

IPC - CSF Submission

I support the DPIE Assessment Report for the Culcairn Solar Farm SSD 10288.

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge that I appreciated the IPC Panel's time and professional manner when they visited my farm to inspect the proposed site.

I am one of the owners willing to lease my land to Neoen for the proposed Culcairn Solar Farm. I was approached by many companies because in their words "it's an optimal site for a solar farm".

I spoke at length with all members of my family regarding my decision in pursuing this opportunity because I respect that all members of my family have an attachment to this land. I am confident to say after my family has farmed this land for over 100 years it is well suited for the agri-solar operations proposed having had to deal with seasonal weather variations over many years such as droughts, floods, pests, and low commodity prices. Now with the changing climate predictions knocking at the door of farmers they are 100 % supportive of doing "farming" differently.

After looking at my land through different eyes than the normal traditional farming eyes, I believe my land to be an excellent site for solar harvesting. It is **RU1 - Class 4** land. It is flat, and low lying, prone to waterlogging and frost, has minimal paddock trees due to continual farming. The land has heavy clay acidic soil, which requires consistent application of lime and gypsum to grow cereal crops.

My agronomist knowing my land was more suited to grazing because my land is prone to getting too wet in winter recommended in 2003 to place 100 ha into raise beds and built drains on the southern part of my land towards the quarry to help mitigate waterlogging because I wanted to keep cropping.

When my neighbours approached me about leasing my land my wife encouraged me that my life was more important than dirt and that leasing the land for a few years would enable me to take a mental break. My neighbours stated that they were happy to give a 'mate a hand'. I leased my land to people I felt I could trust to look after my land with values and ethics like my own I have since learnt that words mean nothing without actions.

Regarding the critique of my land for this project, the narrative for me has never been "how successful my land is" or "who may be the better farmer". The narrative for me is this is a legitimate business opportunity.

I have been vulnerable as the landowner to open my land for critique by my community as a State Significant Site. I am saddened by the way some of this critique has been conducted in this community. I am also heartened by those who have been respectful in this process and excited with those who would love this project to proceed.

Most importantly, my family and my children who will inherit my land are wanting to be part of the solution to make their world a better place.

5.1.14 Importantly, the assessment is based on soil sampling and assessment undertaken in accordance the Land and Soil Capability Assessment Scheme (OEH 2012) and a subsequent agricultural impact statement (AIS) prepared by Riverina Agriconsultants. The assessment validated the mapped Class 4 land (moderate limitations), which can support grazing but requires active management to sustain cultivation on a rotational basis. DPI Agriculture has accepted the conclusions of the soil and agricultural studies and agreed that the productivity of the land is limited due to waterlogging issues.

During this journey I have discovered that farming can be done differently. Farming the sun to produce electricity while still maintaining livestock or crops operation under the panels is innovating and cutting

edge. I believe that traditional farming methods of today will not continue to produce the same yields in the future and this opportunity helps me future proof my land for the next generations to continue farming.

When in initial discussion with Neoen I shared that I did not necessarily need to be the one grazing sheep under the panels, and I would be more than happy if my neighbours wanted to work with both Neoen and myself in this area. My thought, at that the time, was assisting my neighbours in generating a potential income source. At my request, Neoen spoke with neighbours about potential gazing opportunities.

As time has moved on, I can see that my thinking was naïve, and time has also shown me that the neighbours, although incredibly happy to graze sheep on my land do not want to work with me. I do not believe that you can separate a business opportunity on my land without having a respectful relationship with me the landowner.

Because of my neighbours lack of quality and constructive engagement with myself, it has opened a wonderful new opportunity for my family to think outside-the-box and I am now working with my family and Neoen to facilitate a sheep grazing operation which will educate and mentor trainees within our community. Exciting times ahead.....

5.1.16 Further, Neoen proposes to manage the land through sheep grazing during the operation of the development footprint. Neoen has estimated that only 25% of the site would be removed from agricultural production during the operation of the solar farm (mainly for construction of roads, buildings, hardstands), with the remainder of the site being available for sheep grazing around the solar panels. Other Neoen operating solar farms in NSW (i.e., Parkes, Griffith and Coleambally solar farms) and in Victoria already successfully include this practice. Neoen has estimated that the proposed sheep grazing would require 1.5 full time equivalent jobs throughout the project operation in addition to 10 jobs required for operation of the project (pg. 16)

It was in the late 70's when I was about 8 years old, still getting my flared jeans caught in my pushbike chain, when workmen came and built the huge TransGrid electricity towers running right through the middle of our farm.

Only wearing "stubby" short shorts and "volley" sneakers, these shirtless men would build and climb these high towers. I cannot recall seeing any hard hats or safety harness. "High Vis" was something the world had not invented yet.

When I asked the question "why are the towers being built on our land?" My father, now in his 80s shared a story about when his parents back in 1952 first connected electricity to the farmhouse. My father said, "Dad & Mum connected electricity to the house when I was 13 years old and when I turned the light switch on for the very first time and watched the light bulb glow and fill the room with light, I stood there in wonder! The TransGrid power lines have to run through our property to help another community have electricity, just like we can. Why should we stand in their way? We need to help the wider community as well".

I believe the value my Dad taught me of looking outside of our own needs and looking at the needs of others will be necessary to solve some of our global problems.

My family and I have farmed around the towers for over 40 years knowing that although it was of no benefit to us it was beneficial to people further away. We are not unique in having TransGrid power lines run through farming land, but I feel privileged that we could 40 years later benefit from the TransGrid power lines across my land in a legitimate business opportunity.

2.1.6 TransGrid's 330 kV transmission line traverses the site diagonally from north-east to south-west. There is also an existing easement for the APA Group high pressure gas pipeline, which runs through the south-eastern corner of the site. (pg. 3)

The proposed Culcairn Solar Farm boundary is within 1km of the Boral Culcairn Quarry boundary. I note that the opposition who surround the quarry have not mentioned that you can hear two crushing plants, truck engine noise and reversing alarms daily from about 7am weekdays up to 3km (L01) and 3.7km (L02) away. Why is this? Are they not concerned about dust and noise from this legitimate business? Is this because like us, the opposition have learnt to live with a legitimate business enterprise and have just got on with our own business concerns.

The Boral Culcairn quarry was sold in 2016 and was advertised as a viable business for another 10 to 15 years. What will happen to the "hole" when there is no more stone to extract? The discussions I am hearing is that it would be the perfect landfill site for the Greater Hume Shire, or it could be possibly used to deposit medical waste from further afield. If that is the case, what will happen to the soil health and land values of the quarry's surrounding neighbours which includes the Culcairn Solar Farm site? I believe that my decision to host the Culcairn Solar Farm helps future proof my land from any potential development applications regarding the quarry.

2.1.7 The Boral Hurricane Hill Quarry (the Quarry) is located approximately 1.5 km south of the project site along with the entry located on Weamera Road and sharing a transport route from the Olympic Highway, along Benambra Road and Weamera Road. (pg. 3)

I feel that the VPA was always going to be a contentious issue with the opposition. It is a "dammed if you do or a dammed if you don't" mentality. Opposition to the project have called it "bribe money", yet if no VPA was given I believe the cry would conversely be "what do we get"!

As the initial Landowner for the Culcairn Solar Farm, I was aware that a State Significant Development did not have to provide any financial assistance to Local Government, Communities and neighbours. In saying that, I also believe this is a one-off opportunity never to be repeated in my lifetime and I asked each company what their views were towards a VPA that would benefit my communities of Culcairn and Walla Walla, which my family have called home for over 100 years.

Neoen showed me their business model which has a community benefit fund attached to all their projects. Neoen also provided me with references and contact details of members from other communities who shared with me how their community benefited from outside funds not attached to Council's financial limitations. I really liked how their Community Benefit Fund directly benefited the people of the community and was not able to be manipulated by Councillors at budgetary workshops.

I disagree with Council and some Councillors that the Greater Hume Shire be the only recipients of the VPA, as recommended by the Director of Planning in his February and June 2020 reports to Council. Why should the proponent place their money into the hands of a Council or some Councillors who have shown **no** support for this project? I personally think that the Greater Hume Shire Council should receive no monetary amount as they have continually pushed for more money while continuing to vote against the project and have also facilitated the decrease of the project area.

One of my requirements for signing with Neoen was that they agree to a VPA with a Community Benefit Fund supporting the local community directly. Neoen has been honorable in facilitating my request and I believe Neoen have been incredibly generous at offering the Greater Hume Shire Council, townships of Culcairn and Walla Walla and near neighbours 1.6% of the total cost of the project. No other Solar Farm within the Greater Hume Shire comes close to the \$10 million dollars that will come from this project.

• In addition, Neoen has offered a VPA with Council, totalling \$5 million including: – a one-off payment of \$150,000 at the commencement of construction; – an annual contribution of \$150,000 per annum during operation, to be adjusted for inflation. • In addition, Neoen has committed to pay approximately \$4.8

million to a community benefit fund which would be administered by a non-profit community foundation with Council having representation on the committee. Council has agreed to this approach. (pg. 33)

My family and I have used Schoffs Lane and the unnamed road daily for about 80 years. We have personally maintained these roads and as I always wanted to purchase them, I decided to lodge two applications one with Crown Land for Schoffs Lane and one with the Greater Hume Shire Council for the unused road reserve a few months later due to a change in legislation.

NSW Crown Land then asked in the SEARS and EIS that the applicant should make application to Crown Lands to close and purchase the roads. Since I already lodged the applications, Neoen informed the DPIE that the roads were in the process of being purchased by landowner 2 (me). Crown land indicated that they were satisfied with the comments in the Response to Submissions.

Since then, I have received approval of sale and receipt of payment from NSW Crown Land for Schoffs Lane, there was no objections from neighbours.

My unnamed road reserve application went to the Greater Hume Shire Council February 2021 ordinary meeting. The Councillors voted against the Council's recommendation to close and sell the road in question. I believe that the actions of some Councillors voting to reject my application did this to try and stop the Culcairn Solar Farm proceeding. I also believe that this decision and other actions warrant further investigation by a higher body into the Councillors code of conduct.

I would like to ask that the IPC panel reiterate the Crown Land comments regarding the road closures and purchases and ask that NSW Crown Land overrule the Greater Hume Shire Councillors decision based on prejudice and non-compliance of duty.

4.5.10 The Department's Crown Land Group (DPIE Crown Lands) required closure and purchase of a Crown public road within the site (i.e., Schoffs Lane), in the event that it is required for access to the project area. In its response, Neoen confirmed that the Crown Road is currently in the process of being purchased by one of the landowners. DPIE Crown Lands confirmed it has no further comments. (pg.12)

Neoen, I believe have worked extremely hard to communicate to neighbours, Councillors and the community about the project. The opponents to this project have made it incredibly difficult for Neoen to constructively engage publicly with the community. Examples are: -

- The Neoen Community Information day was hijacked by opponents and any community member who was talking with Neoen staff with legitimate queries were interrupted and spoken over by the opponents who were consistently interjecting.
- Community members meeting with Neoen over the kitchen table have kept their meetings "silent" because of constant fear of reprisal or discrimination, like I have been subjected to, from the opponents.
- GHS Councillors accusing Neoen at a public Council meeting of misinformation when referring to the report written by the GHS Director of Planning.

This has not stopped the "anti-solar" opponents to continue a campaign against this project by spreading mistruths, misinformation, defamation, and unrealistic economic figures. The opponents behind closed doors contacted local businesses who spoke up in support from the Walla Solar Farm and have also contacted businesses we are clients of to try and intimidate and bully them into being silent in their support for this project,

Although we have much support, we have not asked anyone to speak publicly in support of the Culcairn Solar Farm project because we are concerned of further harassment and potential damage to their businesses.

I am personally disappointed how the oppositions tactics have been so divisive to the community, and I am disappointed that the opposition expect and demand that their voice to be heard while at the same time being disrespectful by silencing anyone who disagrees with their views.

4.2.1 Neoen undertook engagement with the local community as detailed in the EIS, including a dedicated project website, an online feedback form, a dedicated email address and phone number, community open day, general information flyers and individual meetings with adjacent and nearby landowners (pg. 9)

Our family feel very blessed to be part of the Culcairn Solar Farm project and the highlight of all the studies taken on our farm was watching Wiradjuri people walk country and talking to them about our land. Their wealth of knowledge and passion to share their knowledge with us was inspiring. One comment that resonated with me that confirmed my excitement for this project was from a Wiradjuri person that said: - "this project will be good for the land. It will allow the land to stop and breath, it will allow healing to occur".

I have welcomed them back to see country whenever they want, and I have asked them – not because I must but because I want to - to come and walk country on the rest of my land to continue adding to their story. Without the opportunity to host a solar farm on my land no one would have known about the Wiradjuri history on this land. This history is now written down for generations to come and I am humbled an honoured to be part of this history as joint custodian of this land.

Surveys identified 52 Aboriginal heritage sites, including 26 isolated finds, 16 artefact scatters, five cultural tree sites, three modified trees, one cultural stone site and one potential archaeological deposit (PAD) predominantly of low significance on the site. • Neoen has committed to avoiding 21 items, including those identified to be of higher significance (i.e., low to moderate) and salvaging and relocating the remaining 31 items prior to the commencement of construction. • Consultation with Registered Aboriginal Parties (RAPs) informed the project design and management measures. If Aboriginal artefacts or skeletal material are identified during construction of the project all work would cease and an unexpected finds procedure would be implemented. With these measures, the Department and Heritage NSW consider that the project is unlikely to result in significant impacts on the heritage values of the locality. (pg. 30 & 31)

I believe that this project will be significant in its benefits, not only to my local community but also to the wider community of NSW, Australia, and indeed the world, uniting us in reducing carbon emissions and tackling the changes needed to produce renewable energy. I believe that the proposed Culcairn Solar Farm is an optimal place to implement this!

5.1.22 If all four proposed SSD solar projects within Greater Hume LGA proceed, they would have a combined development footprint of approximately 2,000 ha, which is approximately 0.59% of the 335,000 ha of land being used for agriculture within the Greater Hume LGA. (pg., 17)

Regards

Jonathan Schoff