

## New England Renewable Energy Zone (REZ)

### Community Reference Group (CRG) South - Meeting 1

Held on: Tuesday 28 January 2025 – 5.30pm to 8:00pm

At: Scone Motor Inn and Conference Centre, 55 Kelly Street, Scone

Chaired by: Margaret Harvie

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#### Attended

<b>Chairperson</b>	Margaret Harvie
<b>Community Representatives</b>	Ninna Douglas * Heather Kember * Linda Taylor Robert Warren Mark Eather
<b>LALC Representatives</b>	Nungaroo Local Aboriginal Land Council - Noel Downs
<b>LGA delegates</b>	Upper Hunter Shire Council – Councillor Adam Williamson Tamworth Regional Council – Mayor Russell Webb
<b>EnergyCo Representatives</b>	Julian Watson, New England Deputy Project Director Mim Balcombe, New England Communications and Engagement Director Melissa Maurer, New England Place Manager
<b>Note taker</b>	Kate McGrath
*Online attendance	

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#### Apologies

Muswellbrook Shire Council – Mayor Jeff Drayton

Wanaruah Local Aboriginal Land Council - De-Anne Douglas

Ash Albury, Planning and Communities Executive Director

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#### Declarations of interest

Mark Eather and Robert Warren - Landholders of properties within EnergyCo proposed transmission line corridor.

Linda Taylor – Her company intends to tender for paid recruitment contracts

Margaret Harvie – Independent Chairperson, engaged by EnergyCo. Has a training program attended by companies that are proponents of renewable energy projects.

Noel Downs – Nungaroo Land may be part of the transmission line corridor.

Other Potential Interests

Heather Kember - Director of a design and engagement firm. No current government contracts but this may be possible in future.

Kate McGrath - Employment Facilitator for the New England North West Local Jobs Program which provides funding and support for workforce development in the renewables sector. Also Sapphire Windfarm investor.

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## **Agenda item discussion and actions**

### **Item 1. Acknowledgement of Country**

- The Chairperson acknowledged that we are meeting on Aboriginal land, and paid respects to Elders past, present and emerging.
- Meeting opened 5.33pm

### **Item 2. Welcome and housekeeping**

- Chair welcomed members and outlined structure of meeting
- Chair called for questions about agenda
- Chair highlighted CRG purpose and objectives
- South CRG focused on transmission line corridor

### **Item 3. Introductions and declarations**

- Chair introduced herself and explained role as independent Chair
- EnergyCo staff introduced themselves, their roles in the project, and previous experience
- Members introduced themselves and their interest in participating in the CRG
- Declarations as listed

### **Item 4. Apologies**

- As listed

### **Item 5. Governance and administration**

- Local Councils, Local Aboriginal Land Councils and Valley Alliance are organisational members of the CRG. This means that they can send a proxy or swap representatives, all other members are appointed as individuals.
- Meet four times a year, additional meetings if required, flexibility regarding time and location
- It is proposed that the location alternate between each end of the south region given some members are north of Tamworth (the area covered is roughly between Muswellbrook and Tamworth)
- Members are expected to attend 75% of meetings per year (3 based on current projected meetings)

- Draft agenda to be distributed 2 weeks beforehand to allow time for inclusion of additional items, and all members are invited to include items on the agenda
- Meeting notes will be provided, not verbatim minutes, and only actions will be attributed to individuals
- Meeting notes to be completed and distributed within a week
- Members given a week to review draft minutes (including at least one weekend) and can provide feedback to Chair before notes are finalised for placement on the website by EnergyCo
- Member names and email addresses are to be published on EnergyCo website
- Correction of minutes can be addressed at subsequent meeting
- Request for meetings to be recorded. Chair declined this request on the basis of the potential for people to be less able to speak freely.
- It was understood that the intent of recording is to have communication to the wider community and groups that the members represent. The meeting notes will be publicly available within a short period of time, and it is intended that they serve this purpose.
- If members feel that discussion points are not adequately covered in the meeting notes there is opportunity to make comment and changes to these notes.
- Request for recording of meetings to be a committee decision. Chair declined and requested that the conversation be revisited in the future based on any concerns raised on the recording of meeting notes.
- Discussion regarding Aboriginal community meetings being recorded and distributed as a standard practice
- Concern raised regarding three landholders being an inadequately small representation on the CRG

## Item 6. Terms of Reference

- Chair explained proposed changes to terms of reference from the version distributed previously
- Changes to the Terms of reference included the following
  - Reduction to the number of community reps from 10 to 7
  - Clarification that it is only one rep of each of the Councils and LALC
  - Inclusion/ strengthening of pecuniary interest statement for further clarity
  - No more than 50% of members with financial interest
  - Removal of line to state members could not speak to media, amended to state that members are able to make comment but are not permitted to speak on behalf of the CRG or EnergyCo

- **Action: New ToR to be distributed with meeting notes.**
- All relevant declarations will be included in each and every meeting notes and appropriately documented
- Request for members to re-sign Code of Conduct document
- **Action: Members to sign updated Code of Conduct document – this occurred at the meeting**
- **Action: Members that have not done so need to sign Declaration of Interest form**
- Discussion regarding purpose of restricted membership which is to maintain a consistent and engaged membership through all meetings
- Comment that CRG numbers should be increased, given the large area represented
- Concern raised that the landholders would bear the brunt of the impact of the transmission lines and so should be well represented on the CRG.
- EnergyCo has additional consultation means for landholders and this is to be explained as part of the presentation.
- Tamworth Council representative intends to attend both North and South CRGs. Confirmed that this is understood and was the intent.
- Comment on the existing community opinion of EnergyCo as a starting point to these discussions
- Comment that local government do not have the staff or resources to handle increased pressure from REZ projects, and the financial contributions provided by EnergyCo are inadequate
- Request for EnergyCo to give an overview of engagement as it exists beyond this forum, this will be part of the presentation in this meeting.

#### Item 7. Project overview

- Presentation from EnergyCo outlining NSW energy transition
- Criticality and capability of project highlighted
- Aiming for 8GW in three stages
- Join to Bayswater substation
- 180km of project line is outside the REZ
- Overview of route selection process, detailed information available on EnergyCo website
- Bulk corridor analysed and reduced to 1km wide preliminary study corridor, further refined to preferred study corridor, likely to be further amended based on landholder feedback and current land use of properties
- Scoping report as part of the Environmental Impact Assessment is available on NSW Major Projects Planning Portal – link to document available [here](#)

- Competitive tender to procure network operator in 2025, with market update released late 2024
- Procurement process will be similar to Central West Orana, with adaptations to this from experience and learnings
- Question if EnergyCo will continue project management after network operator is procured. Response that the appointed network operator will design, construct, finance, operate and maintain the network infrastructure
- Concern raised that landholders have not been adequately informed that long term project owner will not be the state government
- Concern raised that regulations will be avoided by non-government proponents
- Concern raised that government is using its power for compulsory acquisition of properties below market value and then selling the asset to a developer

*[Clarification to this point has been made by EnergyCo following meeting: “EnergyCo will continue to work closely with the network operator to oversee the network infrastructure project and lead ongoing REZ-wide coordination and planning. Once the network infrastructure is in operation, EnergyCo will continue to have a governance and contract management role”.]*

- Comment that communication has been inadequate, with lack of personal contact in early stages (“Dear landowner”) and names of property owners spelled incorrectly - details ignored.
- **Action: Follow up with property manager regarding correct spelling of name and attention to owners’ detail in communication**
- Comment that landholders have limited say in the process, bodies established to provide for expression of concerns are not effective, and forums do not constructively promote effective change
- Suggestion that due to community and environmental sensitivity the transmission lines should be underground
- EnergyCo indicated that transmission lines are not proposed to go underground due to cost and the significant land damage to deliver underground lines
- Overview of planned community engagement process was described including the hosting of community pop-ups, meeting with Councils and MPs including their staff.
- Accommodation, workforce, healthcare and roads are the most common community issues raised
- EnergyCo aim through their engagement to connect to all the impacted stakeholders and the objective is to create a positive legacy
- Comment that this infrastructure is generational, and must be designed with future generations in mind, hence supporting the concepts of having transmission underground.

- Comment regarding replacement value and whole of life costs when comparing under and above ground transmission lines
- **Action: Provide further information to explain why EnergyCo (the NSW government) is not planning underground transmission lines**
- Comment that the CRG should have commenced before the project started. Additional comment that it's better than no consultation at all.
- Comment regarding the need for long lead times with Aboriginal communities allowing for adequate consideration and protection of cultural artefacts
- Commitment from EnergyCo to be open and transparent with CRG
- It was noted that members appreciated the presence of EnergyCo and understood that staff are not writing the policy or legislation
- Overview of Legislative Assembly inquiry into the impact of Renewable Energy Zones (REZs) on rural and regional communities and industries in New South Wales, submissions close on 31 January 2025
- Timeline for inquiry hearings, reports and responses is yet to be determined
- Concerns expressed around coordination regarding impact and benefits, EnergyCo is undertaking studies to understand local needs and concerns within the community.
- There is a large suite of biodiversity offsets the project will need to find, desire to see like for like offsets based on impacts
- Request for explanation about how the biodiversity offsets will work for this project
- Overview of basic information about biodiversity offsets but suggestion that it is a complex issue
- **Action: More detailed information to be provided about the biodiversity impacts of the project and the planned biodiversity offsets in response to the impacts**
- It was confirmed that there is a large suite of biodiversity offsets to be acquired. EnergyCo will work with the Biodiversity, Conservation and Science Group within the NSW Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water to ensure that an appropriate approach to securing offsets is undertaken.
- Comment regarding landholders being approached by Biodiversity Conservation Trust (government body for offsets) to secure land to be used for offsets
- Comment that larger parcels of land that are required for local offset and this is unrealistic in this area
- Discussion regarding unique biodiversity of the local area, making the likelihood of being able to replicate this less likely
- **Action: Invite EnergyCo specialist to attend CRG to present to members about the biodiversity impacts of the project and the plan for offsets, including the methodology**

- Concern raised that EnergyCo will just pay into Biodiversity Conservation Trust fund (or other fund) in response to biodiversity impacts.
- Request for more information including mapping of what is impacted along the line and needs for biodiversity offsets.
- Concern raised that route will not be re-directed if endangered sites or fauna are discovered in the corridor
- Comment that when the studies are done, and the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is published it is too late for community to be adequately informed
- Overview of Community Employment Benefits Fund, the final \$ figure for New England has not been determined
- Challenge is how to bring benefits and payments forward to support communities earlier
- Comment that caution is required around programs and funding, and frustration of smaller communities when external bodies receive financial support to deliver programs and activities that may not be sustained in the longer term
- Comment about lack of consultation about what the community needs and what should be funded through community benefit funds
- Comment that consideration is needed to support people into employment, building capacity within local businesses and communities
- Comment that EnergyCo need to be provided with local labour market information and insights
- Comment that grant funded community infrastructure can become a liability, including for local governments
- Suggestion for EnergyCo to be developing housing to meet a need and to create this to leave a legacy
- Comment that social housing is needed
- Suggestion to establish scholarships in local communities to support local people into skill development and to meet skill needs for the REZ
- Comment that there is a shortage of childcare workers and people to train the childcare workers
- Concern about the risk that REZ employment will draw people away from essential jobs, compounding labour shortage being experienced across the region
- Comment about the potential of a “mining village” model to meet accommodation needs and provide future housing, this not being the desired solution
- Desire for local consultation in contributing to the design/ planning for workforce accommodation

- Suggestion that community infrastructure supply to the hub, and the potential for community battery for residential and government building power - directed into battery
  - Considered that communities would be more accepting of renewables if they were able to access cheap power
  - Comment that EnergyCo can influence policy to improve community access to cheaper power through local projects
  - Request for clarification about which body or department is responsible for negotiating proposed community benefits. EnergyCo advised it would work with government to make recommendations to respond to local needs.
  - EIS will include an indicative plan for all ancillary facilities, including accommodation
  - EnergyCo will collaborate with relevant state bodies to ensure planning is undertaken to proactively address social impact
  - Message from local government representatives that they do not want to be responsible for assets that are generated through community benefit funds
  - There was a view from Council representatives that councils should guide the allocation of community benefits and investment
  - Discussion regarding capacity of transmission lines to meet the power demands
  - Overview of EnergyCo working with generators, also known as generation design partners
  - Range of generators that are planning to connect to existing Transgrid infrastructure
  - The Network Operator will be appointed via a competitive tender process to finance construct, operate, undertake detailed design, and maintain the infrastructure for a nominated period – typically 30-35 years
  - March 2025 industry briefing for potential operators
  - Question regarding market competition and potential tenders. Response that consortia is likely to be formed as part of three to five potential operators
  - Discussion regarding cost of project infrastructure
  - Currently EnergyCo are completing REZ coordination studies
  - Establishing regional steering committee
  - Job Summit planned for 2026
  - Onsite surveys are underway, many landholders have been accommodating in permitting this
- [Clarification to figures provided at the meeting, post the meeting: The project's survey area contains approximately 11,000 hectares. About 6000 hectares have been surveyed to date.]*
- Comment that Valley Alliance is frustrated that changes to the corridor in March 2024 meant that project consultation had commenced prior to that community being identified as impacted



- **Action:** Both North and South groups are to be notified when the meeting notes are published on the website
- **Action:** Establish group email thread

**Item 8. First Nations engagement**

- LALCs have a standing invitation to attend CRG
- Standing agenda item for EnergyCo to report on First Nations initiatives
- Range of briefings including meetings with Aboriginal representatives
- Dedicated EnergyCo First Nations Engagement officer

**Item 9. Dinner**

**Item 10. Questions and general business**

- Comment that every time the land and/or environment are impacted it is a negative impact on Aboriginal Culture. Aboriginal people lose the most culturally, but often gain the least benefit (if any) from those impacts.
- Comment that all community benefit needs to capture and maximise value and council does not want to be responsible for more depreciating assets
- Concern around accommodation ideas, mining style camps are not the solution, development partners are needed to make development viable and sustainable, and prevent future liability
- Concern that CRG is for 2-year period and EIS will be lodged at the end of 2025, there are only 2 more meetings before EIS, desire that some of the meetings be brought forward, increase the frequency of meetings to allow for greater input.
- **Action: Agenda items and guests presenting should be focused on topics relevant to EIS**
- Concern raised that community doesn't have time and resources for an adequate response to the EIS, input does not necessarily generate change
- Value of CRG is for group to provide feedback on route, EIS and community benefit
- Concern raised regarding Chaffey Dam and firefighting capacity. Response that capacity will not be negatively impacted, and route will be altered if necessary to ensure firefighting capacity can be maintained using data and modelling. Unequivocal commitment from EnergyCo that firefighting capacity will not be affected.
- Comment that Chaffey Dam is a prime area to underground lines
- Request for an additional meeting before the EIS is lodged. Response that there is potential capacity for at least one additional meeting this year
- **Action: Investigate capacity for additional 2025 CRG meeting(s)**
- Concern about impact on health care, current shortages of doctors and nurses will be compounded.

- Suggestion for incentives for health professionals to be greater and more negotiable.
- Concern that needs of rapidly ageing population is not adequately planned for and impacted by demand from the project
- Suggestion that all Community Benefit money should go into a shared pot to enable significant investment in community legacy projects
- Comment that road network impact assessments should be completed prior to project commencing to enable baseline to be established and project impact to be assessed. Felt that communities should not have to pay for road upgrades, it should be paid for by EnergyCo and proponents.
- Question posed as to what exactly EnergyCo wants from the CRG, and how the CRG can make an impact, the specific areas that EnergyCo is seeking input on. Response that opportunities for impact are in route improvements, identifying local priorities and risks, gathering information not available through a desktop study, refinement of route, distribution of useful information, sharing of community knowledge.
- Corridor is broad, changes within it are quite straightforward. Wholesale changes to the corridor are unlikely.
- Comment regarding desire of group to have input into the EIS
- REZ wide studies require local input
- CRG has information on local ecosystems that might be useful to the biodiversity assessments
- Concern raised that environmental impact offsets do not yield actual repair of impacted ecosystems and species
- Question if future meetings will have more opportunity for input. Response that sharing of information and feedback in response to information presented will be key part of the way the CRG will operate moving forward
- Important to note that the CRG is a feedback forum, not a decision-making forum
- Request for clarity regarding the role of the group and areas in which members can influence the decision makers, and how the time can be used effectively
- Suggestion for EnergyCo to offer reimbursement for travel expenses
- **Action: Further information from EnergyCo on role of the group and areas of expected input**
- **Action: Provide information about the decision-making governance structure of EnergyCo as it relates to the CRG**

## Item 11. Next meeting

Tentative date Wednesday 30 April in Tamworth. Time and venue to be determined.

Action	Responsible	Status
New ToR to be distributed with meeting notes.	Chair	
Members to sign updated Code of Conduct document	CRG Members	Completed for those at the meeting –all future members to do the same
Members that have not done so need to sign Declaration of Interest form	CRG Members	Some members to be followed up
Follow up with property manager regarding correct spelling of name and attention to owners' detail in communication	Julian Watson	
Provide further information to explain why EnergyCo (the NSW government) is not planning underground transmission lines	Julian Watson	
More detailed information to be provided about the biodiversity impacts of the project and the planned biodiversity offsets in response to the impacts	Julian Watson	
Invite EnergyCo specialist to attend CRG to present to members about the biodiversity impacts of the project and the plan for offsets, including the methodology	Julian Watson	
Both North and South groups are to be notified when the meeting notes are published on the website	Chair	
Establish group email thread	Chair	
Agenda items and guests presenting should be focused on topics relevant to EIS	Chair	
Investigate capacity for additional 2025 CRG meeting(s)	Chair	
Further information on role of the group and areas of expected input	Mim Balcombe	
Provide information about the decision-making governance structure of EnergyCo as relates to the CRG	Mim Balcombe	

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## Other comments

Some of the other suggested agenda items for future meetings captured from the discussion:

- Road links and transport
- Community benefit of cheaper power for local communities
- Community batteries
- Housing and accommodation shortages
- Biodiversity offsets
- Workforce planning and development
- Shortage of primary health professionals
- Communication and engagement
- Community and Employment Benefit Program
- Community infrastructure

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## Upcoming meetings

To be advised – likely Tamworth Wednesday 30 April at 5pm. Meeting closed 8:14pm