

Hills of Gold IPCN Meeting Speech 2nd February 2024

Good morning chair, commissioners, ladies and gentlemen. Firstly, thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak at this meeting. I am a fifth generation farmer from Dunedoo in Central West NSW and I am deeply concerned for the agricultural industry and rural and regional NSW, and Australia, with regard to the rapid transition to renewable energy. My community is at the centre of the current proposals for the Central West Orana Renewable Energy Zone, hence the urge I have to express my opinions about the Hills of Gold Wind project.

I have many concerns about large scale renewable energy infrastructure projects - bushfire risks and firefighting limitations, roads and transport, water use, land use conflict, visual amenity and noise just to name a few. Although the biggest question I have at this moment, after reading the DPHI recommendations on this project and others, is how do rural and regional Australian's adequately inform the rest of the population, including the "experts" assessing such proposals, to understand the enormous impacts these projects will have on our businesses, lives, landscape and environment?

The people most affected by the rapid transition to renewables are those who have fed and clothed the population for hundreds of years. Their connection to the livestock they run and the country they care for is very special. That is why turning rural landscapes into an industrial setting is unfathomable for so many. Why does rural and regional Australia have to bear the brunt of the impacts of the "clean energy" transition? If everyone was prepared to do their part, maybe we wouldn't endanger our food and fibre production. Personally, we installed an off grid solar system to power our entire property in May 2023 – why are there not more incentives for solar panels on every roof and batteries in every garage? That would go a long way to minimising the impacts of large scale projects on valuable agricultural land.

The bond with Australian scenery is not limited to farmers. It is a major contributing factor to a lot of people choosing to live rurally for their entire lives or opt for a "tree change" at some point in time. This is often due to a yearning for peace and tranquillity, a slower paced, simpler life, and community values. All of these things will be changed, possibly irreparably, considering the sheer volume of proposed large scale renewable energy infrastructure for NSW and Australia. To hear proponents and DPHI project assessors deem the impacts to surrounding landowners and communities "minor" or "negligible" is an insult to our way of life and the things we value most. Not only will our landscape be forever altered, the vast majority of these projects also pose an enormous threat to our personal safety, and that of our livestock and wildlife.

On the 11th February 2017 the Sir Ivan Bushfire started approximately 15km east of Dunedoo. Due to intense heat and wind the fire had burnt over 50,000ha, approximately 50km, in three days. Whilst I won't go into my thoughts about the inner workings of the NSW Rural Fire Service, what I will tell you about is how the vast majority of our district came together during that time in an attempt to assist fellow farmers and community members in the fight of their lives. The aftermath of Sir Ivan was one of the most traumatic times of my life. I will never forget the days following the immediate threat of fire, but the point I most want to make is who was available to help those who had lost so much clean up the mess. The men and women I was shooting and burying sheep, transporting live sheep to other properties, treating burnt cattle and fixing fences alongside were other farmers or local community members – they were not DPHI, RFS, IPCN, or DCCEEW staff. How is it that these public authorities are given the power to make such huge decisions regarding our future without enough consideration and emphasis placed on our opinions, knowledge and experience?

The DPHI Assessment Report states that "on balance, the department considers that the benefits of the Hills of Gold Wind Farm outweigh its costs". I would like the panel to contemplate for whom? Is it Engie, host landowners and/or small towns like Nundle and Hanging Rock and the three affected LGA's who will receive a short term investment of funds?

I do not live in this community and the division this project has already caused is palpable, and this is before the project is approved and construction has even begun. Why is so much weight given to policy that our government, the people that are meant to represent us, have signed, like the Paris Agreement, and those who have to pay the ultimate price just have to grin and bear it?

Dwight D. Eisenhower said “farming looks mighty easy when your plow is a pencil, and you’re a thousand miles away from the corn field.” Please consider walking a mile or two in a farmers boots and do not approve the Hills of Gold Wind project.

Hills of Gold IPCN Submission

According to the DPHI Assessment Report, the Hills of Gold Wind project EIS received 382 submissions objecting and 201 in support. The amendment report received 280 objections and 144 supporting submissions. Tamworth Regional Council objected twice and Muswellbrook Shire Council objected once, and it is my understanding both still do not agree with the proposed project. Surely that sends a strong message to anyone considering how the affected community is feeling? Why is “public interest” a much more heavily weighted argument than the opinions and concerns of the people who will be most affected by a project?

It is suggested that the project will produce 1 million megawatt hours of energy per year. For each MWh of power produced developers receive one large scale energy generation certificate, a scheme created by the Federal Government as part of the Renewable Energy Target to promote renewable energy generation. On the 19th January 2024 the certificates were worth \$45.75 each meaning the Hills of Gold Wind project will generate over \$45 million per year, and that does not include the sale of power. Why is the income received by affected communities and landowners is such a small percentage of the profit these foreign owned companies/corporations will gain?

Transport and traffic will be a major issue when considering the cumulative impacts of all projects proposed for NSW. A large proportion of construction materials will be transported from the Port of Newcastle to rural and regional NSW requiring the use of the New England Highway and Golden Highway. This route is a major freight route from all of Western NSW to the Port of Newcastle. There will need to be major upgrades to this route prior to the start of any construction of projects. If commodities cannot get from rural NSW to Port that will cost the agricultural industry dearly. There is also the possibility of causing more road accidents due to impatient and frustrated drivers being stuck behind oversize overmass vehicles. How does the proponent, Engie, propose to mitigate the enormous impacts the Hills of Gold wind project will have on local roads, and major transport routes to the satisfaction of the local community, and greater rural and regional NSW? The ramifications will be much greater on those who live in the area, or on the transport route, than the experts assessing these impacts suspect. How will those who own a property split by any of these transport routes, or access tracks, safely move livestock across these roads? How will school buses safely traverse these routes twice a day? Will something only be done once an accident occurs or will measures be taken to prevent any accidents?

During the 2017 Sir Ivan Bushfire there was a significant amount of aerial support which saved countless homes, livestock and farm infrastructure. Whilst there is no clear acknowledgment regarding aerial firefighting limitations to date from the RFS bureaucrats, it is obvious to those of us who have been involved in previous firefighting efforts that areas with wind turbines and transmission lines will be avoided by planes and helicopters during a bushfire in difficult terrain that could well be a life and death situation not only for livestock and wildlife but for local residents. What will rural fire fighting look like in the future? Will community members be able to adequately protect themselves? (Please see photos below of the Sir Ivan Bushfire.)

The Sir Ivan bushfire burned for almost a month, tearing through 55,000 hectares of farming land in the Central West, affecting 138 properties, destroying more than 5000 head of sheep and cattle, and wrecking 5700 kilometres of fencing. Photo Nick Moir.



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📷 NATURAL DISASTER: Cattle and smoke near the Sir Ivan fire. Photo: DEAN SEWELL



FAIRFAX/ALEX ELLINGHAUSEN Sheep fleeing from a grassfire at Cassilis, NSW, as firefighters continue to fight fires after it was hit by the Sir Ivan fire the day before, on Monday 13 February 2017. Photo: Alex Ellinghausen









FAIRFAX/ALEX ELLINGHAUSEN Property damage at Uarbry, NSW, after it was hit by the Sir Ivan fire the day before, on Monday. fedpol Photo: Alex Ellinghausen



FAIRFAX/ALEX ELLINGHAUSEN A farmer shoots a badly injured sheep at Uarbry. Photo: Alex Ellinghausen



FAIRFAX/ALEX ELLINGHAUSEN A severely burnt sheep is seen in Uarbry on Monday, the day after the town was hit by the Sir Ivan fire. Photo: Alex Ellinghausen



FAIRFAX/ALEX ELLINGHAUSEN Property damage at Uarbry, NSW, after it was hit by the Sir Ivan fire the day before, on Monday 13 February 2017. Photo: Alex Ellinghausen

Renewable energy projects all claim to power a certain number of average Australian homes. Is this whilst the sun is shining and the wind is blowing or 24 hours a day, 7 days a week? Is there an industry standard to calculate these claims?

I note that Engie suggests using landscape screening as a way to mitigate visual impacts for neighbouring landowners of the Hills of Gold wind project. In the recently IPCn approved Bowman's Creek Wind project one of the conditions of consent is as follows: "implement visual impact mitigation measures (eg landscape screening) on the land of any non-associated residence within 4.4km of any turbine within 5 years from the commencement of constructions of the turbine (should the landowners request it)". Anyone who has ever planted a tree for shade or shelter knows they take years to grow to a substantial size (we have trees planted on my property that were 25 plus years old before we took the fence out around them to let stock use them for shade due to their size). Any landscape screening should be planted at least 10 years prior to construction so the affected landowner will get some benefit from it. Who is responsible for planting these trees and for their care? Who replaces any trees that die?

There are many references to more information being made available during "detailed design" and the "refinement process" within the Hills of Gold EIS documents. Some of the biggest impacts on the surrounding area are not required to have adequate detail at the EIS exhibition stage therefore not giving the community an opportunity to object or comment on the acceptability or suitability of the proposal – this is not acceptable. All specified Management Plan's should also be made available to the community to read and respond to prior to consent being granted for any project.

Wind projects should not have turbines located where they pose a risk to any neighbouring property ie. blade throw and turbine collapse are serious risks – turbines should not be located within range of a boundary where these risks could impact a neighbouring landholding (if the turbine is 300m to tip no turbine should be within 300m of a project boundary, if it is deemed debris from blade throw or a turbine fire could impact an area of 1km that should form the minimum setback required).

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.

In my opinion, the Hills of Gold Wind project should not be approved due to the large number of concerns from both the local community and greater NSW and Australia. Whilst the project may provide some short term monetary gain for the local area I believe the cost to the environment, agriculture, visual amenity, tourism, roads and transport, and community safety and cohesion is too high to adequately mitigate. Please consider the impacts on those who will be most affected by this project and do not grant approval to the Hills of Gold Wind project.