The IPC-public consultation

5th March 2021

The NEOEN Culcairn Solar Farm Project number SD 10288.

Thank you for your time today Commissioners Andrew Hutton and Zada Lipman

Farming

The ‘Family farm’ covers a very diverse range of enterprises nowadays. Farmers have to be innovative and adaptable like all businesses that are trying to thrive in the changing environment we are all living in now. As such, we all have to be willing to try new ideas and take up opportunities when they arise. This family farm is taking up an opportunity presented to them, which, as often happens, is not taken up by or understood by some neighbours.

All farms are solar powered by the sun’s light, be it for growing various crops such as legumes, grains, vegetables and fruit for food production for people and pastures for animals for livestock production.

The right to farm how we choose allows all farmers to farm in different ways as they choose fit on their land, subject to local governing authorities and guidelines. And not to be held back by other people’s personal hidden agendas, prejudices and jealousy. Any genuine concerns should go through the usual processes, EIS etc and local Council and State Government approvals based on facts and not fiction based on personal grievances which unfortunately are ever present and real for this project.

Opposition

It is unfortunate that the Greater Hume Shire has been difficult to deal with (a number of extra special meetings with regards to the VPA, Community Benefit Fund and the EIS) and at times Councillors have appeared biased. A clear example of this is the subdivision happening on the Walbundrie Road on the outskirts of Culcairn. The paddocks (land) to be divided into houseblocks is zoned the same as ‘Roseworthy’, yet the Councillors met this proposal openly and approved it quickly. To directly quote a local farmer-‘it was the best canola crop in the area’ grown on this ground last season. We understand that Culcairn needs to grow, it just seems that there is one set of rules for one instance and another set of rules for the Solar farm. People need houses, but with more houses means more electricity. This is where the Solar farm will become a great asset to the growing energy requirement.

Some others outspokenly opposed have engaged in questionable tactics to quieten others with differing opinions to theirs, this is why so few spoke positively on the Public Consultation to the IPC (as questioned by one of the speakers) Maybe none of these actions surprise you, Commissioners, for you may have seen and heard this all before.

Fire

Many of the neighbouring speakers to the IPC on Tuesday mentioned the fire risk of the Solar panel system. Unfortunately, they failed to mention the opposite and more likely fire threat-that of a fire started their own properties. Every year, there are a number of fires started by headers or machinery operations during the summer months, due to the heat, dry and dusty conditions. This is a much more likely scenario that a fire starts in a neighbouring paddock and may enter the solar farm.

We are members of one of the neighbouring brigades mentioned by Steven. An annual meeting 2 years ago, when some of our members were wanting us to write a statement of objection to enter any solar farm to fight fires, a member of the RFS headquarters in Albury was present. He was from an area that had a solar farm already in place and he couldn’t understand the hysteria that was being whipped up against it. He reminded us that we already have the right if there are concerns for the safety of yourself and crew members you can decide not to enter any fire situation without the need for moving any extra motions.

Every farmer has to be fire vigilant. Depending on the season and the severity of fire risk, strategies of minimising risk apply to us all. A solar farm by nature is no more of a risk, maybe even less of a fire risk, when managed correctly. With the amount of investment involved, it is in NEOEN’s best interests to keep the area well maintained.

Drought proofing

This farm is diversifying into solar panels, using the sun’s energy not only to generate electricity for the wider community but possibly have sheep grazing up to 80% of original capacity around and beneath the panels, as also mentioned by Tim Paramore. The use of electricity continues to rise as Australia becomes more populated.

This is a smart move and because it is on privately owned land, it is the owner’s right to choose how they farm their land. This is not a large corporate business taking over farm land-NEOEN is leasing the ground from a local family who will still own and manage the farm and choose how the land is used when the lease is finished.

The land will still be there in 25 or 30 years time when this project may be de-commissioned, and as a Landcare lady reminded us, the land is still there, it’s not like a coal mine or a quarry where you are left with a large scaring hole, and they are not noisy like wind turbines.

This is drought proofing at it’s best, farmers are subject to so many variables, one being the weather. Rain or lack there of changes the outcomes of seasons dramatically and therefore the bottom line of profit or loss. This project is a steady enterprise not reliant on rain or moisture levels to achieve it’s objective.

Culcairn

Culcairn, like many small towns needs to attract businesses and business investment to continue to grow. We have been told that NEOEN will source as much as it can locally for the workforce and engage local businesses on the project.

Should this project go ahead, we see that Culcairn and the local area will flourish as a direct result of it. There are not only environmental gains associated with this project but it will bring extra jobs to the local towns and surrounding area, above the existing current levels, and also bringing new technologies and potentially new and exciting skills to the area. This will make Culcairn an even more inviting place to live in.

Thank you for your time and consideration.