

Submission to Community Engagement Review

I wish to submit my experience on lack of consultation from a wind developer (ACEN) regarding their Valley of the Winds industrial wind project and transmission infrastructure (Energy Co) over the last 18 months.

I am a farmer, living near Coolah. Our business is a mixed farm – beef and cropping. My husband's family has lived in the district since settling nearby in the 1840s. They have been farming for over a century. We bought this property over 30 years ago to continue the farming tradition. Living in a rural area, we have little in the way of amenities, but we believe this was a trade off with a rural lifestyle and views of the surrounding landscape.

Apparently, during the height of COVID the NSW Government declared the "Central West Orana Renewable Energy Zone". No one knew how that would change our lives. Did they ever consult with us? No. I vaguely remember the Premier stating it in a news clip, but had no idea that this was an open invitation for every profit making (usually foreign owned) energy company to come and destroy our way of life, our farms, our agricultural land and our communities.

In July 2022 we received a letter from DPE advising that a wind project "Valley of the Winds" was on public exhibition. I had no idea what it was about. There had been talk of a wind farm north/north-east of Coolah which had been going on for well over a decade, but there was no evidence of any sort of progress with it. I thought perhaps this letter referred to that project and ignored it.

A few days later I had a call from the project manager of ACEN (who I had never heard of before), contacting me about the wind turbine project. I was puzzled as I really had no idea what he was talking about and as I said so, he told me "I have just realised you are listed as associated and you're not" I asked what that meant. He ignored my question and went on to tell me I qualified for a neighbour payment as I was nearby to the project, and they would drop the papers off later that week (they never did). He also told me he would arrange a visual and noise assessment and he hastily hung up. (ACEN have since done photos of which I am still awaiting all the montages, but no other study has been done). ACEN did not contact me directly until approximately May of this year (regarding the visual assessment mentioned above), getting close to a year after the first phone call.

After ringing a neighbour and specifically relaying the conversation, I found that ACEN were planning to put a wind turbine project on the next ridge to me and the nearest turbine would be approximately 3.4km from my home! In the EIS, I was indeed listed as an "associated" dwelling. As such I would be subject to no visual assessment and a higher level of noise. My neighbour directed me to the DPE portal and as I started to read about the project I was shocked at the sheer size of the project, let alone the size of the turbines.

I spent hours on the phone to DPE trying to understand the project and the process. The period since then has been a very steep learning curve. We, as "civilians" are supposed to find out about these projects and then read and understand documents verging on 2500 pages within the 4 week comment period and to put in a submission/objection/comment within this time frame.

It's ludicrous. Going from knowing absolutely nothing to supposed expert level in less than a month.

I have no recollection of ever seeing anything about ACEN or the Valley of the Winds project in the

local paper, on the noticeboard in town, by personally addressed letter or even a letterbox drop. Note that I live over 20km from town and only go into Coolah once every 2-3 weeks. I am busy working most of the time so I don't have time to hang on the phone and chat for hours with all and sundry and find out the local news. I don't receive free-to-air TV signals, so don't get any regional news via that method. The local newspaper is often hardly worth opening and comes out fortnightly. I don't usually listen to the radio.

Kudos to Dept of Planning to alerting me to the fact the project was on exhibition, but it was written by people who knew what was going on and its level was written assuming the recipient would understand the gravity of the process. I didn't.

Since that time I have found numerous people in the district, both in town and on farms, that equally knew nothing about this project. A few locals held a town meeting which was very well represented with about 20% of the town turning up (after a run of full page advertisements and a letterbox drop) to find out what was planned for the district. Most had NO idea. I am sure that there are still locals that don't know there are TWO projects nearby. Community members have been horrified over the intervening months when they realise what is planned for Coolah. New residents are shocked when they find out the realtor did not divulge the planned wind projects.

ACEN have not willingly communicated with us since the first contact by mistaken phone call. I have had some correspondence with ACEN about the visual montages in the last couple of months but that is all.

We are still awaiting ACEN's response to submissions. I find it hardly fair that the community is given a month to respond but proponents seem to have no time limit for response to submissions.

Next enter Energy Co.

Our property had previously been under a study corridor by TransGrid in 2020 (of which I was alerted to by a neighbour's email to me asking me if I was affected by it), however the Merriwa Cassilis Alliance, of which we were a part, managed to move the corridor away from Merriwa to the south. After the move away I had relaxed, in the mistaken belief they had "gone away".

After my awareness of all things in the REZ increased to maximum after the ACEN incident, I attended a drop in session in Coolah after the Energy Co scoping report was released on the DPE Portal. I went straight to look at the map. This had a transmission corridor on the opposite side of the road to our property, as it was in the scoping report released the previous week.

I had been alerted by the Merriwa Cassilis Alliance by a general email to members, that I should ask to see the "interactive map". I did so and was shocked to see the study corridor had moved, covering most of our property, going next to my son's house and remarkably close to the original Transgrid line over our property. The scoping report, that had just been released, was already out of date. To say I was angry was an understatement.

The staff there, whilst pleasant, could not answer any of my questions which was very frustrating. We asked to speak to someone who COULD answer them and made arrangements to meet the land acquisition officer outside our property a couple of weeks later.

Note that Energy Co had NEVER contacted us (just like Transgrid had never made contact with us in their earlier version).

The Energy Co representative came armed with maps and a ready story. When asked why over us and not elsewhere, he said that people had never answered Energy Co's correspondence so weren't considered. Considering we had never received anything (and so had never responded either), this didn't ring true. We told him we didn't want it anywhere near us. When asked why the change from the scoping report he said he wasn't sure, but he felt the line was more likely to follow the main road than going over the study corridor route, "oh but don't quote me".

Earlier this year Energy Co held a community meeting. A number of people attended, including some very unhappy people who were personally affected, as well as myself. Energy Co had their spiel ready and could not adequately answer (or did not want to answer) the majority of questions posed to them.

MY, "Head" of Energy Co was in attendance – he was arrogant, rude and basically wanted everyone to sit down and do as they were told, to listen and not ask pertinent questions. This is the same man who at a Dunedoo meeting a few months prior talked about offshore wind and said in response to someone asking how the coastal residents would feel said "they will be 20km offshore so the people there won't be able to see them". Effectively relegating us to be 2nd class citizens in a sentence.

In May this year we were sent an acquisition letter by Energy Co. following a previously planned TILT alignment - that we didn't wish to be associated with any longer (after the option with TILT had expired we took legal proceedings to remove the caveat over our property). We asked for Energy Co to contact our neighbour as the proposed line bends to go into our property before turning across the road – causing two towers on our land, but if it was to go through the neighbour's corner it would not need to turn, requiring only one tower (instead of two). Apparently he said no. But we can say no and get ignored? Obviously Energy Co are not doing this reliant on a budget since they are happy to pay for 2 towers instead of 1.

To date Energy Co are still using outdated maps. I have repeatedly brought attention to the fact that even the interactive map is out of date, given the acquisition corridor. They are still to do anything about it.

Communication with Energy Co has been sporadic and our acquisition officer attempts the "buddy" style of casual phone calls. We have requested everything in writing more than once and have engaged a solicitor.

As you can see from my experience, ACEN has been spectacularly unsuccessful at engaging with landowners, community members and neighbours. In the first instance I should have been personally contacted by ACEN with a turbine planned for 3.4km from my home, whilst it was in the planning stage, not in the EIS stage. Energy Co is only interested in telling us what they will do, without any negotiation.

I expect "consultation" to include the fact that these developers and company men parading as statutory bodies, who will never live in our communities, never send their children to our schools, never play in the local sports team come along and TELL US what will happen, without allowing us to influence the outcome. If the majority of the community does NOT want these developments, they

SHOULD NOT be allowed to proceed. It is not for the “greater good” to ruin the lives of tens of thousands of rural residents for inefficient wind turbines and solar that will not be able to replace thermal energy, no matter how many times the ‘industry’ who will benefit from it, tell you it will. Proponents only want to hear our comments on HOW to get it over the line. They never even consider IF, only WHEN.

They don’t understand that we don’t want their money. Our lives, our families and our farms are more important. A few have sold out for the money as hosts, but they represent usually less than 1% of our communities.

Our agricultural land will never recover, our wildlife and native habitat will not benefit from biodiversity credits in another place.

Our land will burn next time there is a bushfire, as aerial firefighting will be impossible as no sane pilot will fly in between the turbines in low visibility (smoke). Above ground transmission infrastructure, although not as high, will still be an aviation hazard.

Our agricultural land will be under threat from biosecurity breaches. We have heard plenty of stories from hosts of operating energy projects that say that contractors and staff come into the property 24/7 and never shut a gate.

We have heard colloquially that insurance premiums for hosts of wind/solar and neighbours will skyrocket, if they can even GET anyone to insure them at all. Will this happen with transmission infrastructure as well?

Being placed in a REZ, our property values are likely to drop, there is plenty of evidence that being close to a wind or solar project will make your property harder to sell, reducing the price, or at least reducing the number of people interested, so your pool of competition dwindles. I have yet to meet anyone who says they are looking for a property adjacent to an industrial wind complex, an industrial solar plant, a battery energy storage system or a high voltage transmission line!?

I am pro nuclear. I am not against clean coal, after all we DO mine it.... But we’re not allowed to USE it?

I would prefer to have NO electricity and have to be self sufficient than support foreign owned profit driven proponents and quasi statutory bodies that will only plan infrastructure and then have private corporations build it and run it.

I say no.

We ALL say no.