

Our ref: SSD 9679

Prof Mary O’Kane
Chair
Independent Planning Commission
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12/12/2023

Subject: Hills of Gold Wind Farm – Referral to the Independent Planning Commission

Dear Professor O’Kane

The Department has completed its assessment of the merits of the application for the Hills of Gold Wind Farm (SSD 9679).

The application is referred to the Independent Planning Commission for determination as Tamworth Regional Council and more than 50 unique submissions objected to the project.

Hills of Gold Wind Farm Pty Ltd (the Applicant), owned by ENGIE Australia & New Zealand proposes to develop a new State significant wind farm located about 60 kilometres (km) southeast of Tamworth in in the Tamworth Regional, Upper Hunter Shire and Liverpool Plains Shire Local Government Areas.

The project as proposed would have a generating capacity of around 390 megawatts (MW) and includes a 100 MW battery energy storage system, 330 kilovolt transmission line connecting to the existing transmission network at Wallabadah and other associated ancillary infrastructure.

During the exhibition of the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) the Department received a total of 592 submissions, in addition to advice from 19 government agencies and the three host Councils. Of the public submissions, 382 objected to the project, 201 supported the project and four provided comments. Tamworth Regional Council and Muswellbrook Shire Council objected to the project. The second Amendment Report was also exhibited, and the Department received a total of 425 submissions (280 objecting to the project, 144 supporting the project and one providing comment).

After reviewing the submissions, the Applicant made a number of changes to the project to address issues raised in submissions and agency advice, including:

- deletion of six turbines (T1, T19, T23, T27, T31 and T41) and re siting of turbines T2 – T4, T10 – T12, T32, T35 – T40, T42 – T47, T50, T64 and T70;
- removal of the Devils Elbow Bypass on Barry Road and removal of the Head of Peel Road access route; and
- an overall reduction of the development footprint by approximately 66 ha.

Department of Planning and Environment



Under the delegation from the consent authority (i.e. the Commission for this development), the Department accepted the amended application for the reasons outlined in the Assessment Report.

During its assessment, the Department raised concerns about the visual impacts of 15 turbines (T9, T10, T11, T24, T53, T54, T55, T56, T57, T58, T59, T60, T61, T62, T63) on key non associated dwellings. In the absence of the Applicant securing agreements or other feasible mitigation measures, the Department recommends deleting these turbines.

The Department also considers further avoidance of threatened endangered ecological communities (TECs) listed as either endangered or critically endangered under the *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016* is necessary, and recommends deleting two turbines, T24 (also recommended for deletion due to visual impacts) and T28. This would reduce clearing of moderate and high condition Ribbon Gum Mountain Gum Snow Gum by 3.53 ha and 5.02 ha of habitat for threatened species such as the Koala, Barking Owl and Large eared Pied bat. The Department also recommends deleting turbine T42 due to concerns on impacts to avifauna and its proximity to Ben Halls Gap Nature Reserve.

As a result, the total number of turbines recommended is 47 and the project capacity would be reduced to approximately 282 MW.

The Applicant has offered to enter into a voluntary planning agreement with Tamworth Regional Council and Upper Hunter Shire Council, to support the provision of community enhancement projects, with contributions of \$11.6 million total agreed in principle.

In assessing the merits of the project, the Department has considered the environmental, social and economic impacts of the project, submissions on the EIS, relevant environmental planning instruments, the suitability of the site, and the public interest, in accordance with the requirements of the *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979*.

During the assessment process the Department visited the site, and consulted with local residents, Councils and relevant government agencies.

Based on this assessment, the Department considers that the project is approvable, subject to the recommended conditions of consent. I have attached a copy of the Department's assessment report and other relevant documents for the Commission's consideration.

If you have any questions, please contact Nicole Brewer on [REDACTED] or via email at [REDACTED].

Yours sincerely,

[REDACTED]

Nicole Brewer
Director
Energy Assessments