

February 2024 - HILLS OF GOLD IPC SUBMISSION

Thank you to the Chair and the Panel of Commissioners for accepting my submission. I am grateful for this opportunity, and I intend to share my experiences and knowledge of small rural communities and my concerns about the Hills of Gold project and the impacts and opportunities it presents.

BACKGROUND

My name is Sally Edwards, I live on a farm, near Coolah, with my husband and teenage kids. While I don't live here

now, Nundle is a place I love and a town that has been a part of our lives for over 25 years. My husband and I grew up at Gloucester and Nundle was a place we visited regularly with friends. Twenty years ago, we lived in the Garoo district and Nundle became our local community.

I can say, that to this day, we have never lived in a more intentionally connected community as the Garoo area. To have a twelve-month social calendar hanging on the fridge, which said who was hosting the district's get-together that month, and when, was something incredibly unique and special. All were welcome, even if anyone had visitors, it was always "the more the merrier". At the time, I worked at Hanging Rock at the Arc EnCiel Trout Farm. Today, we have friends who call Nundle home and Sheba Dams is a place our whole family loves to visit.

Nundle is not unlike many small rural communities across Australia and it is my connection with the Nundle country, love for the Nundle community and my deep care for small rural communities that has me standing here today.

Firstly, having grown up on a dairy farm, married into a 4th generation beef cattle family and now a farm owner myself, I cannot accept or contribute to wider community acceptance that Solar and Wind Energy Generation projects be called "farms". It is simply not true. Farms produce and grow plants and animals for the purpose of food and fibre and they work in symbiosis with the environment and weather.

Secondly, our home and farm is completely off-grid, we utilise diesel and unleaded to power vehicles and farm machinery, we use solar and battery storage to provide our electricity which powers our home, sheds and farm water supply.

I consider myself an environmental advocate where balance, practicality and cost benefit consideration are important factors when looking at sustainable ways to preserve our environment and ultimately save the planet.

PROFESIONAL CAPACITY

I have spent the last 15 years working as a Community Development Coordinator, with a number of Non-Government Organisations in the Warrumbungle Region. A lot of this work had me working

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alongside both State and Local Government, fundraising, and sourcing and attracting funding to achieve community projects, initiatives and aims.

I have come to learn, respect and in many cases value the very foundational principals of community development, of small-town revitalisation and the associated governing criteria of many funding programs. This understanding indicates to me, that the manner in which projects such as Engie's project are proposed, funded, consulted, planned and eventually delivered, goes against the very foundation of sustainable rural community development.

It is this foundation that I wish to demonstrate today, to evidence that the Hills of Gold Wind Project, while on the surface appears to provide many opportunities for Nundle, particularly economic, will in fact be a continued significant cause, of loss of community character, loss of economic control and ownership, and most importantly loss of community connection.

I believe, the very naming of this project was a tactical move by Wind Energy Partners, to demonstrate a perceived connection with the Nundle community. Initially I imagine, the community would have been quite taken aback with this name, but over time, the familiarity of the term "Hills of Gold" with the history of Nundle, manipulatively increased the familiarity and ultimately acceptance of the project.

I also believe the name is insinuating. The insinuation that by building Turbines on these Nundle hills, will be "Hills of Gold", hills of gold for who? A company or an organisation who genuinely respects and cares for a community, does not make such bold and offensive insinuations, even by mistake.

An important foundation I wish to address is "NEED". To successfully deliver a community project or initiative, you MUST adequately demonstrate and evidence that the Community has a real, recognised and even measured NEED of the project.

The NEED for this project, is not a Nundle community NEED, it appears to me to be a purely commercial need ultimately driven by a National NEED, the need for new Energy Generation and also a global NEED towards NET ZERO. Due to this – the location selection was identified through a purely commercial process, exclusively without the involvement of the Nundle community and initially WITHOUT the community's consent, it only required the land host's consent. This is what I know to be a "top-down" model of development, where a project is developed with no active involvement or ownership by a community.

Currently, our government has identified these NEEDS, without the involvement of the Australian people, and through the Renewable Energy Electricity Act 2000 and the declaration of Renewable Energy Zones, has encouraged and promoted commercial interest by large corporations. Many of which are foreign owned or government owned, and propose, to plan and build these Industrial Energy Generation projects.

Hypothetically - IF the National NEED was indeed identified and supported by majority of the Australian people, to develop new and renewable energy generation sources... imagine if our

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government were to encourage and potentially fund localised, community owned energy generation projects across the country, to allow communities, suburbs, industries (like mining) to develop their own Energy generation sources and storage if needed, at the same time contributing any excess into the grid. This would (a) boost local economies, (b) provide community ownership, control and energy sustainability and (c) contribute to a successful national energy transition. Imagine if these localised Energy Generation projects incorporated diverse energy generation practices and at a local level, significantly reduced energy prices and provided valuable security for base-load power. Power rationing would likely not be a challenge our communities would have to face in the future.

In understanding rural economies, I acknowledge I have a shared belief and wish, with all those that support the Hills of Gold Project AND with those who object, and that is to see the Nundle community grow and flourish. Wanting a thriving community and a boost to the economy is part and parcel of loving your community, you want to see your community grow and to do that you need support for goods and services.

Through this meeting you will hear many, many concerns – concerns around loss of wildlife and native vegetation, construction disruption, water usage and consumption, loss of landscape and visual amenity, increased fire risks, loss of aerial fire-fighting capabilities, pressure on already struggling public services eg, accommodation, health and education and the employment battle – what industries will find it impossible to compete? Agriculture or tourism?

The concern that I have and that I am most equipped to speak on, is the already significant loss to Nundle, of friendships, relationships, fractured committees and of community connection. This loss, this division, will inhibit the Nundle and Hanging Rock community's ability to manage through the disruption and interruptions of construction. Through the physical changes to the environment - emotions will be high, when animals are displaced - emotions will be high, when roads are blocked and traffic issues arise -emotions will be high, when there are unexpected challenges or outcomes - emotions will be high. Throughout this time, the community will be called to support each other. If the community remains divided it cannot possibly face these challenges together successfully.

CONCLUSION

I urge the IPC to not grant approval to this project, based on the enormous and obvious community divide. Engie must address this division – they must put solutions on the table to repair the damage that has occurred in this previously connected, caring and active community. The project shouldn't be approved, until they have whole of community support. Otherwise, the division will only grow, and the capacity and capability of the whole community, will continue to decline.

There should be robust collaborative discussion between all community members as to what could constitute a project that the whole community embraces and supports. What would that look like? What places would need to be avoided, what places are acceptable? I would suggest this would start with discussion around a significant level of community ownership and significant reduction in local

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energy costs. \$280,000pa Community Enhancement Fund based on 47 wind turbine generators is merely an international hand reaching out with a small bucket of money at the cost of your community cohesion, your landscapes and environment and your future sustainability. Commissioners, this is not the answer for a sustainable and thriving Nundle.

OTHER SIGNIFICANT POINTS OF CONCERN

- Project delivery: **removal of street trees** (considerable and measurable to the community's character and tourism offering) **and vegetation**. PAGE 240 EIS
- **Substantial evidence of missing consultation** with directly impacted landholders and associated communities.
- **Substantial evidence confirms that this is the wrong location** for a wind project and more importantly for one of this size and scale. Gold history, tourism, landscapes. Clean, crisp air, clean water, sub-alpine forests. Limited ridgelines on top of mountainous country. To me, it is mind-boggling to even consider.
- **"Carrot stick" community benefit funds are not the answer** to safe-guarding or mitigating the substantial and extensive costs expected to be borne by the Nundle, Hanging Rock, Timor communities.
- **Excessive risks for the environment and neighbouring/non-associated landholders** eg. High risk of mass movement of land/soil/rock. Proven evidence of this potential which is current and concerning without the necessary changes to roads, OSOM traffic or construction of turbines of such magnitude.
- **Apparent use of outdated data and research by the proponent and DPHI**
- **Insufficient studies and risk assessment of potential animal/bird/bat displacement and impacts to breeding of these impacted species**
- As announced during the Public Meeting, **"If Council rejects VPA, the applicant can make a monetary contribution to Council of \$6.3m"**, if this was to occur, structures and conditions need to be put in place to ensure these funds are utilised for the most impacted communities and not become a part of Council's operating budget.
- We see rural Australia as a place of such character, integrity and strength and can't possibly fathom the losses our communities and farming regions will experience through this transition. While there are some financial opportunities for landowners and "carrot-stick" funds for local Councils and communities, we don't believe these **equitably weigh-up against the long list of costs and impacts** that our regions will have to bear – most notably:
 - Environmental and biodiversity losses, wildlife and habitat loss
 - Loss of community cohesion and community strength and character

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- Loss of viable and productive agricultural land and therefore food/fibre producing country
- Unacceptable risk to irreparable damage to soil/soil structure/water
- Substantial changes to both on the ground and aerial fire-fighting capabilities, posing considerable risks
- Rural communities are connected in a unique and extraordinary way. What underpins this connection is a strong set of guiding values. Values that community members embody every day. **This project has damaged the very values that Nundle has been built upon**, not only should this project NOT BE APPROVED, the applicant should be held accountable for this damage and should be required to take considerable steps to help repair it.