

Submission on AEIC Community Engagement Review: Enhancing Community Support for Energy Transition

As a community group, we recognize the importance of respecting and consulting communities throughout the forthcoming energy transition. It is crucial that communities impacted by new energy infrastructure are given a platform to voice their concerns and aspirations, granting them the power to actively shape the transition. This inclusive approach will ensure that communities feel part of a fair and expedited journey toward a safe climate.

With the transition to renewables, it is vital to provide support to regional communities in developing and funding regional plans that take into account the impacts and opportunities brought forth by renewable energy and transmission development. In Renewable Energy Zones where multiple projects are concentrated in one region, we need more effective ways to address, minimize, and manage the cumulative impacts of these developments. Additionally, opportunities to create cumulative benefits for local communities must be maximized. While individual project proponents may already engage with communities, **we risk over consultation**. To combat this, **Federal funding should be allocated to regional planning initiatives which enable communities to proactively prepare for and mitigate challenges, while also leveraging the opportunities that the energy transition presents.**

The energy transition presents both opportunities and challenges for local communities. To actively participate and benefit from this transformation, communities require education and information tailored to their needs. **Establishing place-based hubs that provide independent, high-quality, and pertinent information can empower and inform communities on various aspects of the energy transition.** From home and farm energy efficiency to large-scale projects, these hubs can serve as central points for information exchange and community engagement coordination. Such hubs can foster locally led involvement, inviting community and local council participation in dialogue to prioritize projects, navigate trade-offs, and drive desired outcomes.

The quality and consistency of community engagement for renewable energy projects is a pressing issue that demands attention. **The current oversight mechanism lacks the strength necessary to ensure that all projects follow best practices and meaningfully engage with affected communities. This undermines the social license and trust the industry requires,** particularly given the scale and pace of the energy transition. Hence, **we propose the development of national merit criteria to establish clear standards and expectations for community engagement across all renewable energy generation and transmission projects.** This framework would transparently identify and address poor engagement practices, while simultaneously encouraging recognition and reward for exemplary engagement by project proponents.

Upholding First Nations rights to self-determination and free, prior, and informed consent is imperative for successful energy transition efforts. If we aim to transition our energy system in a timely manner, acquiring free, prior and informed consent from Aboriginal communities is essential. They must be active participants and beneficiaries of renewable energy and transmission projects. Embedding the First Nations Clean Energy Strategy into policy frameworks is central to forging

respectful and collaborative partnerships, ensuring energy security, rights, power, capacity, knowledge, benefits and participation.

While renewable energy projects are essential for the energy transition, they also impact local communities and their environment. To mitigate disruption and damage, **it is necessary to map the land and sea areas where these projects are planned, with active community participation. By understanding the relationship communities have with their local areas, we can identify optimal locations for renewable energy projects. We commend the ongoing efforts in Victoria through the Transmission Investment Framework.** Expanding this approach across the country will enable us to create a sustainable and inclusive future.

The energy transition should not be perceived as something that solely happens *to* people; rather, it is an opportunity for active participation and mutual benefit. Many communities face challenges in understanding the country's shift towards renewable energy sources. While there have been attempts to provide information, they remain inadequate and often confusing. **It is crucial for the public to comprehend the significance of delivering clean and reliable energy nationwide and its vital role in combating *the world's climate emergency*. The Federal Government bears the responsibility of communicating this reality and its vision to the public, inspiring them to become part of the solution. A national-level public relations campaign is necessary to effectively tell the story of the energy transition - both the urgency required and the solutions we have at hand - and motivate people to engage actively.** Therefore, **we propose the establishment of an independent, reliable and trusted source of clear information to explain the transition to renewables.** This resource should be easily accessible to the public, addressing common misconceptions, and fostering a better understanding of the energy transition.

We appreciate the opportunity to contribute to the AEIC community engagement review. By prioritizing community support and engagement, we can ensure a smooth and inclusive energy transition that benefits all stakeholders. Thank you for your attention to these recommendations.