From:	[redacted]
To:	Do-Not-Reply IPCN Submissions Mailbox
Subject:	Submissions re-opened on additional material for Hills of Gold wind farm (SSD-9679)
Date:	Friday, 12 July 2024 6:18:56 PM
Attachments:	IPC - Hills of Gold wind farm submission 12July 2024.docx

Dear Panel Chair and Commissioners,

Please find attached my submission (pages 1-9) in response to the Commissions request for further material for the Hills of Gold wind farm application (SSD–9679).

Yours faithfully,

[redacted]
Walcha Grazier
'Banchory'
[redacted]
Walcha NSW 2354
[redacted]

12 July 2024

Hills of Gold wind farm application (SSD-9679)

Independent Planning Commission (Commission) Submissions Re-opened on Additional Material

Dear Panel Chair and Commissioners,

Opening Comments

This submission draws on my interpretation of the issues which arise from reading the request from the Independent Planning Commission (Commission) for additional material published on the IPC website 27 June 2024, and mainly relies on the Department of Planning, Housing & Infrastructures (Department) response to the Commission 24 June 2024 as my template.

If ever an application deserves to be refused, it is the Hills of Gold wind farm, for in many ways it is a project far more site sensitive than the Wooroora Station/Chalumbin wind farm in Far North QLD, which application was recently withdrawn due to Federal Environment Minister Tanya Plibersek's decision to propose rejection. And so, by common law, a precedent has been set by the Federal government for wind farms adjacent to World Heritage Wilderness Areas, National Parks and Nature Reserves throughout Australia.

Nundle is a quintessential hamlet typical of small rural communities nestled amongst The Great Dividing Range, but like so many of these localities, it is

threatened by '*renewable energy*' developments of an industrial scale such as the Hills of Gold (HoG) wind farm.

The concept of proposing to build sixty-four skyscrapers on top of a 1200-1400m high, extremely steep and heavily timbered ridges in between two National Parks, Crawney Pass National Park and Ben Halls Gap National Park, both habitat to endangered and threatened species of flora and fauna, I find outrageous, inconceivable and a most disrespectful act of the natural environment. This proposed willful destruction of the natural landscape is an environmental travesty – by the international corporation Engie, that sees this pristine landscape as nothing more than a means to profit from generous government subsidies.

Engie SA, is a multi-national corporation with considerable geopolitical clout that is listed on the Euronext exchanges in Paris and Brussels who's first and foremost responsibility is NOT to protect the biodiversity of The Great Dividing Range or provide a Public Benefit to the Nundle residents or the wider Australian community but is to reward its investors with appealing dividends.

2.1 Assessment Weighting

The Applicant has suggested that the Department should give very little (if any) weight to the Complying Development Certificate (CDC) at DAD01, when balanced against the Public Interest in 'renewable energy' generation in NSW, and turbines T53 and T63 should be reinstated based on the following:

5. "*The Public Benefit in renewable energy generation outweighs the private disbenefits [the rights] of individual landowners"*.

6. *"T53 and T63 have some of the highest yields, and the removal because of DAD01 would set a dangerous precedent for other wind farms developments in NSW"*.

These two statements are basically saying that a private corporation should be given the right by government to override Planning Guidelines and

principals of the Departmentand then be able to deliberately adversely impact a neighbouring non-consenting property, and then because that property is adversely impacted the developer should then be given the opportunity to mandatorily purchase (***by means of an insidious method of compulsory acquisition masquerading as discretionary***) the impacted property under the convoluted pretence of '*voluntary acquisition*', per a condition of consent set down by the Department in consultation with the applicant.

I would argue quite to the contrary and say if the Commission accepted the Departments recommendation, it would set up an intractable precedent of 'voluntary acquisition' on all future '*renewable energy'* generation projects which would give any applicant a complete freehand to recklessly develop at their will and then acquire at their discretion, thereby casting assessment based on merit to the wind.

In other words, any project that generates *'renewable energy'* should be automatically recommended for approval without having any regard for its economic environmental or social consequences. This desperate precedent can only cause further fear, anxiety and uncertainty in all rural communities now living with the constant threat of '*voluntary acquisition*'.

2.2 Visual Impact Assessment

Under the NSW Planning Guidelines 2023 the Department states a high *'impact rating'* should be avoided unless an applicant can justify otherwise. The Department has noted to the Commission that the Planning Guidelines 2023 have superseded 2016, and that 2023 should be adopted as the means of determining the Hills of Gold application.

A high *'impact rating'* has been assigned to turbines T53-63 and T59-60 all of which affect neighbouring properties, namely DAD01, with both visual and noise impacts that cannot be mitigated. It is only now following the Departments recommendation to delete T53-63 has the Applicant presented evidence that the project would be commercially unviable without those

turbines. The Applicant would have been fully aware of the higher capacity factor of these turbines when preparing the Scoping Report back in 2018. Furthermore, this admission only highlights just how economically marginal this project is overall.

The Department has noted that *'model wind farm'* applicants recognise the importance of securing neighbour agreements very early at the Scoping stage and prior to finalising the layout of a wind farm, but that wasn't done in this case. The Department goes onto say that if the Applicant is now placing such importance on turbines T53-63, the Applicant should have at the very least secured agreement with DAD01 in considering them with similar weight as hosts on the project or purchased the land outright back in 2018.

Surely it is tardy of the Applicant, six years on, to now be arguing such pivotal importance on turbines T53 and T63 and putting the burden on the Commission to grant '*voluntary acquisition'* rights to the Applicant to resolve the matter of DAD01. I find this imposition on the Commission extraordinary.

2.3 Project Viability / Public Interest

The name Hills of Gold given to this project by Engie could be likened to an El Dorado, a place of fabulous wealth, but POOR SITE SELECTION would suggest otherwise. And from the very outset approval of sixty-four turbines was ambitious, if not physically impossible due to the steep terrain and extreme access problems. The locals new it, it is evident from the early days of the Scoping Report that the Department new it, and I daresay the applicant always felt that approval of 64 turbines would be ambitious and would be satisfied with a lesser number. But when the Department firstly recommended approval of 47 turbines, the instincts and commercial traits of a multi-national corporation carry the day, and the applicant now wants to '*gild the lily'* by pursuing the Department for the original number of 64.

And the Department subsequently sought advice from an Independent Expert Panel for Energy Transition (IEAPET) to examine the Applicants claim that the

project is commercially unviable without reinstating 15 turbines the Department had recommended deleting. The key finding of the IEAPET advice, which is solely based on a Levelised Cost of Electricity (LCOE) model, is that the project is only commercially viable with 62 turbines, but with the caveat that their findings are not conclusive due to; "*the model is not a perfect representation of reality and there are a range of factors not captured by the model that could make other scenarios viable".* One of the factors not captured by the LCOE model is the impost of site costs above the average, which on this site will be well above the average making this development at best only marginal at the 62-turbine scenario.

There is a considerable and mounting overall economic and social cost to rural communities and to the energy economy of NSW in managing poor projects through the planning process. Complex developments which are evident in POOR SITE SELECTION**.** Non-compliant developments such as HoG will become an economic burden not an economic benefit. It offers no downward pressure on energy pricing. Economic viability must present as one of the basic due diligences inherent in any site selection. The fact that the Department has backflipped to throw planning principles '*out the window'* to manufacture a distorted economic viability for HoG based on the LCOE is not discernable of a stable transparent and accountable 'renewable' energy transition framework. The governments IEAPET expert analysis proposes just how fragile economic viability and Public Benefit is on this project. Reliance on AEMO's ISP and CSRIO Gen cost analysis offers no comfort to hosting communities, because it's generally regarded as biased towards the '*renewables'* are cheaper platform promoted by the Federal government.

To base this projects viability solely on the weight of the LCOE and IEAPET advice, and to then to argue that the projects contribution to the '*renewable energy*' transition is a Public Benefit to the overall community, is to disregard the major costs of devaluation to neighbouring properties (*on average forty per cent*), new-build of a high voltage transmission grid, pumped-hydro storage e.g. Snowy 2.0, BESS storage and a rebuild of '*renewable energy'* generators every twenty (*optimistic)* years or so. If these costs are considered

together with the intangible social and environmental costs, this project would certainly not be at all viable, even with 62 turbines, and if the truth be told would in fact be a burden on the transition. So, to argue that this non-compliant development is "*for the better good*" or a Public Benefit is a fallacious and unbalanced one. Viability is a commercial matter for any Applicant to weigh up early on in their due-diligence, and if a wind farm doesn't stack up financially, that surely NOT is a matter for consideration in the approval process, but if the Commission is to take onboard viability, profitability and Public Benefit as a matter for consideration, then it must be balanced and take onboard and weigh up the significant devaluation impacts (*forty per cent*) on surrounding properties.

Surely it would be a far more straightforward process for the Department to be able to simply assess projects based strictly on compliance matters that are within the Planning Guidelines and the NSW BC Act: free from '*political pressure or veto'*.

2.4 Biodiversity Impacts

The Department has noted that additional clearing will be required to accommodate T28, and that the developer has offered an increase in biodiversity offset credits to compensate for this further clearing. And that the clearing for the whole development footprint, which includes an Endangered Ecological Community (*EEC*) Ribbon and Mountain Snow Gum species, and hollow bearing trees that pre-date European colonisation of this country; and the loss and displacement of Koala (*endangered*) and other threatened species of fauna, will be offset through the Biodiversity Offset Scheme. But no amount of biodiversity offsets credits will ever bring these poor creatures back to life or replace their breeding habitat with '*like for like'*. This incongruous scheme, which allows wilful damage in one location to be offset by investment in biodiversity elsewhere, is seriously flawed in many aspects and is in urgent need of review, particularly with respect to wind farms proposed on lands with remnant woodlands adjacent to National Parks and Reserves

such as the Crawney Pass National Park and Ben Halls Gap National Park containing the critically endangered endemic species of *Sphagnum Moss Cool Climate Rainforest*. These woodlands serve as critically important connectivity corridors for wildlife to freely commute in and out of the Parks and provide refuge in times of bushfire events, common in Australia. Eighty five percent of many National Parks were burnt out in the 2019/20 Black Summer bushfire event, but fortunately most of the adjacent woodlands on freehold lands were saved and so were many wildlife, that have since repopulated and migrated back to the Parks. The woodlands are just as important, **if not more important**, as the Parks themselves in serving as sanctuaries and breeding habitat for wildlife during and post bushfire events.

Wedge-tailed Eagles and other raptor densities are often higher along ridgelines; however, this is also the preferred location for sixty-two turbines, right in the path of these birds that rely on updrafts to get airborne; ***'this is the perfect storm'*** and an issue that will persist for the life of this wind farm.

The increase in clearing of native vegetation for wind farms on The Great Dividing Range and particularly so for this very steep development footprint, will also increase erosion and thereby reduce infiltration of rainwater into the soil profile for release via springs into the creek and river systems, vital for sustaining wildlife.

The expansive footprint of this development lies on a biodiverse connectivity corridor between two National Parks. The clear felling of native woodlands within the development footprint will severely compromise the corridor performing the critically important role of providing refuge to wildlife in times of bushfire events and then giving them the chance to repopulate before migrating back into the adjacent Parks following their regeneration.

It is an outrageous contradiction in terms, to continue to approve ***'killing fields'*** on, and adjacent to wildlife sanctuaries and breeding grounds.

Closing Remarks

The Department has noted in its response 24 June 2024 to the Commission that this project has received some of the highest number of objections, second only to the Jupiter wind farm 2017, which project was refused by the Department. The Department has further noted that this non-compliant development from the very outset of the Scoping Report (2018) through to the EIS (2023) has been a litany of major issues, issues that remain unresolved, and many of which are issues with Tamworth Regional Council that will probably never be resolved, and on that collective basis of issues would have more than likely led to a recommendation by the Department for refusal.

But now, out of the blue, the Department has done a complete backflip by abandoning its own Planning Guidelines and has recommended approval of a non-compliant development, most disturbingly using the convoluted and aggressive tool of '*voluntary acquisition'* that threatens an individual's basic property rights, and all riding on the back of a distorted argument of project viability and a perceived Public Benefit; thereby making a complete mockery of the Planning Guidelines.

The Applicant with the support of the Department has argued the Public Benefit or "*for the greater good*" outweighs the basic rights of individuals, the social amenity of affected communities and the cumulative adverse impact on the rural and natural environments. All which conflicts with Article 2 of the 2015 Paris Agreement that states:

"This Agreement…aims to strengthen the global response to the threat of climate change, in the context of sustainable development and efforts to ***eradicate poverty****, including by:*

"(b) Increasing the ability to adapt to the adverse impacts of climate change and foster climate resilience and low greenhouse gas emissions development, ***in a manner that does not threaten food production***".

One would think that the overarching principal goals of the 2015 Paris Agreement should prevail over the distorted viability of a non-compliant

industrial enterprise proposed to be built in an ecologically sensitive and productive agricultural area on The Great Dividing Range that acts very well as a connectivity corridor set between two wildlife sanctuaries in the management of National Parks NSW.

The principal businesses of the New England Region are education, tourism and farming: all clean industries that uphold the principal goals of the 2015 Paris Agreement in a '*just transition'* in balance with the basic rights of individuals and the basic rights of farmers to produce food and fibre.

Whether it be 47 or 62 turbines the issues that have plagued this shaky development from the beginning will not go away and advocating in favour of '*voluntary acquisition'* in the hope that this forlorn project will attain economic viability is at odds with individual rights and the overall goal of a '*just transition*'.

NSW rural communities have relied on the governance of the Department and the integrity of an Independent Planning Commission as key to upholding a '*just transition'* within this State. But since the transition to *'renewable energy'* was born at a Federal level of government, one must now question the legitimacy of a State bureaucracy to determine the terms of an application that; due to political (*geopolitical*) pressure emanating from a Federal (*Global*) level has transgressed into a matter outside the scope of a State bureaucracies governance, which begs the question: should this non-compliant development application be referred to a Federal level of bureaucracy or the Federal Environment Minister for determination.

Ian McDonald, Walcha Grazier

'Banchory'

[redacted]

Walcha NSW 2354

[redacted]