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O/N H-1398923

**INDEPENDENT PLANNING COMMISSION
MEETING WITH THE DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING, INDUSTRY AND
ENVIRONMENT (DPIE)**

CULCAIRN SOLAR FARM – DEPARTMENT MEETING

COMMISSION PANEL: **ANDREW HUTTON (Chair)
PROFESSOR ZADA LIPMAN**

OFFICE OF THE IPC: **JANE ANDERSON (Senior Planning Officer)
STEVE BARRY (Director)**

DPIE: **NICOLE BREWER (Director of Energy
Assessments)
IWAN DAVIES (Team Leader of Energy
Assessments)
TATSIANA BANDARUK (Senior Environmental
Assessment Officer)**

LOCATION: **VIA VIDEO CONFERENCE**

DATE: **10.03 AM, THURSDAY, 25 FEBRUARY 2021**

MR HUTTON: Okay, thank you. Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands on which we meet and pay my respects to the Elders past, present and emerging.

5 Welcome to the meeting today, for the Culcairn Solar Farm Project SSD 10288. Neoen Australia Proprietary Limited propose to develop a 350 megawatt solar farm with a battery storage facility approximately four kilometres south-west of Culcairn in the Riverina region of New South Wales.

10 My name is Andrew Hutton, I'm the chair of this commission panel and I'm joined by my fellow commissioner, Professor Zada Lipman. We're also joined by Jane Anderson and Steven Barry from the Office of the Independent Planning Commission.

15 In the interests of openness and transparency and to ensure the full capture of the information, today's meeting will be recorded, and a full transcript will be produced and made available on the Commission's website.

20 This meeting is one part of the Commission's considerations of this matter and will form one of several sources of information upon which the Commission will base its determination. It is important for Commissioners to ask questions of attendees and to clarify issues whenever it is considered appropriate. If you are asked a question and are not in a position to answer, please do feel free to take the question on notice and provide any additional information in writing which we will then put up on our
25 website.

I also do request that all members today introduce themselves before speaking for the first time and for all members to ensure that they do not speak over the top of each other to ensure the accuracy of the transcript. We'll now begin.

30 Firstly, thanks again for the opportunity to meet with you, we certainly do value this opportunity to have the Department walk us through your summary of the assessment report. There's a lot of material in front of us and we do appreciate that opportunity.

35 For the record, I just do want to note that we have previously undertaken a site inspection on the 30th of October – sorry, the 29th of October at the site and on the 30th of October we visited resident R24, so just for the record. And just the site inspection notes from that particular inspection are on our Commission website, for
40 the record.

45 Okay, thanks again, as I said. We've sent through an agenda, we have tried to, I guess, focus in on the key issues that we felt were worth having a discussion with the Department, but as always, we do appreciate, I guess, a bit of a run through of your summaries of the assessment report and then I guess, we can sort of focus in on those key issues. So, I'll hand over to you, Nicole and team, just to sort of lead us through

that at this point and we'll ask questions as we move through that presentation, if that's okay.

5 MS BREWER: Thank you Commissioners. Nicole Brewer, Director for Energy Assessments, and I'm joined today by Iwan Davies, Team Leader, and Tatsiana Bandaruk, who – a Senior Assessment Officer.

10 Thanks for the opportunity to run through our assessment. I will give a quick overview, perhaps if Tatsiana can share the slides, please?

MS BANDARUK: Can you see the slides now?

MS BREWER: Yes, perhaps, can you put it on slideshow?

15 MS BANDARUK: Yeah. Are you seeing the presenter view?

MS BREWER: Yes.

20 MS BANDARUK: Is it better now?

MS BREWER: Yes, that's great. Thank you Tatsiana.

MR HUTTON: Thank you.

25 MS BREWER: So, the – we just want to run through the context today, a summary of the submissions, the amendments that were made, and Commissioners, as you mentioned, those agenda items that you flagged.

30 So, the proposed project is a 350 megawatt solar farm, it has 100 megawatt, 200 megawatt hour battery energy storage facility. The site itself is just over 1000 hectares with an 892 hectare development footprint. The local context is the adjacent approved Walla Walla Solar Farm there to the south and further to the south are the approved Jindera Solar Farm and also the Glenellen Solar Farm which has recently come off exhibition. But Hurricane Hill Quarry is also to the south and the project
35 shares some of its transport route with that quarry.

MR HUTTON: Nicole, that's currently an active quarry at this point or is it in and out of productivity?

40 MS BREWER: My understanding is it's active.

MR HUTTON: Yep, okay. Thank you.

45 MS BREWER: The site itself is dissected by the transmission line that you can see running from the north-east to the south-west and is bounded by Cummings Road and Weamera Road and Back Creek to the west.

In terms of the engagement that the Department went through for this project, we – it was placed on public exhibition, there were 146 objections and 81 in support. For the submissions within five kilometres, we've got a table showing that breakdown. Around 70 percent objected and around 30 percent supported the project. The main issues that came out of that engagement and just to flag also, obviously, that that was in consultation with the government agencies and Greater Hume Council which, as you are aware, have objected to the project as well.

For the key issues that came out of that engagement, in particular were the impacts on agricultural land, the visual impacts on the landscape and local residents, the biodiversity impacts, amenity impacts around noise and dust, the impacts on the local road network and the cumulative impacts with those projects that are in that Greater Hume Council area with Glenellen and Walla Walla, and Jindera.

So, just give you a quick overview of the amendments to the project, the – I guess one of the key ones is that all of the project infrastructure north of Cummings Road which is around 300 hectares of the original project was removed from the application. There were also a number of measures that we introduced through amendment for particular residences. So with respect to R24, there was an additional set-back of the solar infrastructure to 498 metres with an additional five metres of vegetation screening resulting in a 20 metre wide screening.

There are also a number of – sorry an additional set-back for R33 to the solar panels now being 250 metres from that solar infrastructure, R17 had an additional riparian screening and an agreement with R14.

MR HUTTON: Yep.

PROF LIPMAN: Nicole, has the agreement with R14 been finalised?

MS BREWER: Yes.

PROF LIPMAN: I understand they're buying the land, is that correct?

MS BREWER: Yes, that's our understanding. It's an agreement to purchase.

PROF LIPMAN: Right, thank you.

MR HUTTON: Nicole, the purpose or the reasons behind the removal of the infrastructure north of Cummings Road, was that – what drove that decision? Was it an ag-land issue, a visibility issue; what was that in response to? Are you aware of that?

MS BREWER: Yeah, look. I mean that was something that we discussed with the applicant. So there are a couple of things that drove, you know, led to that amendment for the project - - -

MR HUTTON: Yep.

MS BREWER: It significantly reduces the scale of the project so with, I guess, the cumulative impact of solar farms in the area, there are – there were – that was to
5 reduce the scale but also it reduces the visual impacts for those receivers to the north, R29 and R9.

MR HUTTON: I know the applicant and you've obviously asked the question because they've responded to it one of their response documents, they've indicated
10 that whilst they're removing that those that they haven't lost any capacity in output?

MS BREWER: That's correct.

15 MR HUTTON: Yep, okay. Thank you.

MS BREWER: Those – some of – you know, the amendments also resulted in a reduction in the clearing of paddock trees and a reduction in the native vegetation clearing from .61 hectares to .33 hectares, and also included upgrading a section of
20 Weeamera Road, around 1.4 kilometres from six metres to seven metres width.

So that table provides a summary, I guess, of where we landed at the final project for the application.

25 MR HUTTON: Excuse me, Nicole. On my screen, I've got two blocks that are blocking the final column, I'm not sure if that's just me?

MS BREWER: No, I can see them as well.

30 MR HUTTON: I wonder whether – I'm not sure what they are?

PROF LIPMAN: It's like a box?

MR HUTTON: Yeah, it's just moved.
35

PROF LIPMAN: On to the other side now.

MR HUTTON: Is it worth restarting the presentation to see if it goes away?

40 MS BREWER: Yeah, Tatsiana - - -

MR HUTTON: There you go. Whatever you've done there looks good. I can see all the columns now, that's fine. Thank you.

45 MS BREWER: Okay, perfect. Thank you, Tatsiana.

To focus now on some of the key issues, the Department recognises the concerns of the local community about the potential impacts of this project and also as we've heard, on the other projects in the area and Council's concern around the agricultural impacts. In this case, the assessment was based on both the agricultural land mapping as well as site testing which confirmed that mapping. So for this project, the whole site's been mapped class four agricultural land and is constrained by water logging issues.

So, it's currently used for sheep grazing and cropping wheat and canola, and would continue to be used for sheep grazing around the panels. There's also an area of 32 hectares that will be subdivided from the south-western lot within the project site that will allow that landowner to continue their farming practices. And the amendments to the project both with that subdivision as well as the removal of the panels to the north of the project result in the retention of over 345 hectares of agricultural land, or that's around a quarter of the original project site.

So cumulatively, the four projects are either proposed or approved in the area which are around 2000 hectares in total represent .59 percent of the 335,000 of land that's used for agricultural within the LGA.

We've previously given, I guess, updates on that – the agricultural land mapping project which has been a concern and something that was raised in the submissions. So, we obviously are aware that that's been underway for sometime but with the appointment of the Agricultural Commissioner in August last year, that mapping project is now part of a broader initiative led by the Agricultural Commissioner who's actually conducting consultation at the moment on an options paper for agricultural land use planning more broadly, of which, you know, there are other components including that land mapping. So, that consultation period concludes at the end of this month.

MR HUTTON: I appreciate that I also acknowledge here that – the point you made around the applicant has undertaken an Agricultural Impact Assessment which I assume had an ag expert came out and did the mapping as per a particular sampling regime etcetera and so forth, so look forward to reading that further.

MS BREWER: Yeah, and DPI Ag obviously was happy with the conclusions that were made in that assessment as well.

MR HUTTON: Yeah, thank you, Nicole.

MS BREWER: To one of the other key issues which was the visual impact. The site is a generally flat site. Our assessment has covered all of the residences and we note that the project's not visible from the towns of Culcairn which is to the north-east or Walla Walla which is to south-west. I do just want to focus the discussion today on the adjacent residences R9, R17, R24 and R33, and as I noted earlier there've been a number of amendments by the applicant through the process to reduce the impact specifically on these residents.

5 So R9 is around 585 metres from the solar infrastructure to the east of the project and is at the same elevation with intervening vegetation. So, there's well established vegetation in that area and within the curtilage of the residence and along Weeamera Road, and there's also supplementary vegetation screening along Weeamera Road proposed as part of the project.

10 So now to R17 and R19, they are located 1.16 kilometres and 363 metres from the nearest solar panels. There's existing mature vegetation along Back Creek and an unnamed creek that provide that solar screening and then there's also the proposed enhancement of that riparian vegetation which has, in this instance, a dual benefit of increasing that habitat connectivity but also providing additional screening for these residences.

15 R33 is located to the south of the project and that's the nearest residence, and that's located 121 metres south of the project boundary but is now 250 metres from the nearest solar panel. So, that was also one of the amendments that was made as part of the project which increased the set-back by 120 metres from that residence. There are also landscape plannings immediately to the north of that residence which would further reduce the views of the project.

20 R24 is located, as you can see on the figure there, in an area where the infrastructure is in a L shape and there are panels that are 498 metres to the east and 780 to the south. So the views from the residence, particularly to the east from that residence, there are – you can see on the figure there that there are intervening outbuildings, there's vegetation along the creek and there's also a vegetation buffer that's proposed adjacent to the residence. The – to the south the panels, as I said, are around 780 metres from the residence and there's also a vegetation buffer immediately to the south, and although we recognise the limitations of photo montages in the EIS the photo there shows the view taken from the southern side of the residence, this is outside the curtilage of the residence with the panels in the distance.

30 Now I would note that the landowner has objected to the project and we're aware that the landowner was not satisfied either with the proposed amendments to the project, you know, reducing the panels to the north of Cummings Road nor the – you know, there were amendments made to increase the set-back, particularly to the east which increased it to 498 metres. Also – and they were not satisfied with those amendments either and they consider that those vegetation buffers should extend along the length of that L shape.

40 MR HUTTON: proposed a bit of a gap between the southern end of the eastern landscaping and a gap to the creek and then there's another one along what would be the east-west to the south of the property based on the plan I'm looking at here on my screen.

45 MS BREWER: That's correct, that's correct. So, the vegetation buffer is proposed, I guess, in direct proximity to the residence in terms of that – those direct views, but I would flag that the landowner isn't satisfied with that vegetation buffer as its

proposed. The Department's assessment, you know, obviously considered that but we consider that the impact on the residence would not be significant considering the existing vegetation around the residence, the set-backs and those vegetation buffers that are proposed.

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MR HUTTON: Yeah, great. Okay, thank you. We'll note that we had the opportunity to visit that site when we were in the area and we have a good appreciation of what that looks like, but thank you for that explanation, that's good.

10 PROF LIPMAN: Can I just ask Nicole, when we visited the site one of the concerns of the resident was that the heat could have an exacerbated inference given that it was, you know, an L shape and that they had the panels on each side. Do you have any research or ideas on that?

15 MS BREWER: Look, as we said in the assessment report, I can – I'll jump to the issue on heat island now instead of flag it later in the presentation, but that's – we can chat about it now. Look, there's obviously been the Shepparton study which talked about the set-back of 30 metres from the development footprint and that, you know, other vegetation which includes screening but also includes groundcover
20 beneath the panels can also influence and reduce that heat island effect. So, the applicant's confirmed that the development footprint is more than 30 metres away from the adjacent boundaries at all locations and that there will be groundcover established on site and that there's existing vegetation on the site and the proposed vegetation buffer.

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So we consider with the implementation of those recommended conditions and set-back distances and the screening that's proposed, that it wouldn't significantly impact the agricultural operations.

30 PROF LIPMAN: Right.

MS BREWER: Jumping to the next issue on the agenda for the project in terms of biodiversity. The project essentially has been designed to avoid most of the existing native vegetation on site. There are large areas of the site which are exotic grazed
35 pasture or crops like wheat and barley. The layout will disturb .32 hectares of box-gum woodland and .01 hectares of the rivergum open forest wetland. That disturbance requires 44 ecosystem credits and 15 species credits and they would be retired in accordance with the New South Wales Biodiversity Offset Scheme.

40 MR HUTTON: Can you go back there Nicole. I understand when we were on site that there was a commitment to some enhancement along that unnamed creek. If I'm reading it right, I guess it's that purple-pink colour indicated – up to what would be the northern end of the project, not too far from the main homestead. Yeah. So, that's enhanced planning, I understand it?

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MR DAVIES: That's correct, yes.

MR HUTTON: Okay, and the proposal then is not to take that all the way to the boundary with R24 but to effectively keep it to the east of what is the homestead, based on that figure, that's my interpretation.

5 MR DAVIES: Yes.

MR HUTTON: Yep, okay. Thanks, Iwan.

10 PROF LIPMAN: I have just got a question on biodiversity. I notice that the Weeamera Road is going to be upgraded to seven metres width and you do mention in your report that this high quality native vegetation alongside Weeamera Road and I was wondering how the widening of the road is going to impact on that vegetation and whether that has been factored into the calculation of off-sets.

15 MS BREWER: My understanding is that that has been included in the assessment.

MS BANDARUK: Yes, I confirm it has, and there was also discussion with Council. Council wanted a wider upgrade, I think to eight or nine metres, and they negotiate – the applicant negotiated with Council to reduce it to seven metres to
20 avoid some of this vegetation.

PROF LIPMAN: Thank you.

25 MR HUTTON: Thank you.

MS BREWER: I'll jump to the next issues. I just wanted to give a quick overview, although they weren't on the agenda just in terms of our holistic assessment. We did cover that transport route, there are as you mentioned, the upgrades to Weeamera Road. So, north of the quarry that section of the road isn't currently sealed, so
30 between the quarry and the site, the road will be sealed – widened and sealed. There are also requirements in the conditions for dilapidation surveys and to repair any damage caused during construction.

In terms of noise impacts, all receivers were below the highly noise effect criterion.
35 There were two residences that were above the noise management level. That was predicted to only to be short-term issue during construction for around two to three weeks and that it would be intermittent, so two to three hours per day. There were also no exceedances in the operational noise levels for any of the non-associated residences during day and night. There was under the worst case scenario model
40 during night time hours, assuming that the battery operates at full output, a potential one DB exceedance at receiver R33, but we've added a condition in our recommended conditions requiring them to comply with the project noise trigger level at any non-associated receivers.

45 MR HUTTON: was it R33 isn't currently occupied, is that the case?

MS BREWER: That's correct, yes.

MR HUTTON: Yep.

MS BREWER: R33 is not occupied.

5 MR HUTTON: Yep, okay.

MS BREWER: In terms of cumulative impacts, we talked earlier about the cumulative agricultural impacts that with the – in the broader Riverina Murray region, the loss of that agricultural land represents about .09 percent of the 9.1 million hectares that being used for agricultural output and would result in a negligible reduction in the overall productivity of the region and as I mentioned earlier, specifically in and around this project with those other proposed and approved projects in the Greater Hume area, that it's around .59 percent.

15 In terms of the cumulative traffic, obviously there's the part of the transport route that is used by the quarry. We're also part of the primary haulage route for Walla Walla. That was assessed in the traffic assessment and Benambra Road has sufficient capacity to accommodate those traffic volumes and maintain that level of service along Benambra Road and Weamera Road.

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MR HUTTON: So the feel that there was – or did you consider any conditions around traffic in your draft conditions that talked to that? Or you just felt that it was going to be okay and didn't warrant any additional consideration?

25 MS BREWER: So, the traffic management plan includes consideration of those other projects in the area of, you know, if there's potential for, you know, managing things through scheduling but Council didn't raise any issues with the cumulative impact with – should all three, you know, with the quarry operating and the solar farm under construction should all those correless at the same time.

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MR HUTTON:

MS BREWER: In terms of other cumulative impacts, no noise – no receivers would experience exceedance of the noise effective criterion if Walla Walla and Culcairn were constructed concurrently. In terms of the cumulative visual impact, R17 is about 800 metres from the development footprint of each but due to the distance and the existing vegetation, it was considered that the views from R17 of both projects would be limited.

40 PROF LIPMAN: R17 to Walla Walla as a pattern. I seem to recall from the site visit that it was a quite an elevated site, so yeah, I'm just wondering how that could impact on the visual impacts there?

MS BREWER: So, I guess in our consideration of the impacts for R17, particularly for Culcairn, we considered that the – it's got that set-back to the solar panels and for R17, if you recall that's at 1.16 kilometres and then there's some dense mature vegetation along the creek, so I guess we didn't consider that there was a cumulative

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impact for both projects, you know, in particular, there wasn't a significant impact from Culcairn given that distance and the existing vegetation and set-back. So then cumulatively with Walla Walla we didn't consider that there was a significant impact to that residence.

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MR HUTTON: And the same would noise, I imagine? Yep.

MS BREWER: That's right. So no receivers would experience exceedances of the noise effected criterion if they were constructed concurrently.

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MR HUTTON: At the same time, yeah okay.

MS BREWER: That's right.

15 MR HUTTON: So, just to confirm but, R17 here for Culcairn is the R2 referred to in the Walla Walla application? I think that's right, Iwan?

MR DAVIES: Yes, that's correct.

20 MR HUTTON: Yep, thank you. Just so we can be sure, thank you.

MS BREWER: And I guess in summary, you know, our evaluation has concluded that, you know, there are – while we recognise that some members of the community remain strongly opposed to the project and some members of the community consider that the project would result in residual environment and amenity projects, but the Department considers that the changes made to the project through the assessment process have significantly reduced those visual impacts and I guess overall, the Department considers that with the implementation of those recommended conditions that those environment and amenity impacts can be managed to achieve those acceptable outcomes and that the project in addition would provide significant economic benefits to the region.

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This project also has a VPA that the applicant has offered for \$5,000,000 worth of contributions to Council and separately, \$4,800,000 community benefit fund, and that, you know, overall with the recommended conditions, that the project would contribute to the transition of the economy away from that reliance on fossil fuels and that the project can achieve an appropriate balance maximising the use of that solar resource and the associated benefits of the project while also minimising the potential impacts and the conclusion of the Department's assessment was that we considered it was approvable subject to those conditions that we provided.

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MR HUTTON: Okay, I just have one question that's, sort of, arisen in my reading since sending the agenda through, is just obviously now we are seeing more and more solar farm applications having a battery included as a technic – I understand the technology now is there where people are seeking approval for batteries. Does the Department have a view or comments around the hazards and under the hazard assessment type regime around these battery storages? I understand obviously bush

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fire and those sort of things are a key hazard, but is there any other hazards that the Department is looking into around these battery facilities?

5 MS BREWER: Yes, certainly. Specifically on this project, a preliminary hazard analysis was done to consider those hazards and concluded that those hazards could be managed. So that was a requirement for the EIS.

10 MR HUTTON: Okay. Thank you. Zada, do you have any additional questions that you might like to ask the Department while we have them?

PROF LIPMAN: I don't have any questions, I just want to thank Nicole for her presentation which I thought was very good, and I also found the assessment report very clear and very helpful.

15 MR HUTTON: Yeah, I'd like to acknowledge that too. All right, well I don't have any further questions myself, I think – other than to thank Nicole, you and your team for once again giving us a good summary, a run through of the assessment report. Obviously as we move through the process we will have the opportunity to ask more questions if we need to.

20 Again, yeah I do echo Zada's comments, a good assessment report and a good summary on the issues, so thank you again for that, you and your team. Unless you've got any other, sort of, concluding comments, I think what we'll do is let you go and thank you for your time this morning.

25 MS BREWER: Only just to say, thank you for the opportunity to present our assessment and thank you as well for your feedback on the assessment report, and, you know, I see a lot of hard work from the team went into that assessment report, and feel free if there are any other questions or points of clarification to get in contact.

30 MR HUTTON: Great, okay. Well on that note I think what I'll do is formally close the meeting and thank you for your time this morning.

35 MR DAVIES: Thank you.

MS BREWER: Thank you.

40 MS BANDARUK: Thank you.

MEETING CONCLUDED

[10.36 am]