



TRANSCRIPT OF MEETING

RE: MIDDLEBROOK SOLAR FARM (SSD-10455)

APPLICANT MEETING

PANEL: MR RICHARD PEARSON (CHAIR)
DR BRONWYN EVANS AM

OFFICE OF THE IPC: MR GEOFF KWOK

APPLICANT REPRESENTATIVES: DR SHERRY MOHAJERANI
MR AARON SLUCZANOWSKI
MS BROOKE MARSHALL
MS AMANDA CONLEY
MR JAMES VAN DEN BROEK

LOCATION: ZOOM VIDEOCONFERENCE

DATE: 3:30PM – 4:30PM
MONDAY, 2ND SEPTEMBER 2024

<THE MEETING COMMENCED

5 **MR PEARSON:** Before we begin, I would like to acknowledge I'm speaking to you from Gadigal land and I acknowledge the traditional owners of all of the country from which we virtually meet today and pay my respects to their elders past and present. Welcome to the meeting today to discuss the Middlebrook Solar Farm (SSD-10455) currently before the Commission for determination.

10 The applicant, Middlebrook Solar Farm Pty Ltd, proposes to develop a 320 megawatt solar farm and 320 megawatt/780 megawatt hour battery, approximately 22 km south of Tamworth in the Tamworth regional local government area.

15 My name is Richard Pearson. I'm the chair of this commission panel and I'm joined by my fellow commissioner, Dr Bronwyn Evans. Dr Sheridan Coakes, the third appointed member of the panel is unfortunately unable to join us today but Sheridan will review the transcript of today's meeting and may submit further questions in writing if there are things Bronwyn and I don't cover between us.
20 We're also joined by Geoff Kwok from the Office of the Independent Planning Commission.

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

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

35 I do request all members here today to introduce themselves before speaking for the first time and for all members to ensure they do not speak over the top of each other, to ensure accuracy of the transcript.

40 So we'll start the formal meeting. I know you've got a presentation that you want to run through, which is appreciated. We will ask questions as we go through, if that's okay with you. We find that kind of works better than saving our fire to the end. And just be please aware, we have an hour, so we largely want to focus on the project and its impacts and how you've dealt with them. So please confine any introductory comments about your company and background in renewable energy
45 to the minimum to enable us to get to the substantive impacts of the project that the Commission is dealing with. On that note, I'm happy to hand over to whoever is proposing to run through the presentation today. Is that you, Brooke?

DR MOHAJERANI: That's me. I'm just trying to share my screen. Sorry, I just have some –

MR PEARSON: Okay, sure.

DR MOHAJERANI: – technical –

MR PEARSON: Okay, that's shared. We've got that. Thank you.

MR SLUCZANOWSKI: Thank you very much, Sherry. So yes, my name is Aaron Sluczanski. I'm head of development for TotalEnergies. So I'll just give a very brief quick overview of the company, noting what you mentioned before, Richard, about keeping it brief. So Sherry, if you could just do the presentation start, if you click the one down the bottom.

DR MOHAJERANI: [unintelligible 00:04:54]. Sorry.

MR SLUCZANOWSKI: Yes. Yes, so basically we work for the company TotalEnergies. We've got a 60 year history in Australia and we're a multi-energy corporation. So we look at LNG and renewables, oil, solar, all the different energy sources but our division is concentrated in renewable energy. Next slide, please. So we do rank among the top five producers of renewable electricity worldwide and we do have a number of different interests throughout Australia and the world and we do have very high targets that we're trying to reach as well in terms of trying to be as clean and green as possible as well. So moving forward to the next one.

So TotalEnergies Australia, we have around 34 employees located across Melbourne, Adelaide, Sydney, Brisbane and Perth and we are an entity that is along the ride for the whole development of a project. So we're there for the origination of projects, we go through development process, we're there for the finance, grid connection, all those kind of things, we're there for the construction of the project and then we're the long term owner of the projects as well. So we're not looking at kind of developing projects to flip them, our long term goal is to own assets, renewable energy assets. Next slide, please.

So the renewable division that myself and Sherry work for, so we've got 24 gigawatts of installed renewables, 5 gigawatts that are under construction and 58 in development and just note that that is worldwide. Obviously we don't have that high targets in Australia but Australia is one of the key markets that we are looking at expanding into as well. So move on to the next slide, please.

So solar farms, just why do we build solar farms? We've got a really good solar energy resource in Australia. There's drops in the cost of solar panels, it's one of the cheapest forms of energy and they don't have ongoing emissions and in some circumstances, they can be – there are synergies with agriculture. You know, we do have sheep on some of our solar farms as well. So if you go to the next slide, please?

MR PEARSON: Sorry, just on that point, Aaron, because that's an issue we're interested in, the ability for the solar farm to coexist with agriculture. You say in some circumstances? What are those circumstances?

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MR SLUCZANOWSKI: So the circumstances – so there's OH&S requirements that need to be met as well as insurances and things like that. So basically generally sheep or not all land is suitable for sheep grazing, to begin with. SO the land needs to be suitable for sheep grazing and we need to make sure that the sheep grazing is done in a safe manner as well. So generally most sites would be suitable for it. I suppose there may be some sites that specifically wouldn't have them, but Middlebrook is not – we are looking at having sheep grazing as part of this project as well.

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MR PEARSON: Thank you.

MR SLUCZANOWSKI: The next slide, please. So we do have a number of other projects in development in Australia. The most developed one is the Kiamal Solar Farm, which is a 200 megawatt solar farm that's operating in Victoria, about an hour south of Mildura and that's actually the largest operating solar farm in Victoria, which we developed. We were there for construction and we are operating that facility as we speak as well. And recently we have incorporated sheep grazing into this solar farm facility as well, so we do have experience at ensuring that sheep can graze within the solar farm area as well. And we do have projects in Queensland and New South Wales, Victoria as well. So next slide.

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At this stage I might hand over to Sherry to talk about the project but I'll still be here to talk about projects and just note I have been with TotalEnergies for kind of seven, eight years and I've been involved in the development of Middlebrook for the last five years as well. So I do have a bit of history on it as well. On to you, Sherry.

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DR MOHAJERANI: Thanks, Aaron. Hi, my name is Sherry Mohajerani, I'm senior development manager and I've been looking after the Middlebrook project development since the EIS started. Sorry, I do apologise for the messages in the background.

Just very quick highlight, I know we've kind of covered it at the beginning, basically the project is in close proximity to Tamworth, it's about 22 km away. The capacity is 320 megawatt proposed and the BESS will have a capacity of up to 780 megawatt hour. We do have the transmission line passing through the site, which is very helpful for connection and in terms of location of the project, it has been sited specifically because obviously it has access to TransGrid transmission line as well as in terms of the number of neighbouring residents, we don't have as many neighbours.

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So basically there were about 10 receivers within two and a half kilometres of the project footprint, which is pretty good, and the nearest neighbour, for the record,

was about 360 metres sort of northeast of the project development site. Just obviously as many renewable projects do, Middlebrook Solar Farm will also contribute towards achieving the net zero emission by 2050 and it will help meet the needs for the increase in electricity demand as we progress in the transition from coal to renewables.

Just a bit of background I thought might be helpful for everyone to kind of have a bit of history about the project. The project initially started in 2019–2020 and obviously landowners were signed up and some assessment started but towards the end of 2020, works kind of slowed down due to the COVID-19 lockdowns and the inability to obviously for consultants and for us to travel to site. So the main point was like for many projects, they all sort of slowed down.

The project was picked up again later. Some gap analysis were carried out in 2022 and we started doing the EIS again. At that point and that's where I've been sort of involved in the project, assessments like Aboriginal heritage, biodiversity and visual assessment based on the current guidelines at the time were carried out again and the EIS was submitted in 2023, June, and has been under assessment ever since.

For a visual description of what the project looked like at the early stages when we did the scoping report might be very helpful. As you can see, there were additional lands to the northwest and the northeast as well as additional areas within the current project boundary. You can see there were quite a lot of additional lands that were considered. So the footprint was estimated to be about 1,000 hectares at the time and this is in the scoping phase of the project.

When we moved to the EIS phase back in 2022–2023, obviously after COVID there were some adjustments done in terms of obviously biodiversity and landowners that were involved and consideration of a number of factors and the project was refined to what you can see in the yellow boundary and the hashed areas are where the actual footprint was sort of designated to. And the area for our footprint was approximately about 530 hectares.

Now, through the EIS process, obviously we had feedback from the community and the various agencies and in consultation with the various groups that were involved, we further refined the design and the footprint of the project. So the amendment report covers 515.41 hectares of the project footprint and this reflects the change. And just for quick reference, there were some additional requirements and requests from the council for road upgrades and sealing parts of the road, so that added to some of the additional footprints. But at the same time, there were some footprints in the area where it had a higher biodiversity consideration, we reduced and we removed that.

I think another point that might be, whilst we are on the amendment report, to reflect on is that the changes that were done, an additional site access was included for the project and that was on the request from the council. They wanted to have two access sites, so there is one at this point and there is a second one here based

on the council request and obviously based on the request for the road to be sealed, which addressed some of the community feedback that we had also received. So we can sort of cover that a little bit later.

5 In addition, we also have – and we have better maps later on as well – two crossings between the two sites and it’s important to note that this is only for crossing between the east and west part of the project and is not for site entrance and exit to site.

10 And just to also sort of might be helpful, I think the next map might be – sorry, go back. This is the New England Highway, just going through to the left here. This is Middlebrook Road. That comes down and basically we follow the road. This is the proposed site, obviously. And as you go further, this is Marsden Park Road and Middlebrook Road continues down to the south. So it’s a little bit confusing
15 but we will not be using those crossings, for example, for site entrance and exit. When we refer to Middlebrook Road, it’s literally just site entrance 1 and the site entrance 2, which was requested by the council. Sorry, did you have a question?

20 **MR PEARSON:** No, no, I was just noting what you were saying.

DR MOHAJERANI: Sure. Just a very quick overview of the exhibition. So post-exhibition, which finished on 3 August 2023, we received about 129 unique submissions and that’s why they were referred to IPC. It’s important to note that there were only six objections that were within 5 km from the site and sort of
25 explain where we believe the rest of the sort of concerns came from in the submissions.

30 Basically, generally speaking, the issues that were raised included the agricultural land, the economic, the visual impact, all the sort of general concerns that arise with any major projects. Traffic, dust was a big issue, the location, the situation, physical situation and geographical location of the project, social aspects and the biodiversity where the main issues that were raised. Sorry, does that work? Yes.

35 Conscious of time, so just we have sort of highlighted the agendas that were key for the IPC panel and for us to sort of cover. So we’re going to go through them. We’ll try to go through them as fast as possible to allow for any questions that you may have but please feel free to jump in at any time and I will be asking Brooke shortly for some assistance.

40 In terms of community engagement, that was one of the first points that was highlighted. As we noted, the project is about 22 km south of Tamworth and there are a number of projects also proposed in the area. One of the projects that was proposed was Lambruk Solar Farm and we found out that when we had the open day there were a lot of people who attended our open day, mistakenly thinking that
45 this was for Lambruk Solar Farm.

So we feel that a lot of concerns that sort of were raised in the EIS submissions perhaps were reflected because they were thinking we are a different project,

unfortunately. And we had only six people within the 5 km radius of our project. We were happy obviously to address any questions they had, but in general terms.

5 **MR PEARSON:** Sorry, what's the status of the Lambruk project? I mean, it's a question I can ask others but do you know where it's up to?

DR MOHAJERANI: I believe it's scoping but I'm not 100% sure, sorry.

10 **MR PEARSON:** Okay.

DR BRONWYN EVANS: And if I can have a follow on question, Bronwyn Evans here. As you can said, the community has concerns about the level of activity more broadly in the area. How are you thinking about the cumulative impact that your project contributes to the overall activity of renewable projects in the area?

15 **DR MOHAJERANI:** Sure. To some extent obviously you can see from the changes that we have made to the project since the scoping phase and how the project has actually reduced to address the issues that were raised, whether they were from governmental agencies or community, we have tried to reduce our footprint as much as possible.

20 All the assessments to date based on all the available information about the other projects that have been in the area and in the obviously development phase, that's when we can make assessments when we know about them, have been undertaken. And we've been working with obviously the Department of Planning and tried to reach out to the council on various issues to make sure that we can address if they have any concerns.

25 **MR SLUCZANOWSKI:** And just adding to that as well, Sherry, so there are a number of projects to the northeast of Tamworth up towards the Armidale area as well. So we do touch on – we are actually outside of a REZ zone, we were looking for a site that was kind of away from other projects to limit the competition and to limit some of those cumulative effects as well. So the location of our project, there are other projects in the general area and vicinity but there are other areas that have kind of a higher concentration of projects planned as well.

30 **DR EVANS:** Thank you.

35 **DR MOHAJERANI:** Sorry, just to continue on, so what we did, with NGH's support, we conducted a survey for the people in the area up to about 3, 4 km, just to make sure that they have avenues to be able to reach out to us and give us feedback and as part of our consultation and then they could sort of communicate with us.

40 Follow up to that, we had obviously open days and information day at Tamworth and we have followed up with neighbours one on one, whether we meet them on site, face to face, or based on their preference, maybe communicate via emails,

phones, we have sent updates via letters and emails, just trying to keep everyone within the close vicinity of the project informed as much as possible. And whenever someone requested a meeting, we made sure that we'll meet them.

5 **MR PEARSON:** Yes. Can I just ask a question, Sherry?

DR MOHAJERANI: Sure.

10 **MR PEARSON:** Do you attempt to negotiate agreements with non-host landowners? So people in the local area, can you talk to that?

15 **DR MOHAJERANI:** Sure. Generally speaking, the agreements are – if any project, generally speaking, has any significant impact on a neighbour, that's when you have those conversations. Sometimes it could be for various reasons, proximity to the project, they're not happy or something like that.

20 But those generally come in when you have – there are significant issues that cannot be resolved or mitigated. So that's when you have those conversations. But in the case for Middlebrook Solar Farm, all the assessments, including visual, which is a concern, one of the concern sort of items that people raised, showed that there are no significant impacts on any of the nearby residents and receivers. So therefore there was no need to reach any of those conversations.

25 Having said that, even though the visual impact assessment showed that there was no impact or low impact and there was no need for screening, for example, we have reached out to a few people who just were concerned and said, although it's not required, we are happy to consider that and have conversations with them going forward. Should they wish to, then we can implement something with them in terms of a screening. But nobody has shown any kind of interest in that as yet, 30 so yes, we haven't got any sort of agreements in that sense.

MR PEARSON: Thank you.

35 **MR SLUCZANOWSKI:** And just building on that as well, so all the neighbouring residences within 3 km of our development footprint, they have been offered a direct neighbour benefit fund with no strings attached to that one. So throughout the community survey, we asked what kind of benefit they would like to see for the community and there was a lot of people asking for some kind of different benefit and council also asked if there was any benefit to helping to pay 40 for electricity bills or something similar.

45 So kind of based on this site and the community facilities in the area, they are quite close to Tamworth and they get a lot of their facilities from Tamworth and Tamworth is a well-resourced town, we have made the decision to offer any residences within 3 km a direct neighbour benefit, which is still open for people to take up if they want. And there's no agreements that require them not to object or anything like that in regards to that.

MR PEARSON: So did that include subsidised power? Is that what you're saying?

5 **MR SLUCZANOWSKI:** So the council suggested we could help pay for power but we thought it was a more equitable route to offer just a direct payment. Some people have solar panels, so their power bills aren't as high, so we didn't want some people to be more benefited than other ones and the payments are directly attributed to how close someone is to the development footprint.

10 **MR PEARSON:** Was there any interest in that scheme or fund?

MR SLUCZANOWSKI: There is some interest. Yes, maybe I'll let Sherry detail it a bit more.

15 **MR PEARSON:** Sure, yes.

20 **DR MOHAJERANI:** Sure. Yes, as Aaron said, sorry, if I just finish the next bit and I'll get on to that. So some of the key issues that were raised, obviously traffic, agriculture, visual and socioeconomic impacts. One of the main things that people, as Aaron noted, wanted was some direct benefit to them because not necessarily – the area doesn't have a sort of locality as such where there is established groups like Country Women's Association or Men's Shed, for example, so where you can sort of provide the community benefit fund that we also have in place, an offer to spend it with.

25 And people were saying that they'd prefer to have a direct benefit to them and as part of that and also following council's recommendation to provide some support for people, we have established that neighbour benefit sharing and as Aaron said, there is no strings attached. It does not inhibit them from opposing to the project or raising issues at all and the only thing would be obviously that they we will ask them to pass it on if they sell the land, pass it on to the next person, for example, next owner.

30 And that's the only kind of condition that might be in there, obviously we want the person who lives there to be able to share the benefit of being next to our project and it's directly based on the comments that we received from people and the feedback we received from people and the council as well.

35 **MR PEARSON:** Yes, sure.

40 **DR MOHAJERANI:** And in terms of part of the community engagement that we did and one of the issues that are raised, as I mentioned, was traffic, and dust was a big issue, which council also raised and suggested for us to seal the road. That was their sort of recommendation. And Middlebrook Road from the highway, as you can see, there is about 4 km or so and it's not in very good condition, it's very dusty. So yes, we have agreed as part of our offer of VPA to sort of upgrade this road obviously and seal it.

5 Now, the first entrance is here and the council asked us additionally to seal it to 440 metres past the first site entrance as well in our discussions with them. So we have taken that on board and included that. Now, so that provides obviously the main – and we will cover this in traffic but the main access will be through the site access 1 and all heavy vehicles will be going towards where the substation is located through site entrance 2. If I can pass this on to you, Brooke, if that’s all right. That would be great.

10 **MS BROOKE MARSHALL:** I don’t know if you can hear me. Can you hear me all right?

MR PEARSON: Yes, we can.

15 **MS MARSHALL:** It’s because I’ve changed microphone three times since we started. So I’m Brooke Marshall, I’m NGH’s –

MR PEARSON: It’s working well.

20 **MS MARSHALL:** – principal planner in renewable energy. So I directed basically the process of the preparation of the impact assessment for the project and one of the primary authors is also on the line, I think, Amanda Conley.

25 Land use capability, one of the key decisions we made earlier in the project was to exclude all class 3 important agricultural land. So you can see this map here, that’s the yellow that runs through the site. After the scoping report, we pushed the project west to exclude all that class 3 land, so that the project now only impacts class 4 and class 5 land.

30 You spoke about cumulative impacts, I would say the cumulative agricultural impact of the project is low in that the class 4 and class 5 land that will be impacted is a very small percentage of what is available locally and it’ll be managed and monitored and restored to its agricultural capability after the life of the project. Some of this is also built into the lease agreements separate to the environmental management side of things that the applicant has with the landowners, which includes the ability to graze. It also includes the requirement for the proponent to restore the land back to the agricultural capability it has today.

40 How do we maintain land use capability, in this case agricultural viability? It’s done through design into construction and operation and decommissioning. The modules’ heights and row spacing ensure that sheep can get underneath and that the panels are far enough apart so that the shading doesn’t impede the pasture growth.

45 We’re accumulating more evidence that this actually has a favourable effect on pasture. Certainly overseas studies show it but I think the information is starting to accrue in Australia as well that shows this microclimate effect we get from a bit of shading and a bit more moisture held near the ground has benefits for soil health and pasture growth.

5 During the construction of the project, the vast majority of the area that will be impacted by the project is for the solar arrays. They're not mounted on concrete footings, these are pile driven or screwed into the ground so that when they're removed they have a pretty small physical impact on the soil that's underneath them. The operational commitments to maintain ground cover are built into the project commitments, so a lot of monitoring goes with that. The grazing is managed to keep that amount of ground cover to protect the soil health, weed management, pathogen management, that all goes with the environmental management during operation.

15 And yes, I would also say in terms of land use capability that traditionally this area has been used for agriculture but the ability to provide solar as well into the regional economy is a really important diversification, particularly through climate extremes and we were out there in 2019–2020 when we had some pretty extreme drought conditions on the ground. So these are ways that the host landowners can still get an income without – and take the sheep off their property during those times. So we see that as a pretty good outcome for the project.

20 **MR PEARSON:** Yes. So Brooke, would it be the current landowner who would continue to graze on the properties? You know, he's got land to the east, which you're not using for the project, is that the dynamic or who would actually graze?

25 **MR SLUCZANOWSKI:** Yes, so in the agreements, the current landowners have the first right of grazing that land. So yes, we open up the option to the current landowner to put sheep within the solar farm. If they don't take us up on that offer, then it'll be investigate kind of other opportunities as well because it does actually help with running less vehicles to keep vegetation down and there are benefits to having sheep grazing within the land as well. But yes, the current landowners get the first dibs on the grazing rights.

35 **MR PEARSON:** Yes, because if it's not the current landowner, then there's other infrastructure that would need to go with the grazing, for shearing, et cetera, you can't – I'm not a sheep grazer but I don't imagine you can just solely use that property. You'd need some ancillary infrastructure.

40 **MR SLUCZANOWSKI:** Yes, so there is ancillary infrastructure on the land at the moment and a significant amount of that is outside of our development footprint. So there is a lot of farm infrastructure being maintained and there are sheep varieties that don't require as much maintenance. I know the sheep variety that we have at the Kiamal Solar Farm don't require – they're not required to be sheared, for instance, and there's not significant infrastructure on that solar farm site, but they are maintained to a high degree.

45 So there are different options and this harks back to the question you asked before about grazing, so there are some conditions in regard to grazing, you can't just go crazy grazing, you need to work together with the solar farm and it's only going to be sheep, we won't allow cattle grazing because they're too damaging on the

equipment.

5 **MS MARSHALL:** Yes, and I think if you look at some of the dot points in what the groundcover management plan and the grazing management plan would require, they're based around protecting the soil and the groundcover and then secondarily about getting some kind of agricultural grazing yield. So I look at it more as a groundcover management strategy but it does provide some nice flexibility and benefits to the host if they're grazing as well.

10 **MR PEARSON:** Yes. Thank you.

15 **MS MARSHALL:** I think it's biodiversity next. Yes. I'll take this one as well. Yes, sorry, got a bit of feedback. What we have here is a site that's been used extensively for agricultural use for a long time, so the biodiversity values are relatively low. We have some nice remnants of box gum woodland primarily associated with the creek lines. The key habitat resource are scattered trees and trees within those native remnants with hollows.

20 So we did find a squirrel glider species and identified about 2.1 hectares of habitat for that species that is still within the footprint and a number of hollow bearing trees and scattered trees, that is isolated trees over exotic pasture grasses. They are the key biodiversity resource being impacted by the project. You can see some of these figures of the 500 hectares of the project site, 495 hectares is classified as category 1 land, which means it's been extensively modified and it's exempt from
25 most of the aspects of the biodiversity assessment. It doesn't generate any offsets.

30 Yes, we end up with the 4.3 hectares of native vegetation, it's still mostly scoring quite low vegetation integrity scores, 17–36 out of 100. That more pristine and intact vegetation type would be more up around the 50, 40–50, so it's quite low quality and if we have a look at the next slide, I think it quite nicely illustrates the native vegetation extent in the area. There's a lot more around our site than on the site.

35 So the project has been quite responsive to finding areas already cleared and using those and still, if you see those bright green lines running through the site and then we've got our creek line through the site as well we've excluded the project from, we're still maintaining landscape connectivity. There's a lot of hollow bearing trees in those areas that have been left.

40 We're leaving the larger remnants, so by and large that 4 hectares of native vegetation is coming from roadside vegetation and then peripheral areas on the edge of the project or some quite small areas, which would be within the array area, not really worth preserving in terms of their integrity. So by and large it's a good outcome for site suitability for biodiversity and that kind of vegetation in the
45 landscape is also helping to contain the views of the project to other areas.

DR EVANS: Just if I could ask a question, please. Were there any specific design changes that were needed to be made for those remnant areas of higher quality

native vegetation?

MS MARSHALL: Yes, I wonder if you could zoom in a little bit further, Sherry, on that central riparian corridor. We said to the ecology team, you know, “What are your no go areas?” and we basically excluded all of the what would have qualified as box gum woodland that meets the Commonwealth TEC status, so that we didn’t have to refer the project.

So basically we set about designing no go areas. So that’s that central riparian corridor in that fragment kind of in the central area of the site adjacent Middlebrook Road. So the other design measures come down to kind of best practice waterway design where there’s some waterway crossings, measures like weed management, pathogen management, some fencing stipulations to reduce the risk to squirrel gliders in the area.

MR SLUCZANOWSKI: Yes, and we’ve worked together with NGH when we found out about where the exact location of areas were, we worked with NGH to try kind of minimise while maintaining the project footprint.

DR EVANS: Thank you.

DR MOHAJERANI: I might just cover the traffic. So in consultation with the council obviously and Transport for New South Wales, we did our initial assessments, they came back with they had some concerns about the numbers and the counts that we had done in terms of vehicles and the number of people that would be on site. So we did the remodelling again and based on the feedback we received and the turn treatments and we have been in consultation with both the council and the Transport for New South Wales to address this.

So this is some of the turn treatments that may be required as part of our assessments that we have done. Obviously we will be doing a traffic management plan later on once we were at the detailed design phase to make sure that all the requirements by Transport for New South Wales as well as council are addressed as part of the next phase of the project and the next steps in terms of traffic.

Also in consultation with the council and it was something that also addressed the concern that was raised by the community, they were worried, as I mentioned before, about the dust, that may be a high level of dust during the construction phase of the project. And in addressing that, based on the feedback and recommendation and requests from the council, we agreed obviously to widen roads and seal the road up to the site entrance 1. In further consultation with the council, they also asked us to extend that to about 440 metres past site entrance 1 for safety reasons, which we agreed to.

And also, as I mentioned before, they asked for a site access, additional one, to break down the number of the cars that will be going in and out of the site from one point and site access entrance 2, which is near the substation, was created for that purpose based on the feedback that we received from the council. So we have

gone back and then updated quite a number of things based on their recommendations and the requests from the council. And so Brooke, I think this was what you were trying to show. So this kind of has sort of decreased in this crossing here, which impacts on that.

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MS MARSHALL: And if I could add just to that cumulative question before, I think that the cumulative impact of the project is around the construction phase and is around traffic and accommodation and workforce. They in each case have been found that the transport network can accommodate the traffic for construction and the local accommodation can accommodate the workforce. But that peak period of construction somewhere during that 18 months' construction program, that's the project's largest cumulative impact, as I can see, if it overlaps with other projects at the same time of their construction as well. So that's addressed in management planning, accommodation workforce strategy, traffic management plan.

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DR EVANS: I'd just like to have a follow up question on the principles used in the traffic management plan. [unintelligible 00:42:54] that peak construction time when I note that there could be as many 400 construction workers. And coming to site, I saw there was mention of a shuttle bus but getting 400 people to site is quite a number, so what are the principles in the traffic management plan to manage those numbers using the local road network?

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MS MARSHALL: There is a commitment to use shuttle buses and develop driver protocols and carpooling strategies. The detail of that is only single dot points at the moment but these are the details to be fleshed out with Transport for New South Wales in the development of that plan.

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DR EVANS: Thank you.

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MS MARSHALL: And there were quite extensive back and forth with Transport for New South Wales because they're obviously applying a lot of scrutiny to transport routes that are going to be used to access renewable energy zones.

DR MOHAJERANI: The next item that was also raised as a concern, as with any major project, I believe, was the visual impact. Obviously, one of the reasons that the Middlebrook Solar Farm was kind of chosen, obviously great suitability of land and access to the site and one of them was because there were not a great deal of neighbours nearby and that was something that we were considering to make sure it has obviously less impact.

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And all the visual assessments that were carried out, obviously as per the guidelines, to 4 km and there were found there was nothing significant and all the visual assessments came out low from any of the receivers nearby. And they also found that there is no need for screening and, as mentioned before, with those neighbours who did raise concerns about visual, we did offer, even though it was not required as part of the assessment and was not identified to be needing any screening, we offered to take it into consideration and work with the neighbours if

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they were feeling that that would help them. But no one had taken that up.

5 One of the concerns obviously with the screening, it's obviously the water that would be required. The area does go through drought from time to time and obviously there is that concern of having additional screening and plantation that you need to sort of address, I mean satisfy with water. So we tried to redesign the project to make sure that obviously reduce the visual impact and so there was no need specifically for screening. But as I said, just in consultation with people, we did make that offer to assist them.

10 One of the other visual assessment that was addressed was the glare from the solar panels. Initially, there was a very – just to sort of clarify, there was no glare on any of the receivers. There was some glare identified for the road and part of the road and also important to mention that it was only between certain months of the year earlier in the morning and in the evening. So it wasn't even the whole day and it's only a very small array of panels that will have that glare effect on the road.

15 And even though it's really minimum, we have worked through with consultants and we have addressed that and we worked out an angle that would work to eliminate that glare issue in its entirety. And we have therefore no need for any screening because of the glare issues and, as I said, that would have only been for the road and no receivers have any impact.

20 **MR PEARSON:** But you're aware there is a condition proposed by the Department that requires you to maintain certain angles at certain times of the day? Yes.

25 **DR MOHAJERANI:** That is right. We had run some modelling with our consultants to sort of come up with what would work to eliminate that. Not just minimise it but eliminate that. So we're aware of that.

30 **MR PEARSON:** Yes. And is it unusual for you to have a solar project that doesn't require any screening?

35 **MS MARSHALL:** In my experience it is, yes.

40 **MR SLUCZANOWSKI:** Our solar farm in Victoria doesn't have any screening either. We try to choose sites that we think will try minimise the visual impact as well and yes, I guess we've been lucky with the site in Victoria and this site here that it seems to fit that.

MR PEARSON: Thank you.

45 **DR EVANS:** And if I could have a follow up question on that. In the event that we are minded to approve the project and have a condition on requiring screening, what species of trees would you be using in this area?

MS MARSHALL: We had assumed from the beginning that some screening was

likely to be required but we haven't taken it through to a landscape management plan obviously we didn't need to. But species appropriate to the site would be box gum woodland species. They're mostly eucalypt but they do contain some shrubs, so some of those faster growing shrubs, acacias are typically what you would use for a vegetation community like this.

DR EVANS: Thank you.

DR MOHAJERANI: Just on that, obviously just one of the advantages when obviously we realised that we don't need screening specifically for visual on the first visual assessment was the use of water. So we would be much better for the – I mean, neighbours, if they had it on their land and for us if we had it on the project site, to be able to maintain them and keep going, it saves a lot of water usage that can be used for agriculture in the area. So that was one of the benefits that we thought if we don't have to do screening, then that's probably better for the area.

MR PEARSON: Yes. I noticed the council did talk about screening for Loomberah residents. Are they to the west of your site? Would that be what they're talking about there?

DR MOHAJERANI: They mentioned one landowner to us and one resident. They thought they may have more of a view to the project than others and we have reached an agreement with that neighbour separately.

MR PEARSON: Okay. Thanks.

DR MOHAJERANI: Sorry, Aaron, did you have anything that you want to add? It's all good.

MR PEARSON: Let's keep going because we're sort of rapidly moving towards the hour.

DR MOHAJERANI: Sure.

MR PEARSON: Yes.

DR MOHAJERANI: I'll just go through this quickly. Just basically the water resource, obviously the amount of water that we have proposed to use on site will be reduced because obviously we don't have to do as much dust suppressions for the roads. That would have been a constant need during the construction if the roads weren't sealed as well. So that has that added benefit of when sealing the road, we'll be using less water on site. And the amounts are also reflected in our updated reports and the Department's assessment report as well. I'll just move on quickly. If there is something that you want [cross-talk 00:51:27].

MR PEARSON: I thought you had a question on this, didn't you, Bronwyn, about the access to water?

DR EVANS: Yes, I noticed that there was discussion around using the council's standpipe in Tamworth. Is that potable or non-potable water that comes out of that standpipe?

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DR MOHAJERANI: Sorry, I'm not 100% sure, so I'll have to take that on notice.

DR EVANS: Thank you.

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DR MOHAJERANI: But those will be discussions that we'll have with council in terms of the exact source of the water based on availability because we are conscious that obviously the area needs it and so we will be having conversations with the council later on.

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DR EVANS: And if I could just continue on that conversation, have you considered what water sources are available to you if that council standpipe is not a sufficient volume?

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DR MOHAJERANI: Sorry, Brooke.

MS MARSHALL: Just sourcing, yes, local contractors, local water suppliers, also there's a couple of buildings on site that we collected water from. So in operation that water requirement is relatively low.

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DR EVANS: Okay. Thank you.

DR MOHAJERANI: Accommodation was one of the other issues that I think you wanted to discuss. There are about 400 – estimated about 400 workers that will be required for the peak construction period, which will be about 18 months and obviously I think for anyone doing the [APC(?) 00:53:14] work, they like generally to hire local people because it's easier for transportation, accommodation. But obviously does depend on the skillset and availability of people, given that there may be other projects happening in the area. So we will aim to maximise the hire of local people but it does depend on a number of factors, that it's hard to confirm at this point in time.

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MR PEARSON: Sorry, Sherry. Did you have an expected commencement date for construction for this project in the event that it's approved?

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DR MOHAJERANI: In the event that it's approved, I believe it's second quarter next year, I believe. Second or third.

MR SLUCZANOWSKI: Yes, so Q2, Q3 next year would be kind of the early work start of the process. Obviously, there's different times when there's a different amount of people will be on site, but yes, that's kind of towards the end of next year is when there's likely to be more significant work.

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MR PEARSON: Okay.

DR EVANS: And just continuing on the accommodation management plan, do you have experience in other sites where there's peak tourist activity in a location? For example, in Tamworth every year there's a major influx of tourists and one of the things that council and local businesses are keen to make sure they're able to accommodate are all of the tourists coming in. So is this something that you have got experience of working with and incorporating in any accommodation management plan?

DR MOHAJERANI: I personally haven't but I'm sure, as we've mentioned to the council, we will work with them to make sure that we can sort of work together in terms of timing and availability obviously of accommodation. I'm not sure at this point exactly how but we need to do those management plans and we'll do it in consultation with the council.

DR EVANS: Thank you.

DR MOHAJERANI: Obviously the project will commit to develop all the relevant management planning, including the environmental management plan and as the project sort of progresses should it receive approval and as part of that, including traffic management plan and all the other commitments that we've made throughout the EIS and the many reports throughout the process.

There was also a question raised about the decommissioning. Obviously, we have agreements – just briefly covering this, we have agreements with the participating landowners and as part of those agreements, we will be reinstating the land to its sort of current situation as much as possible. Obviously, there might be some infrastructure that the landowners would like to keep, so then that would be done in consultation with them. But majority of the project, like panels and cabling will be removed and for us to be able to reinstate the land to its current condition and rehabilitate the land for them to be able to use as they are now.

MS MARSHALL: And those last two dot points there are commitments of the project. So they're statements of commitment, if you like. And then the next page has some of the management plans that also guarantee that same level of commitment to retaining and providing certainty that that land capability will be retained.

DR EVANS: And can I ask whose responsibility is it for the rehabilitation of the land after decommissioning?

DR MOHAJERANI: The project proponent. It's on us.

DR EVANS: Thank you.

DR MOHAJERANI: Just quickly overing the community benefits, as we briefly covered before, there is a community benefit fund that would be available that's

part of our offer as part of the VPA with the council, which we'll cover again. And this will be for people – so we have a community benefit fund that goes to obviously you have like grant form, so people will be applying for having the benefit and then using these community benefit funds annually.

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And we also have a neighbour benefit fund, as Aaron mentioned earlier, which is for people within 3 km and the offer is an annual payment, no strings attached and basically it's a goodwill gesture for sharing some of the benefits of being near a major project. And as council suggested, if people like, they can use it towards their electricity bill or other purposes, whatever they see fit. It's up to them. It does not cause any issues, they can still have an issue, they can raise that. They're not sort of stopped in any shape or form. It absolutely has no strings attached.

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MS MARSHALL: Can I speak to this one, Sherry?

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DR MOHAJERANI: Yes, absolutely.

MS MARSHALL: The social impact assessment team, they spent a lot of time talking to people, doing interviews and framing up the aspirations of the social impact mitigation. So what you see here is a lot of principles and then on the next page, a lot of local initiatives that they think are appropriate to build into that community benefit fund, but it's something that would be developed later on. So what we've done is set up an appropriate framework but the detail of that is very much to be fleshed out post-approval.

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DR EVANS: Thank you. Can I ask a question on that and perhaps it's more your experience at other sites, how is the community benefit fund managed and who would comprise any committee, in your experience, that allocates access to this funding?

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MR SLUCZANOWSKI: Yes, so each project is unique and each local community is unique. So I know for our Victorian project, for instance, we have the local business community that have a grant scheme that we've kind of piggybacked on because it worked for the local community. So in terms of this local community, it is something that needs to be kind of fleshed out exactly how that would be operated. We note that council have expressed the interest that they don't want to be the one responsible for it because it's extra work on them and we understand that.

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So the prime consideration for the community benefit fund is so the local community that is kind of most impacted gets benefit. So we do need to work on exactly what that community benefit can do to help the local community and we have spoken to locals about what ideas there are but that is something that needs to be fleshed out to a greater degree. But we have committed to the community benefit fund.

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DR EVANS: Thank you.

DR MOHAJERANI: In terms of the VPA, we've had a number of conversations with the council and with the Department on this. There are obviously current guidelines. There is a sort of recommended amount and so we have agreed to provide that to the council.

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We haven't unfortunately reached an agreement with the council as yet and so that's still ongoing but as part of our offer to the council, we have offered to pay about – the first year of operation, over \$82,000 and it will get CPI adjusted annually for the life of the project and that will go to the council as well as that obviously the community benefit fund, which we just discussed, it's about \$32,000 from the commencement of operation and that's also available for the life of the project going forward.

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And as part of our VPA offer, obviously based on a request from the council, we are going to be sealing the road, so that's part of our contribution to the council as well for sealing the road, the portion of the road that they requested for us to seal. Just very quickly, sorry, conscious of time, we've gone a bit over.

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MR PEARSON: Sorry, I just had a really quick question, Sherry, on the council VPA. There's a big difference, isn't there, between what the council wants and what you're offering and what the Department's recommending. I think they're in the 10 plus million range, from what I last saw, unless they've come closer to you any time more recently?

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DR MOHAJERANI: Not exactly. We are still trying to have those discussions with them. Yes, I think they requested about 1.5% of the capital investment value, which was like over \$12 million roughly, which is quite high. So yes, it's just something that we are sort of working with them, we are going with the current guidelines [cross-talk 01:03:29].

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MR SLUCZANOWSKI: Yes, and we've been working with the Department over the last few months as well to ensure that our offer with the VPA is in line with Department recommendations as well.

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MR PEARSON: Yes, it's an issue we'll talk to the council about when we have our meeting with them but yes, I probably don't need anything further at this point from you on that issue. Thank you.

DR MOHAJERANI: Just very quickly, obviously this is a state significant project and we've gone through an EIS and obviously the assessments and the IPC at the is point. All the assessments have been done based on the guidelines and it's all been assessed by the Department and all the relevant agencies, including council. And just important to note that obviously they haven't had any issues, they haven't objected to the project, they've just provided recommendations and suggestions in terms of the management plans that needed to be prepared.

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We are going through a transition, we do need more renewable energies in the mix and therefore the Middlebrook Solar Farm will be sort of contributing towards that

and the power that it could generate could be enough for about 122,000 homes. So that's quite significant and every little bit counts, I suppose.

5 The follow on benefit from the project, obviously during construction there would be quite a number of jobs available for the project and looking from a different angle is that obviously yes, they do need accommodation but they will be spending their money locally whilst they're there for the construction and that adds to the economic benefit of the area. And so hopefully that's an added benefit that the local community will benefit from and will enjoy.

10 Just important to know very quickly that we are not in the REZ as such but we have obviously – we are in the renewable hub based on the New England Regional Plan. We have our connections and based on the number of neighbours that we have, we don't have a lot of neighbours, so therefore it's a well-suited site, we believe.

15 And based on the Department's report, they have sort of consulted with all agencies and they're satisfied that the project has been assessed correctly and obviously the next phase is for us to make sure that we go through the IPC and based on their findings and further consultation with various groups, whether they're community, council or other agencies, that we can provide a manageable sort of way forward.

20 Just before I finish, there was an issue with one of the draft conditions that we received from the Department on one of the items for cultural heritage and that was I think just reported incorrectly. So we just sort of wanted to note that, we were told that we can sort of highlight that.

25 **MR PEARSON:** Yes, thanks for that. We'll follow that up with the Department. So thank you very much. I have no further questions. Bronwyn or Geoff, anything from you?

30 **DR EVANS:** No. Thank you. Thank you for that.

35 **MR GEOFF KWOK:** Nothing from me as well. Thank you.

MR PEARSON: Yes, I think the only thing we took on notice or, sorry, you took on notice was in relation to the water issue, from memory. Geoff, is that correct?

40 **MR KWOK:** Yes, that's correct. Looks like that's the only question on notice.

MR PEARSON: So I guess will we follow up on that or are we just going to await their response on that, Geoff? I think we formally follow up, don't we?

45 **MR KWOK:** Yes, normally we'll send out a letter requesting the response. So we'll be able to send something through some time this week.

MR PEARSON: Yes. All right. But other than that, thank you very much for your

time. It was very useful from our point of view. Thank you for sharing that with us and for answering our questions and we will – well, we’ve got a public meeting in I think it’s 18 September, if I’m correct, Bronwyn or Geoff. Yes.

5 **MR SLUCZANOWSKI:** The 19th is the public meeting and the 18th is the site visit.

10 **MR PEARSON:** Okay. Correct. So we will see you at both of those events. Just in terms of the public meeting, I’d just probably stress the main thing that I think people that are attending that meeting are going to want to understand is how your project has addressed the impacts that they’re raising.

15 And so it’s probably quite important for you to focus on changes that have been made since the EIS was exhibited, for example, the sealing of Middlebrook Road, so that people can understand any changes that you’ve made that have attempted to address issues raised in submissions. Because people might not be fully across the more recent changes that have been made to the project, so that’s just a bit of advice, how you might want to address matters at the public meeting. Other than that, thank you all again and we’ll see you in Tamworth.

20 **MR SLUCZANOWSKI:** Thank you very much for your time. Nice to meet you, Commissioner Richard and Commissioner Bronwyn. We look forward to meeting you in person.

25 **DR EVANS:** Thank you.

MS MARSHALL: Thank you. Thank you for your time.

30 **MR PEARSON:** Pleasure. Thank you. See you all. Thank you.

MS MARSHALL: Bye.

>THE MEETING CONCLUDED