

Thunderbolt Wind IPCn Submission On Additional Information

I offer the following feedback to the Request for Information from the NSW Independent Planning Commission (IPCn) to the Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure (DPHI) and the DPHI response.

Firstly, I would like to raise a timing issue with regard to the original Thunderbolt Wind IPCn case submission closing date, 25th March 2024, and the Request for Information letter from IPCn (written by Stephen Barry, Planning Director) to DPHI dated 22nd March 2024. Is it acceptable that the commissioners had formulated ALL possible questions raised from submissions PRIOR TO the official closure at 5pm on 25th March 2024, in fact at least 3 days prior to the official closure? How many submissions were received during the period between when the questions to the DPHI were formulated and the official submission closure and did they receive adequate scrutiny?

Water Resource

The Water Access Licence (WAL) for Pine Creek Dam may well have sufficient suggested capacity to meet demand for the Thunderbolt Wind project construction but what constitutes a “significant” impact? For example, if construction happens to coincide with a dry period would it be a condition of consent that a percentage of water must remain in the dam at all times – restricting the use for the construction of the wind project?

A “verbal agreement” with the landowner who holds the WAL is not acceptable when considering the possible approval of any project. For approval to be granted Neoen MUST have a confirmed, formal agreement in place in regard to any water to be used for construction, and operation, of the Thunderbolt Wind project.

The Biodiversity Management Plan (BMP) should also be publicly available PRIOR TO any possible consent to allow landowners, communities and those with environmental interests adequate time to read, digest and respond to Neoen regarding its content.

The response from DPHI states “the Department, Water Group and the EPA are satisfied that, with the implementation of appropriate mitigation measures, the erosion risks of the project can be adequately managed.” Have any local groups or neighbouring landowners been consulted regarding the proposed mitigation measures? What constitutes “appropriate” to the Department, Water Group and EPA? What is deemed “adequate” when considering the management of erosion – only half of the top soil being washed away, or none?

Firefighting Operations

It is stated that “throughout the assessment process of this project, the Department consulted extensively with various state agencies, including the NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) during assessment and preparation of the recommended conditions of consent.” Were there any local RFS brigades or control centres, peak bodies, independent contractors or local landowners and communities consulted in regard to fire fighting operations? I ask this as it is my understanding that no RFS staff are qualified to fly either fixed wing or rotary aerial fire

fighting aircraft therefore would it not be prudent to get opinions from those who will putting their lives, or the lives of their staff at risk?

Possible restrictions to aerial fire fighting efforts also poses great risks to farmers, landowners and communities – does that not warrant some input into the decisions that will affect them for the rest of their lives? For example, if it so happened that 25% of current RFS contracted fire fighting businesses refused to fly within the boundary of any wind, solar or transmission project that would severely limit the aerial assistance received, especially within areas with multiple projects (ie. mean instead of 4 aerial crews assisting in a major fire it would mean there would be only 3), putting more pressure on ground crews, and endangering more livestock, wildlife, habitat, infrastructure and most probably human lives especially in cases where a fire is in difficult terrain to access from the ground.

The Emergency Management Plan should also be publicly available PRIOR TO any possible consent to allow landowners, communities and those with fire fighting interests adequate time to read, digest and respond to Neoen regarding its content.

I find it interesting that “RFS did not raise any concerns about the project or recommended conditions” after consultation with the Department regarding the Thunderbolt Wind project. Is this due to RFS being a statutory body of the Government of NSW, and therefore not willing, or able to go against current government policy?

With regard to the recommended capacity of a water tank on site - a 38mm fire fighting nozzle is capable of pumping 280L/minute meaning 20,000L of water would be used in 71 minutes. During most grass or bushfires there are numerous fire fighting trucks and trailers used in an attempt to put the fire out in a timely manner for the obvious reasons of there being less damage done. A average call out for RFS members would see half a dozen vehicles/trucks attend – six 38mm nozzles would use 20,000L in just over 10 minutes. It would be nice to think you could have a fire blacked out in that time but it is simply not reality. 20,000L is not enough water to adequately fight even the smallest of fires in rural NSW.

An Asset Protection Zone (APZ) around wind farm infrastructure may well assist in protecting those structures from fire, but what/who will protect the surrounding habitat, farming land and communities?

It is stated that “the Department is satisfied that aerial firefighting and the bushfire risks can be suitably controlled through the implementation of appropriate fire management measures and procedures.” I’m pleased that the Department is satisfied but I can categorically say that many landowners, who are the ones at risk when considering bushfires or grass fires, are not! What constitutes “suitably controlled” to the Department and IPCn when considering bushfire risks, and what fire management measures and procedures are considered “appropriate”?

I received the following email and attachment from David Braid, Managing Director & Chief Pilot of Eagle Helicopters stating the company intention regarding aerial fire fighting operations within a wind project area.



windfarm fire fighting operations

To: Emma Bowman



Gday Emma hope this helps

Regards,
David Braid
Managing Director

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11th April 2024

To whom it may concern.

I David Braid acting as Managing Director and Chief Pilot of Eagle Helicopters.

Issue this statement as a directive to all staff Aircrew that whilst participating in aerial firefighting activities do not at any time enter any wind farm whether turbines are static or rotating do not at any time enter the windfarm to conduct aerial fire fighting duties.

This directive is active forthwith of the publication of this Letter.

Justification of this Company directive

That in the event of a fire in the windfarm it is and would be deemed that at no time can or could we 100% guarantee the safe conduct of operations, that would allow operations to be conducted in a safe manner in regard to any incursion with blades towers whilst the effect of bush fire smoke creates a limited view of the working area.



David A. Braid

Managing Director

I also reiterate the following from my original submission:-

The Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council's (AFAC) Guideline Version 3.0 - Wind Farms and Bushfire Operations document published 25th October 2018 states the following in regard to possible firefighting limitations and hazards for emergency responders:

Firefighting limitations in and around the wind farm facilities

Wind farms may result in aerial firefighting limitations due to aerial obstacles created by wind turbines and meteorological monitoring towers. The bushfire at the Waterloo wind farm demonstrated that if conditions are clear and wind turbines are turned off, wind turbines are clearly visible from aircraft and are not likely to constrain aerial firefighting operations (Clean Energy Council 2017). However, during this event transmission infrastructure, meteorological towers and guy-ropes were difficult to see (Clean Energy Council 2017); this infrastructure does have potential to limit the effectiveness of aerial firefighting operations. Access and egress challenges on the ground as well as water supply issues can also create firefighting limitations, if not planned for appropriately. Wind farms can also impact response operations by interfering with local and regional radio transmissions (Australian Wind Energy Association 2004a).

Hazards for emergency responders, including aerial personnel

Turbine towers, meteorological monitoring towers and power transmission infrastructure pose risks for aerial firefighting operations. Meteorological monitoring towers and power transmission infrastructure are generally difficult for aerial personnel to see, if they are not marked appropriately. If wind turbines were not shut down, moving blades and wake turbulence would create significant hazards for low flying aircraft, thus the shutting down of wind turbines, in an emergency situation, is defined in wind farm emergency procedures. A wind farm facility's power lines may pose electrocution risks, that are exacerbated due to smoke during a bushfire.

The same document also states:

Wind farms can interfere with local and regional radio transmissions by physical obstruction and radio frequency electromagnetic radiation (Australian Wind Energy Association 2004a). The risk of radio communications affecting emergency response operations may be considered in the planning stages for a wind farm development. This issue may be considered in wind farm site selection and equipment selection.

The Aerial Application Association of Australia (AAAA) also has a wind farm policy available here (<https://aaaa.org.au/policies/>).

Accommodation

“The Department acknowledges cumulative impacts are a key concern of many of our stakeholders in renewable energy zones (REZs)”. “The Department is continuing to work closely with the Energy Corporation of NSW to jointly conduct cumulative impact studies for the New South Wales REZs”. Is it acceptable that projects are continuing to be assessed and approved PRIOR TO the completion of these studies? Or that “while the additional work would assist future projects, this work cannot be applied to the Thunderbolt Wind Farm”.

How is it permissible for an Accommodation and Employment Strategy to be included in the conditions of consent, not PRIOR TO consent? Again, the cart is going before the horse.

Voluntary Planning Agreement

Is it acceptable that an applicant can bypass the support or acceptance of affected councils by making a Section 7.12 of the EP&A Act contribution? Surely LGA's, who are representing the communities within their boundaries should be permitted to object to, and ultimately reject projects when it is believed it is not in the best interests of their ratepayers.

I note numerous references to 33% of the contribution being “spent in and to the benefit of the immediate community”. Who agreed to this percentage? Was it council and the affected communities, or Neoen, or the Department? Will that adequately compensate the local communities for the upset, devastation and the permanent change in their district?

The term “local community” being defined as “the communities within the Tamworth Regional Council LGA and up to Bendemeer, ie. the area around the Thunderbolt Wind Farm project within a 20 minute drive” is very ambiguous. Is it 20 minutes at 100km/hr or 50km/hr?

Again, I urge the Independent Planning Commission to deny approval to the Thunderbolt Wind project proposal.

Emma Bowman