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**TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS**

**TRANSCRIPT IN CONFIDENCE**

O/N H-1120758

**INDEPENDENT PLANNING COMMISSION**

**PUBLIC MEETING**

**RE: NEW ENGLAND SOLAR FARM ARMIDALE**

**PANEL:** **ANDREW HUTTON (Chair)**  
**PROF ZADA LIPMAN**  
**PROF SNOW BARLOW**

**ASSISTING PANEL:** **BRAD JAMES**  
**CALLUM FIRTH**  
**KYM STATHAM**

**APPLICANT:** **UPC RENEWABLES**

**LOCATION:** **MEMORIAL HALL URALLA**  
**27 SALISBURY STREET**  
**URALLA, NEW SOUTH WALES**

**DATE:** **4.29 PM, TUESDAY, 11 FEBRUARY 2020**

MR A. HUTTON: Okay. Good afternoon everybody. Thank you for coming along today. Before I begin the meeting, I would just like to acknowledge the traditional owners and the land of which we meet, the Anaiwan People, and I would like to pay my respects to their elders, past and present, and to the Elders from other

5 communities who may be with us here today. Welcome to this meeting today. UPC Renewables, the applicant, is seeking to develop a new 720 megawatt solar farm and battery storage facility located six kilometres east of Uralla and eight kilometres south of Armidale in the Uralla Shire local government area. My name is Andrew Hutton and I am the chair of this particular IPC panel. Joining me are my fellow  
10 Commissioners, Professor Snow Barlow, on my left, and Professor Zada Lipman on my right. Also assisting us today is Callum Firth and Brad James from the Commission secretariat who are sitting on the table over there.

Before I continue, I would like to just state that all appointed Commissioners must  
15 make an annual declaration of interest, identifying potential conflicts with their appointed role. And, for the record, we are unaware of any conflicts in relation to our determination of this proposed application. You can find additional information on the way we manage potential conflicts in our policy paper which is available on the IPC website. And, in the interests of openness and transparency, today's meeting  
20 is being recorded and a full transcript will be produced and made available on the Commission's website.

So the purpose of the meeting really today is about giving the public the opportunity to speak with the Commission, or the panel and for us to hear your views on the  
25 assessment report prepared by the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment before we determine the application. So what about the role of the IPC. So the Independent Planning Commission of New South Wales was established by New South Wales government on the 1<sup>st</sup> of March 2018 as an independent statutory body operating separately to the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment.

30 The Commission plays an important role in strengthening transparency and independence in the decision making process for major development and land use planning in the State of New South Wales. The key functions of the Commission include determining State significant development applications, conducting public  
35 hearings for development applications and other matters and providing independent expert advice on other planning and development matters when requested by the Minister of Planning or the Planning Secretary.

It is important to note that the Commission is an independent consent authority for  
40 the State significant developments and provides an additional level of scrutiny where there are more than 25 public objections, where there is a reportable political donation or where there has been an objection by the relevant local council. The Commission is not involved in the department's assessment of this project or the preparation of their report or any of their findings within it.

45

In terms of where we are in the process, this meeting is one part in the steps of the process towards determination. We have been briefed by the department, and we have met with the applicant and we have also met today with the Uralla Shire Council. Transcripts of these meetings will be available on our website. After

5 today's meeting we may convene with relevant stakeholders to clarify or seek further information if we require on any matters that are raised. Records of all these meetings will be included in our determination report which will also be published on the website.

10 Tomorrow we are undertaking a site inspection. We're going to visit the project site. The applicant, the Commission and a neighbouring landowner will be in – will attend the site inspection and details of the site inspection will be available, again, on the Commission's website. Importantly, the Commissioners have reviewed all of the written submissions received by the Department of Planning, Industry and  
15 Environment which are published on that department's website. The Commission will also accept written comments in relation to this project up until 5 pm on Tuesday the 18<sup>th</sup> of February 2020.

20 So anyone can send in written comments to the Commission before that time. You can do so by sending your comments to the Commission by email to ipcn@ipcn.nsw.gov.au or by posting to the Independent Planning Commission New South Wales, Level 3, 201 Elizabeth Street, Sydney NSW 2000. If you need to get that information again, the gentlemen from the secretariat will be able to provide that for you.

25 Following today's meeting, we will endeavour to determine the application as soon as possible however there may be some delays if we find that we need to pursue additional information. Before I move to the first registered speaker, of which there are six today, I just want to establish ground rules for everyone who is participating  
30 in this meeting today. Importantly, this meeting is not a debate and we will not take questions from the floor and we will not permit interjections. Our aim is to provide the maximum opportunity for people to speak and be heard by the Commission. And we do ask that the speakers refrain from making offensive or threatening or defamatory statements as per our guidelines available on our website.

35 For many people, public speaking is very difficult and so we would like there to be respect. Though you may not agree with everything you hear today, each speaker has the right to be treated with that respect and heard in silence. Today's focus is really about public consultation and our panel is here to listen, not to comment. We  
40 may ask questions or seek clarification but usually that is not necessary and it will be most beneficial if your presentation is focused on the issues that concern you in relation to the application. It is important that everybody registered to speak receives a fair share of time and I will be enforcing timekeeping rules as the Chair. Each speaker has already been given allocated time which I will advise at the beginning of  
45 their presentation.

- I reserve the right to allow additional time if I consider that it's appropriate. For notice, a warning bell will sound one minutes before the speakers allotted time is up and, then once again, when it runs out, and I do ask that if you're speaking, you endeavour to respect these time limits. If you would like to project something onto
- 5 the screen, as some speakers may wish to do, please give your presentation to Callum or Brad before we -your presentation so we can get that up on the technology. If you have a copy of your presentation, it would be really appreciated if you could provide that copy to the secretariat after you speak or at a point after the presentation today.
- 10 Please note, any information given to us may be made public and the Commission's privacy statement governs our approach to your information. If you would like a copy of our privacy statement, that can also be obtained from one of the secretariat or from our website. Finally, just a last bit of housekeeping, just to make sure everyone has their mobile phones turned off or on silent to avoid disruptions. Otherwise I
- 15 would now like to call the first speaker please.

The first speaker today is Killian Wentrup who is representing the applicant, UPC Renewables, and Killian has 10 minutes.

- 20 MR K. WENTRUP: Would you like me to stand at the lectern or - - -

MR HUTTON: Yes, if you don't mind, please. Yes.

- 25 MR WENTRUP: Thank you, chairman. Good afternoon everyone. My name is Killian Wentrup, head of solar development, UPC Renewables Australia. And, as the chairman said, we are the developer, and the owner and the applicant of the New England Solar Farm project which is currently being considered for planning approval.

- 30 Firstly, it's really nice to see so many familiar faces here and I want to thank everyone of you for making time and giving up your private time to come here to this meeting. As was stated, today is primarily about listening to the community and I'm going to try and stick to my 10 minutes. And my job here is really just to summarise our application as it currently stands because we have made some important changes  
35 and refinements over the last two years. As we all know, New South Wales, in particular, is in urgent need of new investment and energy generation capacity. Around - - -

- 40 MR HUTTON: Killian, sorry, Killian, to interrupt. Could I just ask that you present to the panel rather than the audience, if you don't mind please.

MR WENTRUP: Sure.

MR HUTTON: Thank you.

- 45 MR WENTRUP: Around 7000 megawatts of coal fire generation capacity will close in New South Wales in under 15 years due to age and technical life of those

facilities and this needs to be replaced. The facts are that today solar, and increasingly solar and battery energy storage is the cheapest form of new power generation globally and anywhere in the world with ample sun, this is the technology that makes the most sense to replace that coal. Despite the fantastic rainfall that

5 we're experiencing here in New England at the moment, New England tablelands is certainly a suitable location due to its ample solar resource, its altitude and also the grid capacity in the region. And this has been recognised by many, including the New South Wales government, TransGrid, the Australian energy market operator and others. And it is seen as an ideal location for large scale wind and solar for these

10 reasons.

UPC believes that the New England Solar Farm, as stated, as 720 megawatt solar and battery project with up to 200 megawatts, two hours of battery storage is a key part of a solution for New South Wales energy supply into the future. The first thing I

15 would like to highlight is our community engagement activities over the last two years. I have had the pleasure of working with local people in Uralla for over two years now. We held our second community drop in session in this venue here nearly two years ago. In that time, I would like to think our team has forged some really positive relationships. I think we have gained valuable feedback on our proposal.

20 We have refined our plans and we have learnt about what gives Uralla and the region its character.

Some of the highlights include over 70 face to face meetings with locals, 7 open door policy community drop in sessions, several briefings to council, updates regularly by

25 email, letter, our dedicated website and our Facebook page and opening our Uralla office in Bridge Street nearly a year ago. We have also worked closely with representatives of the local Anaiwan people during the Aboriginal cultural heritage surveys and we continue to do so as the project progresses. If this project if approved, I want to make it clear that we are committed 100 per cent to continuing to

30 work with locals and, in particular, our near neighbours to ensure that the construction and operations of this project go smoothly because ultimately it's our reputation at risk and we want to be good neighbours and I will talk a little bit more about that later.

35 I would like to quickly highlight, if I can, some of the reports – the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment's assessment report findings. The DPIE has considered our EIS and all of the submissions received from the community to date and further amendments made by UPC in its amendment report and its response to submissions in the middle of last year. The department's report, released in 2019,

40 recommended approval of the project with conditions, stated that the government considers the site to be appropriate for a solar farm and considered that the project would result in net benefits to New South Wales and the local community and is therefore in the public interest.

45 The department's assessment report also noted that the two most common issues mentioned in community submissions received on our environmental impact statement were, firstly, concerns about visual impacts and, secondly, competing land

uses, specifically competition with primarily the agricultural land use in the region and on the site that is proposed. These issues were not only considered in detail by UPC and our consultant CMM but also in the department in its assessment report.

And I would like to just quickly highlight some of the findings on those two

5 important issues which were of primary importance to the community based on the submissions.

On visual impact, the department's report found the impacts on the local landscape have been minimized through project design, including exclusion zones providing

10 significant buffers between solar panels and residences. Any residual impact was of negligible to low nature. There would be no significant visual impacts on surrounding residences. And the department found that the rural character of the area would be preserved as far as practicable.

15 On agricultural land use the department found, and this is consistent with our own assessment, 90 per cent of the site is classed as four, five or six category class land which means there are at least moderate limitations in terms of the productivity of the soil types there. The inherent agricultural capability of the land would not be affected by the project over the long term because of the relatively low impact nature

20 of the development. The project would not significantly impact on neighbouring agricultural activities, which is a key point obviously from the community's point of view. The department also recommended requirements to return the land to agricultural use following decommissioning and UPC is also supportive of such requirements.

25 The department also noted our plans to work with landholders to continue sheep grazing on the solar farm, and I will talk a little about that in a moment. The nature of a lot of these findings from the department highlights the approach that UPC has taken over the last two years which I would characterise as primarily focused on

30 avoidance of impacts and refinement where possible. Throughout the last two years we've been listening to the community and, where appropriate, we have made changes to our plans. We have prioritised avoidance of impacts where we can before looking at mitigation measures, making refinements to the layout of the project and adapting our construction strategy significantly.

35 The New South Wales government has itself explicitly recognised the efforts we have made to avoid impacts on agricultural land, water courses, biodiversity, traffic impacts and cultural heritage impacts. Some of the major refinements that we've made to our plans over the last two years, that I would like to highlight. Firstly and foremost, removal of the southern ..... area. After listening to nearby landholders and engaging with them over an extensive period of time, particularly residents and nearby landholders in the Salisbury Plains area. We decided to remove this from the current development application in the middle of last year and communicated this to the broader community.

40  
45 Secondly, significant refinement of the broader project layout, namely the northern and central areas as well. Following detailed discussions with locals, particularly in

the Kellys Plains area, we have increased exclusion zones and setbacks from the residential area to the north-east and this is over and above the, I would call it, pre-emptive exclusion zone which we imposed ourselves prior to lodging our EIS.

Along with the natural undulation of the landscape and the remaining trees on the

5 outskirts of the project site, this helps to shield the vast majority of residents within a two kilometre radius from having any views of the project.

For the one – residents located within a one kilometre radius of the infrastructure, and we do acknowledge that there is one residence, we increased the distance to one  
10 kilometre in its northerly aspect and 450 metres in the south. The central array, I will comment, is even more hidden from views from nearby residences of which there are very few due to the rolling landscape and the remaining trees in the area.

The next important one is the removal for the need for a workers accommodation  
15 village from the application. In response to feedback from some nearby residents, and I would say it was a very small number, but seriously taken, we worked with our contractors and became confident that it could be removed from our application.

This is also a positive for the region and for Uralla because the workers who do need  
20 to come in will thus need to utilise local accommodation, local services, local eateries and other businesses and it will have a positive impact on the town and the region.

Finally, I would like to highlight the reduction in the number of local roads utilised  
25 for the construction phase. In response to feedback from some residents about the use of Munsies Road, we decided to avoid this altogether, improving safety and amenity for people and the safety of stock. All construction traffic will travel from the New England Highway by Barleyfields Road North and then along Big Ridge Road. And we are proposing and agreeing to upgrade the entire length of the access route to site, we will be sealing Big Ridge Road 70 metres wide – 7.2 metres wide,  
30 all the way to the end of where the gravel road currently ends and it becomes a farm track. We will not use Barleyfields Road South, Munsies Road or Gostwyck Road.

Anyone who has come to one of our drop in sessions has already heard about the benefits of this project more broadly so I will just quickly highlight the key ones.

35 The project will create jobs during construction and it will create jobs on an ongoing basis. Those numbers are significant, particularly in construction where it could be 500 to 700 jobs at the peak, depending on if the battery is built at the same time as the solar farm. We will upgrade the local road infrastructure, as I just mentioned. In times of drought this project will help support 10 different families farming operations in the area.

40 MR HUTTON: Please continue.

MR WENTRUP: Thank you. We propose, and are working with landholders, to continue sheep grazing within the solar farm. This is important so that an agricultural link to the site is maintained and it also helps manage vegetation and it creates significant research opportunities which we have started to explore at an early

stage with interested parties such as CSIRO, UNE and others in the industry who are very interested in this. And of course we have a community benefit sharing initiative which we intend to launch at the same time as construction, starting with \$100,000 in year one and increasing to close to \$200,000 per annum by the start of full operations 5 for the life of the project.

Why are we doing these things and why have taken this approach of avoidance and refinement? Because we're a long term investor and we want to be here for the long term. We've been developing wind and solar farms for over 25 years internationally 10 and we want to keep doing so here in Australia and around the world in a responsible way. Because of this we take a collaborative approach. We want to work with locals and develop good relationships to be a good neighbour. This includes looking at opportunities for working with groups such as the southern New England Landcare group and the Closing the Gap Initiative and I am pleased to see that there are some 15 speakers on the agenda today who are going to – who are related with those groups because we want to look and see how we can support initiatives in the area going forward, beyond what we have to do as a part of a legislative approvals process.

So, in closing, UPC supports the findings of the department's assessment report 20 which recommended approval of the project. We note that council is supportive, that no State agencies objected. We encourage the IPC to approve the project with appropriate conditions and I would like to thank the Uralla community again for working with us collaboratively and cooperatively over the last two years. And if the project is approved then we look forward to working with you into the future.

25 Thanks.

MR HUTTON: Thank you. I would now like to call the second speaker, Anthony Spiller, who has 15 minutes.

30 MR .....: .....

MR HUTTON: No.

MR .....: .....

35 MR HUTTON: You're right, mate. We don't count technology time as speaking time. There we go. Thank you, Mr Spiller.

40 MR T. SPILLER: Thank you. Well, IPC panel, UPC executives, fellow participants, my name is Tony Spiller, if you don't know me, and I'm a resident from Kellys Plains in the Uralla Shire. I live one paddock removed from the planned solar farm of the UPC New England Solar Farm ..... and my number is, on the company map, N6. From the outset I would like to say that we are supporters of clean and 45 renewable energy. But there is a cost of course for anything that we put in place, and one is a potential cost to the biota, the fauna and the flora.

I must say also, from the outset, though, that I have found the UPC executive very accommodating and they are prepared to listen and act upon our concerns, so thank you for that. My wife, Frances, and I are long-term residence at our property, Goobragandra, and we have been significantly involved in planting of native vegetation on our property as part of the closing of the gap, functional habitat for threatened New England fauna project. To date we have planted more than 3000 native trees on our property. The Closing the Gap project was partially funded by the New South Wales government's Environmental Trust programme and was run by Southern New England Landcare.

10 The project ran from 2016 to 2019 and 14,200 seedlings were planted by 15 local  
landholders in this project alone. There have been projects before that. This one has  
replaced them so there has been a lot more planting than the Closing of the Gap  
project. Individual landholders contributed approximately half of the cost of their  
15 individual projects. The species planted were chosen for their ability to thrive in our  
local area and create connectivity with other plantings and so assist fauna restoration  
and migration.

Well, what is the aim of Closing the Gap? Past agricultural practices, for example extensive land clearing, wood getting and overgrazing have led to a highly fragmented and degraded rural landscape resulting in loss of ecosystem connectivity. So there's plenty of gaps and the project is about trying to close those gaps. The project aims to connect ecosystems in the east with those in the west of the tablelands by strategic revegetation plantings in the interests of biodiversity and maintenance of populations of declining and threatened woodland birds. So we see here the Closing the Gap is to close the gap from these areas here, which is Dangars Falls area through to Invergowrie and that area, so it's this area here.

30 MR HUTTON: Excuse me, Mr Spiller, for the benefit of the transcript, could you stay near the microphone. But on that is a laser pointer that will help - - -

MR SPILLER: Is that the dot?

MR HUTTON: That's the dot.

35 MR SPILLER: Okay.

MR HUTTON: There we go. Thank you.

40 MR SPILLER: So here it is here. It's 23 kilometres and then fauna, birds especially from this area, that have access to the full ranges of New South Wales and the coast, are able to migrate and travel across here like they used to, to this area and then they've got access to southern Queensland at this time. So the project is to do these plantings as significant staging points, as steppingstones so they can actually move across to where they used to. And that is a good aspect of what Closing the Gap is about. So the 23 kilometre gap in habitat connectivity south of Armidale and north of Uralla, extending from Mt Butler and Invergowrie in the west to Gara Gorge and

Dangars Falls in the east and a 15 kilometre southern extension of this zone to Gostwyck and Hillview Road.

Now, what has the restoration involved? The gap in the ecosystem connectivity is preventing and/or inhibiting the movement and dispersal of 15 threatened species between the eastern and western sides of the tableland and also migration of other species and no just birds. Since at least the 1970s, seedlings of native trees and shrubs have been planted to establish vegetation corridors and new habitat for these and other species. So we can see here, there's a new planting and then on the hill beyond is one that is a little bit older, and these are connecting up existing remnant vegetation which happens to be yellow box and ribbon gum here in the foreground, yellow box on the hill.

Other plantings, examples, this good looking fellow here is about to plant in an area that has been .... for the first time and these are the plants. And over the back there, you can see the background area of the paddocks which are fairly devoid of vegetation. The actual solar ray at our place is in this area, up in here, up through there, on top of the hill. And my good wife, photograph taken yesterday, this is that planting six years later. Now, it has had horrendous high temperatures and dry effect for the worst drought ever. And I can tell you, we really copped it and the dust that we've got off paddocks and that is unbelievable. It's grit.

These trees have survived. I haven't watered them except for the first year and they are now nearly six years old. Here's another shot of that planting that you saw I was about to do in the last slide. That's what it is. So it can work because these plantings have very hard conditions and we are really pleased what's happening there.

Okay. These plantings by landholders and others have been in strips and blocks to act as stepping stones for birds in this gap area. Biodiversity reports would be enhanced by mentioning plantings in the landscape by location and extent in the landscape.

Plantings are ongoing. So when reports are done, eco reports and environmental impact reports, it would be nice if the company had mentioned the extent of these plantings because they're important to the landscape, if not quite now then hopefully in the future.

These plantings by land – yes. Over time, these plantings have increased the amount and quality of habitat available for threatened and declining fauna and help their movement across this gap. Okay. I will go back to that one, if I can. This is the projected solar array. And the Closing the Gap would run down here and it would run up here. So it effectively has a reasonable footprint on the area of Closing the Gap.

Okay. the New England Solar Farm is proposed on a site east of Uralla and south of Armidale and will cover direct footprint of approximately 2000 hectares across two areas of land currently used for grazing. This area overlaps that of the Closing the Gap connectivity project. By virtue of its location and lateral extent within the restoration zone, the New England Solar Farm acts as a significant barrier to formal

movements and across to habitat and access to habitat. The UPC environmental impact statement, page 98, states:

5       *Impacts are not anticipated to be significant given the low diversity and abundance of the fauna recorded. As part of the Closing the Gap project, systematic bird surveys were carried out by a professional ornithologist. The survey covered 36 sites within the gap area, targeting threatened and declining woodland birds and other fauna. The results recorded 994 individual birds from 69 species and 37 families in the spring of 2017 survey. These included*  
10      *woodland birds with declared status of declining, threatened and of conservation significance.*

15      And this is one threatened bird that was photographed in the survey within the area of Closing the Gap and proximal to the solar array projection. And its name is the Dusky Woodswallow. This is the speckled warbler and it was taken at CSIRO Chiswick at that time and it's also a threatened bird. And this one here, the Scarlet Robin, also threatened. And the photograph was taken of that bird in the bird survey. The Closing the Gap project has demonstrated that scattered paddock trees have high conversation value for remnant native fauna, especially hollow utilising birds, bats  
20      and reptiles. They are not to be viewed as simply dead trees with little conversation significance. Rather as important habitat elements in fragmented landscapes. Revegetation plantings are providing new functional habitats.

25      There are a few isolated remnant trees in the northern array that are – these are just an example of where we live. And this is up the hill from us, and those trees are within the projection of the solar farm. And I have spoken to Tim Kirk about that and I'm going to stay on his back until he can move the boundary to save those trees because there must be lots of others but these are just trees near us that I happen to know. And this area here is the official boundary, this is where the solar array will  
30      be. This stays as paddock and I can't see why they could not accommodate, once again, because they've been very good at accommodating, and run a line across there and keep these trees.

35      Because we happened to just walk up there with – the brother in law had his camera and he took photographs of the Striated Pardalote, which is a bird of great interest to ornithologists, and it is a migrant visitor. And these pardalotes come in winter time to the New England area and they were photographed on that branch out there.

40      MR HUTTON: Mr Spiller, could you go back to the slide showing the layout and point where these trees are. Sorry to ask you to go back.

MR SPILLER: Where the trees are?

45      MR HUTTON: Yes. So if you back to there, if you could point where on that map - - -

MR SPILLER: Well, this is only one plot of trees where we - - -

MR HUTTON: I understand that, yes

MR SPILLER: Okay.

5 MR HUTTON: Yes.

MR SPILLER: So those trees would be just within the array here where I'm shaking the pointer

10 MR HUTTON: Okay. Okay. Thank you.

MR SPILLER: And we live here.

MR HUTTON: Okay.

15 MR SPILLER: So – and they have accommodated by moving the boundary because there's a lot of vegetation here which is mature and they have accommodated, moved the boundary to allow those trees to remain. And they've moved the boundary from where I'm shaking the pointer to where it is now.

20 MR HUTTON: Yes. Okay.

MR SPILLER: But the trees are actually just there.

25 MR HUTTON: Thank you.

MR SPILLER: Okay. I went back the other way.

MR HUTTON: Sorry to - - -

30 MR SPILLER: That's all right. Okay. So there is high conservation value and uses of them as stepping stones. And I get the sense from the environmental impact statement that they're being dismissed a bit because it's a denuded landscape and it's – but, to me, they're even more important than that, that's all there is for the birds and for 35 animals who might use them. Since that's all there is – do I get time for having to go back?

MR HUTTON: Yes

40 MR SPILLER: Sorry.

MR HUTTON: Yes, no, that's fine.

MR SPILLER: Yes. Yes. Okay. All right.

45 MR HUTTON: We won't take question time off you.

MR SPILLER: I won't be long.

MR HUTTON: You're fine. Won't take question time off you. That's fair.

- 5 MR SPILLER: Okay. So that's a visiting migratory pardalote. Okay. So we would like to make a few recommendations that come from discussions around the traps. In relation to biodiversity and Closing the Gap, what has been done elsewhere to reduce the effect of solar farms on connectivity and biodiversity. So it would be good research to see what's happening in Europe, other parts of Australia. Wherever.
- 10 Okay. We're recommending, save wherever possible, mature trees. And I think that they've taken that onboard, the company, and I think that's what they want to do. But be conscious of it because I heard, before the meeting started, that an access road to the farm, today, had beautiful mature eucalyptus trees cut down, that had hollows in them for nesting sites and all, so it started. It began today.
- 15 So, please, what can you do to save the trees? Create functional vegetation corridors across. Now, that's a big one. We have asked that this happen but it has been – the company has said that they can't do that really. So could they create functional vegetation corridors across the solar farm, and there are small places where it would be much easier to do than others. Support native vegetation plantings within the broader footprint. So it's not just the footprint of where the solar farm is. The footprint extends way beyond that. The footprint is anything that is affected as it approaches or can't pass through the solar farm. So can they support – and they have been doing that because I'm the recipient of a planting. But can they continue.
- 20
- 25 And this is a big one. "Compensation offsets to be local". Now, I know that the regulation is that the compensation offsets for the loss of flora can be anywhere in New South Wales and the company has said it probably will be because there's not enough biodiversity or forest area to make it a goer. Right. Well, the logic is, we need it here. This is the place. We're closing the gap and growing some areas could actually really support. So, please, look at – can you actually approach the authorities and say "Can we change that to make the compensation offsets local?" I'm sure we would all really appreciate that. And support and create connectivity however possible as a responsibility of the UPC.
- 30
- 35 So, in conclusion, we hope that the UPC feels a corporate responsibility to build a solar farm as not only a sustainable industry but also to assist with the restoration of the fragmented landscape this helping to close the gap for functional habitat of threatened and declining New England fauna. Thank you.
- 40
- MR HUTTON: Thank you, Mr Spiller. I would now like to call Karen Zirkler from the Southern New England Landcare Group. I believe Karen has a presentation and you've been allocated 15 minutes. Thank you.
- 45 MS K. ZIRKLER: All right. Well, good afternoon panel members. Coincidentally, I've called my presentation the same thing but I've got a different focus. So I'm Karen Zirkler, executive officer and long-time Landcare coordinator

at Southern New England Landcare. I think I've been Landcare coordinating for something like 25 years and, you know, environmental science degree, working with communities over a very long time. So who is Southern New England Landcare. I just wanted to give you a very brief snippet of this organisation.

- 5 It's a pretty impressive organisation. Our mission – this is our core thing that we do, to lead, connect and enable our communities to meet their sustainability goals. And I think, from what I've seen with Tony's presentation, I'm pretty proud that we've enabled and helped just one of our community members to be able to stand up here
- 10 and speak like that. We've got about 30 groups. We're not for profit. We've got a 30 year history of positive impact in our community. And our community is not just the Uralla community but it's the Armidale region right up to Guyra and Ben Lomond; in the south, right down past Walcha, down to Nowendoc; Ebor in the east and the smaller locality of Kingstown in the west. That's roughly our region.
- 15 So we've got three, and we used to have four local government areas to deal with and liaise with. We've got about 760 members and that's growing, members and friends. That's growing. We've got urban, we've got rural membership. And our board – we're run by a bboard of – volunteer board of directors and they're all local people.
- 20 Those about – probably about 12 months ago decided, given the interest in renewable energy developments in our region here. We take a neutral stance on renewable developments because we've got members who are for, members who are against and everywhere in between.
- 25 Just by the way, a little handout that I've got located up on the back table but I will give you one of these, some of our achievements over the last 12 months. Pretty well respected organisation amongst Landcare communities across the nation and internationally actually. The Closing the Gap project, look, I wouldn't be telling you much more than what Tony Spiller has just told you. But we got about \$100,000
- 30 from the State government three, four years ago to take – to do that project, to close that east/west gap or to work towards closing it. \$100,000 is not going to do it. 12 to 15 landholders got involved. We actually restored twice as much land as what we predicted. 88 hectares, 14,000 seedlings, We did three field events. We got 100 participants at those to demonstrate on farm effective habitat management.
- 35 As Tony said, there were three bird surveys that were conducted by a professional ornithologist and those have indicated a positive trajectory. So that's really exciting. And just a note there that, you know, the development is across, pretty much, as Tony showed the project area.
- 40 So just going on to that survey work, the image at the top that you can see there is – I believe Tony was probably going to give you a hand out of that. It's a fantastic little poster that we produced which is a summary of those bird survey outcomes. But just to draw your attention to some work that happened in 2006, and it's – all of this work
- 45 that I've got in hand here, and I will leave this with you, the Land, Water and Wool project, which was a partnership, quite massive project, right up and down the tablelands. Partnership between the University of New England, Southern New

England Landcare and a lot of our landholder members, and Australian Wool Innovation and Land and Water Australia, the then CRC for land and water.

- 5 And that five year project produced a massive amount of work which I'm really proud to have been a part of. And a lot of the survey work that was done in that, combined together with economic work to prove that biodiversity does contribute to wool profits, certainly in our area and I will leave that with you. So the Closing the Gap survey work is actually just a, sort of, more modern – well, it's not the same sort of work. These surveys are showing the same thing. We're doing the right thing.
- 10 We're doing good work and we are on a positive trajectory.

At that point, I would just like to note too that probably a lot of the survey work that has been done for this development in the last two years, we've got to remember that the results that come from that were achieved during the most significant drought in 15 our history, So you're not going to find as much – in my personal opinion, I don't think you're going to find as much as what you might have in good times, in terms of flora/fauna.

- 20 We are a hot spot. The southern New England is a hot spot. The New South Wales government realises that. We're a hot spot for two things, biodiversity and renewable energy. Yay. So Southern New England Landcare and UPC have fostered a relationship already. We have been in discussions and dialogue about the possible impacts and we have discussed the possibility of co-creating mitigations to some of the issues that we've seen – or that we can see. So we want that dialogue to continue 25 because we want it to create real results, should this project go ahead.

Just to also be aware, my brain is just about exploding because there are no less than seven State significant developments in our area, in that southern New England region at the moment. That's just the ones I'm aware of. There are going to be – 30 there are already cumulative impacts on our community and on – you know, they're a positive, they're a negative. It's all of the impacts. And I just think we need to have a regional discussion about all of this and we need a regional plan because – yes. It's big.

- 35 MR HUTTON: Sorry, Karen. Are they all solar developments or do you mean - - -

MS ZIRKLER: No, wind.

MR HUTTON: - - - a mixture of - - -

- 40 MS ZIRKLER: 240 metre high wind turbines, you know.

MR HUTTON: Right.

- 45 MS ZIRKLER: So – and Landcare – Landcare is where our community comes to find help to facilitate the landholder groups that start popping up everywhere because we've got the facilitation skills to work with communities. And it's taking its toll, I

can tell you. The other – you know, going on this idea of cumulative impacts, and I know that the government and the assessors and everybody talks about cumulative impacts but, you know, do we really consider them properly? Here's our next project. We've just been granted another \$100,000 from the State government,  
5 environmental trust, to reconnect Thunderbolt country. And guess where that is? It's just a wee little bit south of this project.

So a very similar ecological-type project. Won't go into the details of it but very similar. And guess where it is? Its' in the midst of the Walcha Energy Solar  
10 proposal. So we will probably see you again in another, whatever it is, year or so to have another conversation along these lines.

So my question – one of my questions is, can the Biodiversity Conservation Trust offset mechanism, learn from adaptive management. It has been up and operating  
15 for, what, 18 months or something, two – I don't know what it is now. Carrying on from a point that Tony made, and I didn't know he was going to make that point, but can we – and I don't know how much influence you, as the panel and the Commission has with these but we need to start some adaptive management here at the legislative level, at the State level to start talking about how the Biodiversity  
20 Conservation Trust can take that offset money and direct it into these project areas, not just to Glen Innes or somewhere else in the State, but to utilise Landcare and its local knowledge to help direct these funds to the places where they're needed in these massive gaps in our ecological environments and our agricultural environments.  
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So this is my last slide, I'm not sure how much time I've got left but, you know, our recommendations would be to require all State significant developments, okay, this is not just this one but let's think bigger because my head is exploding, starting to think bigger, consider the cumulative impacts of multiple projects in our region.  
30 Seek these – all State significant developments need to seek willingly, like UPC has done but we want to do more, to become ecologically illiterate – literate, sorry, delete that word, and to honour the past work that has been done by our community. Because we've done 30 years of really hard work on national Landcare funds and the little scraps of money that the federal government throws out every now and then and asks us to do some work.  
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You know, ask or require them to foster, like UPC has done, but we want more, to foster an ongoing relationship with Landcare because your Landcare networks, and they're all over the State, they are connected into all the communities right around the State. They know what's going on. Co-create design solutions, like Tony was mentioning, with Landcare and with the Landcare community, but with the broader community as well, and build them into that project plan, write them down, write those design solutions into the plans. Our big one, and I've bolded it there, is to increase that east-west habitat connectivity across and through the barrier that's going to be created by projects like this, the barrier being a barrier to wildlife movement through those corridors.  
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And I've left this one as not one of the numbered ones because I feel it is a bit different, is that somehow we need to inform and influence decision makers at the State level about how to somehow direct that biodiversity conservation trust offset funding to project areas where appropriate or where possible. I think that's about all  
5 I wanted to cover and just to say that I've got some handouts that you can take home with you.

MR HUTTON: Could I ask you a question. The first thing probably is to say the Independent Planning Commission is not part of government.

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MS ZIRKLER: Okay.

MR HUTTON: So that we don't have the control over the BCT offsets. But I really have a question, what do you regard as the width of a functional connectivity corridor across such a project in an east-west direction.

MS ZIRKLER: Well, the first thing I would say is that ideally you wouldn't just have one. Okay.

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MR HUTTON: Yes. But – yes.

MS ZIRKLER: But typical Landcare plantings are becoming wider and wider/ You know, we started with two rows and this project tested that actually. But if you could go 30, 50 metres width you're starting to get some functionality in there.

MR HUTTON: Is there research to indicate the effectiveness of that?

MS ZIRKLER: Yes. Some of it's in here.

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MR HUTTON: Okay.

MS ZIRKLER: And some of it is also in the bird survey reports from the Closing the Gap Project because the ornithologist who did that work actually investigated the occurrence of these threatened birds in different ages of revegetation projects. I forgot the groupings now but it was – there were certain groupings. And it's on the – if I can just go back and point – see that image there, that information is on that there. And if I can just make sure that you guys get a copy of that, that would be great. I didn't bring one but I believe Tony might have.

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MR HUTTON: Thank you. A quick question I have is, is part of the work that you've done, have you mapped the corridors, like are you able to provide an ArcGIS layer of the corridors that have been planted and then perhaps the ones that may be planned as part of future projects to provide spatial.

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MS ZIRKLER: Yes and no is the answer to that question.

MR HUTTON: Yes.

MS ZIRKLER: Yes, in – all our projects have a landholder management agreement. So if we're working with a particular landholder to divest funds, then there's a  
5 landholder management agreement and, as part of that, there's a map that is done in a GIS mapping program. However, we would need to seek permission from all of those landholders, due to privacy, in order to provide that information to the Commission. So it is possible. And I would also actually need some funding to put on a GIS expert because I can't drive the system.

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MR HUTTON: Okay.

MS ZIRKLER: Sorry.

15 MR HUTTON: No, that's fine. Thank you.

MS ZIRKLER: Yes. Thanks very much.

20 MR HUTTON: Thank you. Thanks for that. Next speakers are Amanda and David Adams and they've nominated and got 10 minutes speaking time please. Are they here?

MS ZIRKLER: Can I just say, I got a text message not very long ago saying that they had been called away unexpectedly to hospital.

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MR HUTTON: Right. Okay. Well, we will just check again before we finalise the meeting to see whether they've been able to make it otherwise we will note that. Thank you. I would now like to call then, Tom Newsome to come to the microphone and Tom has been allocated five minutes.

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MR T. NEWSOME: No worries. Thank you. Thank you for the opportunity to address the meeting. I appreciate your time, chair, and panel members. So my name is Tom Newsome. I'm here in my capacity as the nearest landholder neighbour to the project. I have had some exposure to resource development and their impact on neighbouring landholders and the community. I work as an agricultural consultant. A lot of the work that I do is in serving the various courts whether it be the Land Court or the Supreme Court in Queensland and the Northern Territory, looking at similar sorts of developments in terms of the impact of resource industry developments on the community and neighbouring landholders.

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40 So I have some understanding of the process. I have some understanding of the impact and I have some understanding of the requirements of proponents and the sort of strategies that they should undertake in terms of mitigating the losses of surrounding landholders. My role here today is really as a representative, first and foremost, of my own family but, in addition, a representative of people that, I guess, don't have a voice, that are being personally impacted by the proposed development.

So in doing that, I will tell you a little bit about our story, little bit about our property and the impacts that I see on us that will be a result of the proposed development.

- 5 So in 2012 we had moved to the current site which is the adjoining property to the north-east of the northern array. It was essentially two paddocks, a bare block. There was no improvements on the property. We've spent the last eight years and a significant amount of money developing that property into what we feel is a nice place to bring up our kids and to live as a family. It took us quite a while to find that site because we looked at 45 properties in the area. Finally we settled on that. It had 10 everything we needed. We wanted to build our own house and it was important that we had the privacy and the security that we required, in that I travel a lot for work, and security was important to us. It's at the end of a dead end road. There's no passing traffic. We currently enjoy a lot of privacy at that site.
- 15 MR HUTTON: Sorry, Tom, I understand you're N1 in the stakeholder list. That's correct, yes, so just for reference, N1. Yes.

MR NEWSOME: Thank you.

- 20 MR HUTTON: Yes.

MR NEWSOME: Now I know too.

- 25 MR HUTTON: It will just help us with understanding where you are in the context of the area.

30 MR NEWSOME: Sure. So that's our house. Obviously the improvements that we've made to the property in addition to the homestead are hay sheds, tack rooms, horse arenas. We've nearly entirely fenced the property. We have entirely pasture improved the property. We've put in multiple dams. In other words, we've spent a significant amount of time and money getting that property to the level that we're happy with it and we're happy to be in that environment.

35 Well, there is significant beneficiaries of the project and we acknowledge the proponent. We've also, like Mr Spiller, found them good to deal with. Largely they've made an attempt to mitigate our circumstances. They've pushed back the boundaries; they've removed the camp. They've done several things that we appreciate and would like to acknowledge them for that.

40 So the major beneficiaries of a project like this, obviously the proponent. The current proponent – I know there's an Australian based subsidiary but the parent company is US based, Hong Kong – Hong Kong based, US owned. Obviously the government has got a vested interest in renewables. They've got, you know, renewable goals to meet. And probably the other obvious beneficiaries are the local 45 absentee landlords. Again, our neighbours who are in the project, I have no qualms or quarrel with them. I understand why they're making their land available.

However what I would like to point out is that, for all the beneficiaries of a project like this, there is also people that bear the cost. The people that bear the cost are people like my family and other families that neighbour the project. Instead of living in the rural environment, the environment that we've invested a huge amount of time and money, as well as our emotional connection to our property, we feel that, instead of living in the environment that we've spent the last eight years developing and putting in place where we want to live, we're now going to be living with the backdrop of an industrial zone which is not what we signed up for. Some of the negative impacts, and I respectfully request just an extension of time.

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MR HUTTON: Yes

MR NEWSOME: I sold myself a bit short. Some of the negative impacts that we see and declining property values. I don't think people are going to be attracted to the new scene as opposed to what we bought into and what we've developed. Security issues. I acknowledge the movement of the camp but there's still a significant workforce that will be very close to our boundary. This provides security concerns, and even on an ongoing basis, we will have contractors coming and going very close to our property from behind as well as the situation that we had already controlled in terms of people coming up our driveway.

With respect to security, there's only so much you can do. You can prove there's no security risk but if there's a perception of security risk, then to that person, that risk is real whether someone else says it's perceived or not. To that person it's real.

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For my family it's a massive thing because I travel for work, if there's a perceived security risk and my family is not happy, and they feel threatened, then that impacts my business, it impacts my ability to travel and it impacts my income. So while I acknowledge the beneficiaries of this project, we feel like we're the collateral damage and we're being thrown under the bus as a result of it.

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There's other potential negative impacts, biosecurity, the ability of the project to manage the weed burden, the threat of pests and the threat of pollution, sources such as noise, dust, vibration and light. It also impacts the visual amenity and the lifestyle that we enjoyed and it impacts our businesses, whether that be our livestock business, our horse business and potential for businesses that we built our home with a view to carrying out into the future with respect to ours, and education. From a professional level, it impacts me to a massive degree because if I don't feel I can leave my family to travel, then that impacts me significantly and there's a significant amount involved.

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We've gone to the trouble of quantifying our losses through a discounted cash flow model. More than happy to provide those figures to the panel. I think it's done based on regular sound assumptions.

MR HUTTON: I think, Mr Newsome, you did provide a submission to the application.

MR NEWSOME: Yes. That was an initial model. We've provided further detail, I guess, in response to some of the mitigation measures that the proponents put forward.

- 5 MR HUTTON: Okay. Well, if you're happy to provide an updated version of that to the secretariat, we would certainly, you know, happy to receive it.

10 MR NEWSOME: Yes. Thank you. I appreciate that. In terms of land value, this is the view from our back fence with respect to the proposed development. While it's – it may be 450 metres from our residence, we don't live in our residence all the time. I'm at that back fence almost daily enjoying our lifestyle whether it's riding horses, running, walking, you know, moving stock, whatever. And to me, that is an impact on us based on visual amenity and the impact is significant.

15 15 In terms of biosecurity, we've got a lot of noxious weeds in our area. I think that – and I've seen this in other resource projects. They can have good biosecurity plans in place but the reality is that with people coming and going, both within the site and between sites, it's very difficult to manage the increased biosecurity risk that a project like this will burden our area with. You know, there are some really 20 significant weeks, like, Chilean needle grass, Serrated tussock, African lovegrass as well as the other ones mentioned. And with the absence of mandatory washdown facilities and those sorts of measures, then these weeds, which are prolific in the area, will have – the project will have a negative impact on the biosecurity in terms of weeds.

25 25 Likewise, with pests, I think that current threats in terms of rabbits, foxes, pigs, dogs, cats, it provides a harbour for them. We would need to be satisfied that the presence of the project is not impacting the efforts to manage feral pests in the area. The problem that we've got is that if you're managing pests and that means that you're – by definition, you're increasing our concerns in terms of the security threat. It's just more people around whether they're got guns or whatever method. And that then impacts, you know, the amenity that we enjoy as a family. And other people that adjoin the project would also enjoy and be under threat.

35 35 Environmental impact, I won't go into this too much because the previous speakers have but just to note that we consider that the environmental impact is not all positive. There's negative aspects of solar farms in terms of the environment. There's people that are far better qualified than me to speak in this regard but just to note that not all environmental impacts are positive. In terms of our livestock 40 business, we've done a lot of work professionally in this area. The impact of resources on livestock, whether it's horses, cattle, sheep, whatever the rural industries are. We know that dust increases respiratory diseases and dust borne infections. We know that livestock, both horses and cattle are affected by high pitched noises. You can move a mob of cattle by rattling a chain but if there's a low frequency blasting event a kilometre away, they won't notice it. It's to do with the frequency and the pitch. And we're concerned that this will impact our livestock 45 businesses, whether it's our cattle business or our horses.

Visual amenity, visual amenity is a real thing. It's a real thing with real value and that's why we purchased the property and built what we did. It's quite unique. It has got 360 degree views for up to 40 kilometres. Our problem at the moment is that when we look south we only have to look 130 metres and we've got a chain wire fence and an endless view of solar panels. And, to us, that's affecting our visual amenity. So that's the current view to the south of Cloud Hill. That's the view that we will enjoy when the solar farm is built.

5 Fire is a threat. So we're concerned about the fire fuel load with respect to the project. That's on our property. That smoke, that's just before Christmas. In terms of future businesses, we're looking over a 45 year time period is how long we intend to be there. We're permanent residents. We're not intending to move. We're interested in agri-tourism. We think there's good scope for those sorts of businesses. We've set our house up from the day we built it to enable that sort of business to be 10 utilised as we go forward. Again, the idea of having agri-tourism with the backdrop of an industrial development is not exactly attractive to potential clients.

15 So what do we want. First of all we want the project rejected. We understand that there's benefits of the project. I'm not against solar or renewables. We're actually 20 standalone solar. We're off the grid. However, my argument is when you're weighing up the benefits to the people that are benefiting from the project, and then you offset that with the negative impact to people like me that are impacted by the project, then you come to the situation where you've got competing interests in the outcome of your decision and does that competing interest go to the beneficiaries? 25 Does it go to the US resident who lives in Hong Kong or is there consideration for the neighbours and the impact on our ongoing lifestyle and what we've built.

MR HUTTON: Mr Newsome, I am mindful of time. Just - - -

30 MR NEWSOME: This is my last lot.

MR HUTTON: Thank you.

35 MR NEWSOME: Second, our losses, like in any of these projects, and other people that are impacted by projects such as this, there needs to be a meaningful effort to mitigate loss. While I acknowledge some of the work done to date, we've got quite a good ongoing dialogue with the proponent. The reality is, is that it has only been 40 verbal discussion of what I would describe as mitigation methods that don't mitigate our loss. And if they mitigate our loss, we're talking about – they're talking about sporadic tree planting. And while Mr Spiller earlier showed us trees that were six years old that were almost fully grown.

I can show you trees on the ridge line that are eight years old and stand that high. So 45 Mr Spiller is my neighbour. I know how committed he is to his trees but what I'm saying is that their efforts in mitigating our loss and shading us from the project are actually inadequate because by the time they grow, there's other tree lines in that direct area that haven't reached the level of Mr Spillers in 20 years of growth. So .....

like, 20 years and we're nearing retirement age, we, sort of, had our run and in the meantime we have to put up with the ongoing impact on our lifestyle, our business and our home.

- 5 Further thing, I know that neighbour agreements are very common in the resources sector. I think they're fair. If you're going to compensate the landowner where the panels are sitting, if you're going to compensate the community for the impact on the community, and you're going to provide benefits to the State government and the shareholders of the proponent, then it's important to have neighbour agreements so  
10 that everyone impacted by this development is actually having their loss mitigated. We're not looking to benefit out of it. We're just looking to have a mutual outcome and I think that's what I said to the proponent the first day I met them 18 months ago or thereabouts, was we want a neutral outcome. I see it as the negotiation with the proponent is to try and achieve that neutral outcome for neighbours, like us, that are  
15 impacted by the project.

MR HUTTON: Okay.

MR NEWSOME: Thanks for your time.

20 MR HUTTON: All right. Thanks very much. Thank you. Next speaker is Thomas O'Connor and Thomas has been allocated three minutes. That does seem tight.

25 MR T. O'CONNOR: Commissioner Hutton, Professor Lipman, Professor Snow, my name is Thomas Patrick O'Connor, normally called Tom. I am here before you as a private citizen and a member of the former community reference group that was established to give guidance to UPC Renewables on the proposed community benefit sharing it as – known as CBSI. At the outset, I wish to express my support for New England Solar Farm as proposed by UPC Renewables and the subject of the State  
30 Significant Development 9255.

During 2018 UPC Renewables commissioned Community Power Agency to design and facilitate community engagement, and through an eight member community reference group, produce a community benefits sharing initiative options paper. This formed part of UPCs submission to the New South Wales Department of Planning, Industry and Environment for this State Significant Development. The community reference group recommendations covered the purpose, geographic scope and governance models agreed by the community for the CBSI funds as well as covering the primary purpose, directing funds to activities that would benefit the community.  
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40 The paper included a description of the governance structure under which those funds would be administered.

The New South Wales Department of Planning, Environment State Significant Development Assessment, SSD9255, clause 147, economic, in the penultimate dot point on page 22, notes that the commitment of UPC to contribute \$50,000 to the community during the construction of the project and \$250 per megawatt of installed power capacity per annum during the life of the project and that the funds would be  
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administered in accordance with UPCs proposed community benefits sharing scheme detailed in the EIS for the project and that this scheme would be implemented in consultation with the local community. UPC has accepted the options paper's recommendation and has promoted the CBSI and have even publicly stated that the 5 contribution during the construction phase would be increased from the commitment of \$50,000 to \$100,000 commitment.

Therefore I submit and request the Independent Planning Commission, in giving their final approval to the project to go ahead, concur with the Department of 10 Planning Environment State Significant Development Assessment, SSD92554147 economic penultimate dot point on page 22 and ensure, for appropriate conditions, UPC prioritises the establishment of the community reference group's recommended trust structure so that the community has an open and transparent guardianship of the ongoing funding for the community benefits initiative following the initial \$50,000 15 distributed during the first year of construction. Thank you.

MR HUTTON: Thank you. Thanks very much. Okay. I just want to check whether Amanda and David Adams have made it. Unfortunately – what we will do 20 is we will just make sure that the secretariat contact them to see whether they would like to submit a written submission.

MR .....: Yes.

MR HUTTON: So that would be great. Other than that we have no further 25 registered speaker so at that point I would like to thank everybody for coming along. And just remind you that if you did want to make any further submissions to the Commission that you've go until 5 pm on the 18<sup>th</sup> of February to do so and that will be made available to the panel for consideration. But, once again, thanks very much and I will now call the meeting closed. Thank you.

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**MATTER ADJOURNED at 5.49 pm ACCORDINGLY**