish social relationships between communities and proponents understood as a long-term (and intergenerational) process and commitment, not a one-off benefit that is negotiated at construction and not revisited again.
- Communities require a coordinated approach to training, workforce capability building, procurement and accommodation strategies that is supportive of people of low socio-economic background and facilitates economic opportunity across the region. It is imperative community engagement processes are designed to view local stakeholders as valuable contributors and recognise the work that locally-based organisations are already undertaking

Key Recommendations:

Recommendation 1. There is a need for an **accessible presence on the ground** in the New England so that our townsfolk and rural residents have places where REZ info is disseminated and where they can go to ask questions, access information, get involved and be heard. Both connected to our local government services and a voice up to State, DPIE and EnergyCo, and ideally across other agencies – see Recommendation 5..

Recommendation 2. Sufficient notice of consultation activities and much better dissemination of **notice through community networks** including local government channels is needed. An emphasis on involving the community rather than simply informing. Taking the whole community along rather than a landholder by landholder approach only.

Recommendation 3. Programs to directly engage and enable **households, farms, communities and businesses to pursue renewables as well** – creating an energy shift where there are many access points for people to be part of the transition rather than

it being simply an impost to be mitigated. Support for localised energy and transmission literacy and circular economy.

Recommendation 4. Governments address misinformation about the energy transition by funding broad community awareness and education programs with trusted institutions about energy systems/ technologies and the need for energy transition.

Recommendation 4. Understanding that the REZ is an impact both from renewable energy developments and an altering transmission landscape is complex. While these two areas for development may have different policy and government processes this needs to be taken into account by the NE REZ communications, engagements and State systems, **the general public see it as one force of energy transition.**

Recommendation 5. Federally led resources need to be allocated to coordinate the many different organisations needed to turn what is currently an infrastructure construction project into a regional development project. In other words community engagement needs to be developed across government agencies not simply the energy or planning components of the public service. A concerted focus is required on networking and hosting strategic discussion to bring the large number of organisations needed on the ground together, this role could be hosted through the RDA network or other Federal agency but with an emphasis on the staff being located locally.

Recommendation 6: Local communities need to be facilitated for involvement in their future and all development. Local knowledge needs to be accessed early and in an ongoing fashion. Developers should not be encouraged to have a fly in fly out approach but rather a long-term connection to community should be the expectation and norm.

Recommendation 7: Renewable Energy Community Benefit Frameworks are a significant part of the kind of community and partnership building that we need in this context. This area needs more work – a) the governance mechanisms here need to both involve both communities and local government (not local government- or State- alone) b) the regulatory requirements from development proponents needs to establish social relationships between communities and proponents understood as a long-term (and intergenerational) process and commitment, not a one-off benefit that is negotiated at construction and not revisited again.

Recommendation 8. The Community Power Agency has been engaged with our community over the past 2 years and has strong expertise and knowledge of the issues here on the ground. We recommend their submission to you as well in this context.

We thank you for your time and consideration of our suggestions and wish you all the best with the submission process.

Yours sincerely

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Stand for climate action now

**TOGETHER
WE CAN**

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of this land and pay our respects to elders past, present and emerging. Our community pays tribute to their love of land, love of people and love of culture.