

New England Renewable Energy Zone (REZ)

Community Reference Group (CRG) North - Meeting 3

Held on: Wednesday 2 July 2025 – 12.30pm to 3pm

At: NOVA, 122 Faulkner Street, Armidale

Chaired by: Margaret Harvie

Attended

Chairperson	Margaret Harvie
Community Representatives	Alex Hunter Diane Gray Annette Kilarr Tony Lashlie Bruce McMullen James Reilly Michael Luchich – Voice for Walcha
LALC Representatives	
LGA delegates	Armidale Regional Council - Councillor Paul Gaddes Tamworth Regional Council – Jordan Kirk Uralla Shire Council – Councillor Sarah Burrows
EnergyCo Representatives	Julian Watson, New England Deputy Project Director Michael Burden, New England REZ Coordination Director Darren Clarke, Director Regional Coordination Laura Hoffman, New England REZ Biodiversity Manager Cleo Andrews, New England Communications and Engagement Lead Sara Crowe, New England Community Engagement Manager Melissa Maurer, New England Place Manager Leanne Thompson, First Nations Advisor
Observers	Councillor Dorothy Robinson – Armidale Regional Council James Pryor – Armidale Regional Council
Note taker	Kate McGrath
*online attendance	

Apologies

Walcha Council - Councillor Rachael Greig

Glen Innes Local Aboriginal Land Council – Elena Weatherall

Glen Innes Severn Council – Mayor Margot Davis

Declarations of interest

Member	Details
Dorothy Robinson	Pecuniary interest. Investor in Sapphire Windfarm.
Sarah Burrows	Pecuniary interest. Landholder of property in proposed transmission line corridor.
Kate McGrath	Non-pecuniary interest. Kate is the Employment Facilitator for the New England North West Local Jobs Program which provides funding and support for workforce development in the renewables sector. Pecuniary interest. Investor in Sapphire Windfarm.
Margaret Harvie	Margaret is paid by EnergyCo as the Chairperson. She has advised generators on community engagement and delivers a community engagement training course which generators participate in.

Agenda item discussion and actions

Item 1. Acknowledgement of Country

- The Chair acknowledged that we are meeting on Aboriginal land, paid respects to Elders past, present and emerging. Energy Corporation of NSW acknowledgement was on the PPT presentation.

Item 2. Welcome and housekeeping


- Meeting opened 12.37pm.
- Introductions.
- Chair welcomed members and outlined structure of meeting.
- Call for questions about agenda.
- Chair advised question register will be compiled to track questions posed between meetings. Noted that there were some questions from members.
- Chair noted Armidale Regional Council change of representative and welcomed Cr Paul Gaddes.
- Chair requested that Councils only send a single representative in the future.

Item 3. Pecuniary Interests

- As listed

Item 4. Noting of Actions

Chair noted the action register had been shared prior to the CRG meeting.

#	Action	Responsible	Status
1	EnergyCo to clarify if four tier towers rather than three tier towers are being proposed	Julian Watson	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The transmission towers proposed for the New England REZ project have three cross arms. Figure 3-2 on page 52 of the <u>Scoping Report</u> shows indicative concept designs for 330 kV and 500 kV towers. <p>The detailed design will be carried out following the appointment of a Network Operator and an update will be provided when available.</p>
2	EnergyCo to provide images of similar 500KV hubs to give an indication of what they look like	Melissa Maurer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indicative layouts of energy hubs and switching stations for Central West Orana REZ are provided in Figure 3-5 to Figure 3-8 in the project's <u>Environmental Impact Statement</u>. These figures provide indicative footprints for 500 kV energy hub designs. <p>An example of a large energy hub is <u>Tamworth Substation</u>. This substation is the largest of five substations to be upgraded as part of Transgrid's Queensland-NSW Interconnector upgrade.</p>
3	EnergyCo to share image of monopoles with CRG members.	Melissa Maurer	<p>Please see an example of 400kV T-Pylons on the transmission connection for the Hinkley Point C Transmission connection in Somerset England below.</p> 

#	Action	Responsible	Status
4	If information is available EnergyCo will provide rate of build for approved, commissioned, under construction and rate completed in NSW for 2024	Julian Watson	<p>EnergyCo is responsible for planning and coordinating transmission infrastructure specifically within the NSW Renewable Energy Zones (REZs), such as the New England REZ. However, we do not have oversight of all transmission line projects across the state.</p> <p>Transmission projects outside of the REZs, or those led by other proponents, fall under the responsibility of different organisations.</p> <p>We are currently seeking more information from other organisations and will provide an update when available.</p>
5	Michael Burden to attend next session to talk about cumulative impact and share information from studies and get the feedback and identify gaps	Michael Burden	Complete. Overview of REZ-wide studies included in agenda for July meeting.
6	Need to have deeper discussion about workforce accommodation	Chair	Noted. To be included in a future CRG meeting or dedicated online session.

#	Action	Responsible	Status
7	EnergyCo to confirm how far OSOM route extends	Michael Burden	<p>EnergyCo is currently working with Transport for NSW and our delivery partners to finalise the proposed OSOM route to support the delivery of key infrastructure in the region. As part of this process, we are also planning the road upgrades required to unlock access to the New England REZ.</p> <p>While the OSOM route is still being refined, we can confirm it will extend from the state road network to key project locations, including proposed substation sites and construction hubs within the New England REZ.</p> <p>We will provide further details when they are available. Meanwhile, you can read our latest notification regarding field investigations to support his work here.</p>
8	Members to submit questions directly to Chair or reply all to group and EnergyCo will ensure that these are part of a register.	CRG	Ongoing.
9	EnergyCo to investigate establishing an online register for CRG members to submit their questions.	Melissa Maurer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> EnergyCo will develop a Questions Register, similar to the existing Action Register. This register will capture questions raised by members, along with responses provided by the project team. The Questions Register will be shared with the CRG whenever new questions and responses are added, to ensure all members have access to the same information and updates. <p>Please continue to submit any questions via email and they will be captured in the register for follow-up.</p>

#	Action	Responsible	Status
10	EnergyCo to share list of events EnergyCo intend to attend.	Melissa Maurer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We are planning to attend the following community events in coming months: July – Aberdeen Highland Games, Aberdeen August – AgQuip, Gunnedah September – King of the Ranges Stockman Challenge and Bush Festival, Murrurundi October – Thunderbolts festival, Uralla November – Black Gully Festival, Armidale <p>We welcome any suggestions of other events you would like to see us at.</p>
11	Share standard community presentation.	Melissa Maurer	<p>The presentation template used to brief community groups is the same as ‘Section 2: New England REZ’ in the presentation provided to the CRG in our inaugural meeting. Find the presentation here.</p> <p>We are also working on an update Project Overview document. We will let members know once this is complete and available on the website.</p>
12	EnergyCo to investigate developing a post-event summary to meet landholders’ biosecurity needs.	Julian Watson	<p>We are currently considering the development of a post-event summary that would provide landholders with a record of site visits, including who attended, when, and any relevant biosecurity measures undertaken. We’ll provide an update once options have been further explored.</p>
13	Update on Central West Orana Community Employment Benefit Program to be provided for information.	Julian Watson	<p>The latest information on the Central West Orana Community Employment Benefit Program is provided on our EnergyCo website, or sign up for updates here.</p>

#	Action	Responsible	Status
14	Community Employment Benefit Program targeted session will be delivered later in the year.	Julian Watson	To be added to the agenda for September or November CRG meeting. If not a full presentation at the September meeting, EnergyCo to report on progress at the next meeting.
15	Confirm number of affected landowners within the study corridor, how many have signed access agreements and property agreements, and provide information to the CRG.	Julian Watson	<p>Complete. The preliminary study corridor announced in 2023 included around 320 landowners.</p> <p>Following landholder and community engagement and further technical studies, sections of the preliminary study corridor were revised to avoid and minimise impacts.</p> <p>The revised study corridor was announced in March 2024 and reduced the number of landowners by 80 to about 240.</p> <p>We have been working with landowners and currently have access agreements in place for approximately 70% of the study corridor to carry out further field studies, which will help us further refine the corridor and find the best location for the transmission infrastructure.</p> <p>The easement acquisition process is due to commence later this year, when we will seek to acquire easements by agreement with landowners.</p>
16	Send through water information documents for inclusion in meeting notes.	Alex Hunter	<p>Complete. Following link provided in email on 9/05/2025.</p> <p>https://www.netimes.com.au/2025/01/27/sustainable-water-security-for-uralla/</p>

- Chair asked if CRG members had any questions about the actions. No questions were raised.

Item 5. Meeting procedures

- Chair noted a complaint had been received, partly about meeting procedures.
- Complaint was issued to Chair’s professional association.
- Complaint included concern about pecuniary interests. Chair stated she is open to discussing any perceived conflicts.

- Chair acknowledged perceived conflict of independent Chair being paid by EnergyCo, however appointment by the proponent was the process for all Community Consultative Committees worked on previously.
- Chair shared information about the core engagement principles that guide her role as an engagement practitioner.
- Chair stated belief that people should have a say in things which impact their lives, and her aim to facilitate this.
- IAP2 spectrum purpose is not to ensure empowerment and collaboration, but to ensure that whichever element of the spectrum is promised is delivered.
- CRG is seen to be on the consult level, this includes the inform level and does not include empowerment and collaboration.
- Chair will be honest about the level of participation on offer in the CRG.
- Chair encourages future concerns to be raised directly prior to lodging formal complaint.
- CRG member asked what the outcome or feedback was resulting from the complaint.

Response: Chair stated the professional association advised the complaint did not need further investigation.

- The Chair indicated the first hour of South CRG meeting had been spent discussing the complaint and the associated concerns by CRG members.
- Chair noted concerns around the time allocated for EnergyCo to speak versus the community, and as a result the CRG meeting structure will be amended to shift this dynamic and provide more opportunity for CRG representatives to speak.
- Key topics will be presented and then each individual CRG member will have the ability to talk in response to the presentation, and then EnergyCo will be asked to respond.
- Comment from CRG member that it's disappointing that someone made a complaint and chose to abuse protocol. They expressed the Chair has been fair and professional and they support them. The member feels the complaint is an attempt to stop the EnergyCo development process.
- Chair stated the initial CRG meetings had lots of content and we would shift toward more dialogue once everyone is equally informed.
- Chair advised impolite emails have been received as "reply all" – this has occurred in both CRG groups and this will not be tolerated moving forward.

Item 6. Biodiversity offsets

- Presented by Darren Clarke, Director Regional Coordination.
- Portfolio level strategy for biodiversity and broader offset scheme.
- Walk through changes to biodiversity offset delivery model.

- The project first aims to avoid and minimise impact to biodiversity. Scale and size of project means impacts are unavoidable and must be offset.
- Changes to the way EnergyCo will meet their offset obligation as a result from instruction from Minister.
- Traditional model typically involves open market procurement through biodiversity stewardship agreements (i.e. offset sites), or reverse auction credit.
- Proponents typically pursue offsets independently.
- EnergyCo must take a proactive approach given the scale of the project and quantum of vegetation to be cleared, resulting in a substantial offset liability.
- Energy and Environment Minister has approved the development of Conservation Investment Strategy (CIS) developed by Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW) which identify coordinated conservation priorities to ensure evidence-based conservation outcomes.
- This model optimises conservation outcomes at a regional scale.
- CRG member asked what is considered conservation.
Response: Conservation seeks to retain or protect biodiversity values of any particular species or ecological community.
- Recommendation from DCCEEW adopted, and EnergyCo will no longer independently pursue offsets (i.e. no longer looking to establish biodiversity stewardship agreements with private landholders).
- EnergyCo is a foundational investment partner for CIS to provide confidence to other proponents and generators and influence the coordinated investment.
- CRG member asked if the Strategic Offset Delivery Approach applies to generators.
Response: Generator projects still have the choice to independently pursue offsets or deliver offsets under this new model.
- Proposing to partner with DCCEEW under strategic offsets delivery agreements (SODAs), a regulatory amendment was made to the Biodiversity Conservation Regulation in May 2025 that allows for offset liability to be delivered by entering into a SODAs. Once project's liability is known the Environmental Agency Head (i.e. Secretary DCCEEW) would take responsibility for delivery of the project offset obligations in accordance with the CIS.
- SODAs do not provide an avenue for EnergyCo to reduce the quantum of credits it is required to offset.
- SODA does not apply to every proponent, only eligible renewable projects within in a REZ, transmission in a REZ, and long duration storage projects, focused on the REZ.
- Central West Orana REZ is going first and the first SODA will be executed shortly, which is a precursor and reference point for what will happen in the New England REZ.

- CIS will be prepared by the DCCEEW for the New England REZ, this is not developed yet. Expected that a draft will be available toward Q3 2025 and EnergyCo will invite DCCEEW into this meeting. Opportunity for CRG to provide feedback, and Councils and LALCs will be consulted to ensure local priorities captured. First Nations communities will be invited to participate.
- Hunter Councils have been engaged as part of the drafting of the Hunter CIS, and it's had positive feedback and good alignment. LALCs are also scheduled to be engaged in the coming weeks to elevate First Nations outcomes in the CIS.
- The task is to develop and negotiate the SODA for New England REZ, the offset market is volatile and there is credit scarcity. DCCEEW providing ongoing offset delivery estimates will serve to create some certainty around offset delivery costs for EnergyCo.
- Negotiating SODAs with upper liability value, and any savings realised are returned to EnergyCo and ultimately the consumer, so risk doesn't sit with the consumer.
- Strategic benefit to new model includes better compliance, allowing EnergyCo to fulfil its offset obligations on entry into the SODA and transferring delivery risk to The Environmental Agency Head.
- Constraint of NSW government governance, expenditure and probity requirements would create challenge to compete in the open market, so SODA will also enable EnergyCo to more easily meet its offset obligations.
- EnergyCo able to use DCCEEW expertise and, for CWO SODA there is a 5% administration cap, providing certainty as to the cost to administer the SODA.
- Probity risks in biodiversity stewardship are real, nature market offset division have an established market and governance structures, so engaging them enables EnergyCo to be one step removed and minimise the risk of any persons being able to unreasonably benefit from the use of data and information EnergyCo holds.
- Allows for consistent application of this approach across all REZ and all projects.
- Engagement did occur with interested landowners prior to the changes in the offset delivery model to be adopted by EnergyCo, while these opportunities will no longer be available directly with EnergyCo there is opportunity through DCCEEW to establish stewardship sites which has more long-term opportunity.
- There was mention of the dates for DCCEEW online information sessions, which had been shared with members by email, to find out more about biodiversity stewardship support and available support from the department.
- EnergyCo and DCCEEW working together to support landowners who have previously been engaged on prospective stewardship opportunities.
- Biodiversity assessment calculates the impact of the project (constructing permanent infrastructure such a towers and tower pads, access tracks and temporary laydown areas) on vegetation, habitat and threatened species. An offset liability (i.e. number of credits required

to compensate for the impact) is calculated. Credits (for each type of vegetation, habitat or species) have a monetary value. Under the SODA, DEECCW will determine the overall cost to deliver the project's offset obligations.

- For inaccessible areas (where ecologists can't survey due to land access restrictions), the biodiversity assessment will assume all predicted vegetation types, habitats and threatened species are present, and in good condition. This is known as "assumed presence". Assumed presence will generate the highest offset liability for those inaccessible areas.
- The offset liability will be refined and adjusted as more surveys are undertaken (as land access becomes available through the acquisition process), and ecologists can verify if threatened species, habitats and vegetation types are present or absent, and if present, in what condition.
- Assumed presence surveys are sometimes allowed for the conditions of approval stage and prior to impacting of those biodiversity values.
- SODA includes a price adjustment mechanism and the cap can be amended to reflect an increase or reduction in project offset obligations.
- Comment from CRG member that there is a lot to process.
- CRG member asked what was included as far as life cycle of infrastructure and is this considered with the assessment of impact.

Response: Impact is considered on the basis of it being full and permanent, but future infrastructure outside this assessment will require its own additional assessment. Assessment typically includes build and operation, and total affected area if disturbance is greater in construction than operation and maintenance.

- CRG member asked for link to Central West Orana REZ CIS when published. EnergyCo advised it was due to be published on Friday 4 July.

Action: Provide link to Central West Orana Conservation Investment Strategy once published.

- CRG member asked if revegetation and restoration of links between habitat will be restored.

Response: Fragmentation of habitat as a result of the transmission infrastructure project will be minimised and this will happen through partial clearing and other strategies. EnergyCo will look to retain groundcovers and shrubs, and habitat features such as logs. At a landscape scale, the CIS will identify where habitat corridor links can be made and retained, via spatial analysis and species. Improved connectivity is expected to be a priority conservation action outlined in the New England CIS. The CIS will likely aim to secure land for connectivity corridors and habitat regeneration, but there will be a mix of all sorts of conservation initiatives such as breeding programs.

- CRG member asked for a link to credit list of species.

Action: Provide link to credit list of species if available.

- CRG member asked if EnergyCo is paying close attention to what is happening in Central West Orana and avoiding the repeat of issues here.

Response: EnergyCo is proactively resolving and workshopping to ensure CWO issues are addressed in its forward program of projects. This includes ensuring alignment between the EIS and on-ground delivery and encouraging contractors to adopt innovative methods to minimise clearing. EnergyCo is also consulting with other transmission projects eg Snowy Connect project, to better understand clearing protocols and retention of biodiversity values.

- CRG member asked if lay downs and clearing areas will be revegetated to status quo or better.

Response: Yes, the general approach is to return to a condition as it was prior to construction. Site selection also prioritises avoiding intact native vegetation with preference on disturbed areas.

- CRG member asked if there is responsibility for removal of assets once they have expired.

Response: Planning approval doesn't consider decommissioning; this will require a separate process given that full decommission is unlikely.

- Comment from CRG member that Strategic Benefit Payments to landholders only go for a set time period, so what happens to landholders at the end of this period.

Response: Compensation is paid for easements in accordance with the Land Acquisition (Just terms Compensation) Act 1991, which are typically secured in perpetuity. The landowners also receive \$200k per linear km over a 20-year term (annual payment increases with CPI), as an additional Strategic Benefit Payment, separate from compensation. Landowner payments will be included as an agenda item for the next meeting

- EnergyCo noted that Strategic Benefit Payments are entirely different to any biodiversity stewardship agreements that might be entered into with property owners.
- Comment from CRG member that fire and other risk will make offsets null and void.
- Comment from CRG member that easements in perpetuity should be paid a fair dollar per acre charge instead of offsets.

Response: Any payment to landowners for biodiversity stewardship entirely are separate to land acquisition compensation and Strategic Benefit Payments for landowners. The method for determining compensation amounts for easements and Strategic benefits payments are defined by the relevant legislative instruments.

- DCCEEW are best positioned to speak to liability of landowner if a stewardship site is affected by fire or other natural hazards.
- Offsets are likely be delivered or secured in a different location to where the impact occurs (i.e. on the transmission line easement). This is because ongoing operation and maintenance of transmission assets makes it very difficult to ensure the offset area continues to be conserved.

- Comment from CRG member that biodiversity credits are making corporates money, much like water rights and entitlements have been in the Murray Darling Basin, and there is risk in this and perhaps a better system such as a counter offer to a landowner.
- Comment from CRG member they are pleased to hear DCCEEW will be aiming to revegetate and re-establish vegetation. They asked when it will start and how will the implementation be managed.

Response: SODA will allow three years for the department to deliver the offsets, and EnergyCo is advocating to build up the credit market and make sure landowners can make informed decisions about participation. EnergyCo will also review and provide comment on the draft CIS for New England.

- CRG member asked about the process of finalising the New England CIS - what does the formal consultation process look like, and will it be strong, robust, and include feedback from people who genuinely know the land. Engagement with biodiversity reference group is positive.

Response: The drafting and engagement on the New England CIS will be managed by DCCEEW. Draft CIS should be ready by next meeting of CRG. Biodiversity reference group provided feedback to EnergyCo Biodiversity Manager in a meeting held earlier today. The priorities of this group will be conveyed to DCCEEW and information will be shared, and a public briefing session is planned. **Clarification requested by CRG member:** *The New England biodiversity reference group is led by Heidi McElnea (Community Power Agency), Dave Carr (Stringybark Ecological) and Eric Gogh (UNE) and includes other members from across the region, including First Nations reps.*

- Comment from CRG member that DCCEEW is the expert and that this makes sense, but it means EnergyCo has no power going forward and the previous work and relationship may be lost - engagement is vital.

Response: There is a desire to continue maintaining the relationships and EnergyCo will maintain engagement and convey information.

- CRG member requested more information about the credit scarcity issue and does this approach mean that offsets will take place close to impacted areas.

Response: Owing to the scale of the project, the impact will be sizeable and the offset liability will be high. When combined with other projects in the region, the cumulative demand for biodiversity credits increases – raising concerns that there may not be enough credits currently available on the market to meet this obligation. The Conservation Investment Strategy (CIS) aims to address this by identifying opportunities to conserve land, secure like-for-like credits, implement breeding programs, plant trees, and restore habitat – ideally as close to the impacted areas as possible. It's an ongoing conversation with DCCEEW at this point, and looking at the Central West Orana Conservation Investment Strategy will be beneficial.

- CRG member asked if offsets need to be in legislation.

Response: EnergyCo will be required to meet its offset liability in accordance with the relevant Acts and Regulations. The regulation was amended on May 9 to allow certain proponents (including EnergyCo) to meet its offset liability via a Strategic Offset Delivery Agreement.

- CRG member asked who the regulating body is and are there penalties for not achieving offset requirements.

Response: The regulatory amendment states the timeframe and responsibility. Under the regulation changes the Environmental Agency Head is responsible. EnergyCo must make payment in accordance with the provisions of a SODA or risk termination clause being used. For Biodiversity stewardship agreement, the landowner usually has money set aside (Total Funds Deposit) for management of site for 20 years and funds are released annually based on reporting. Failure to carry out management actions and reporting can result in management funds not being released for the subsequent year.

- CRG member asked if the CRG's role is to represent the community and feed information back, can an example of an offset and a credit be provided.

Response: An offset is compensation to the environment. If 100ha is cleared, the value assigned by the nature market is paid to DCCEEW to use the money to conserve habitat elsewhere.

- CRG member stated land is finite, and suitable land is limited, so how do people get involved and can they get paid.

Response: Yes, landowners may receive financial support for assessment. A credit is a figure assigned to a species and its perceived value. The best way for landowners to understand the prospective benefits of biodiversity stewardship is by attending the online stewardship support briefing sessions and visiting the DCCEEW website.

- CRG member asked for an example of land that has been used as an offset.

Response: In Central West Orana EnergyCo procured a site called Home Hills which had biodiversity value that compensated for the impacts of the CWO project; it contained the same biodiversity values that were impacted by the project. The site will be conserved and some data from this can be shared.

Action: Share Home Hills ecological data as an example

- CRG member asked if the SODA covers the NE REZ transmission line coverage outside the REZ.

Response: Yes, the offset liability from all elements of EnergyCo's NE REZ Transmission Infrastructure Project (i.e. transmission lines, access tracks, workers camps, laydown areas) will be calculated and covered by the SODA.

- CRG member asked if offset areas had to be within the area.

Response: DCCEEW will determine location based on conservation priorities identified in the CIS, but prioritisation investment in conservation action in the CIS is typically focussed on within the REZ.

- CRG member asked if there would be opportunity within the New England REZ to buy properties outright for their natural environment.

Response: Properties adjoining national parks had been identified and landowners were asked if they'd sell a portion, but this has been changed under the SODA. To manage expectations, the process to secure offsets under a SODA is likely to be different than what has occurred in the past. DCCEEW are likely to utilise established market mechanisms to secure credits.

- CRG member asked if this is the same as Biodiversity Conservation Trust, which they noted they believed isn't working.

Response: Delivery of SODAs is likely to be managed by DCCEEW's Planning, Offsets, Threatened Species and Ecosystems team (POTSE) and would be supported by mechanisms made available under the NSW Biodiversity Credit Supply Taskforce POTSE will develop the CIS based on the knowledge, spatial analysis, inputs from relevant Save our Species programs under DEECCW. The CIS will likely include a number of conservation initiatives beyond securing biodiversity credits, such as conserving habitat corridors, habitat restoration, breeding programs and tree planting. This is beyond the scope of BCT's responsibilities, which are primarily to establish and manage conservation agreement with landholders, administer the Biodiversity Stewardship Payments Fund, and secure offsets.

- CRG member commented there is DCCEEW engagement with landholders about what they are allowed to do and what has been previously cleared. Member asked if these rules also apply for state significant infrastructure. Nervous about outcome having watched Biodiversity Conservation Trust fail previously. This will change the landscape significantly and must be carefully managed.

Response: EnergyCo is required to consider all the same Act and Regulations as any other proponent or landholder who wishes to carry out an activity or development on their land. For example, EnergyCo must consider the Native Vegetation Regulatory Map, and the definitions of Category 1 and Category 2 land.

- Comment from CRG member stating credits must be used in the New England to rectify damage.

Item 7. Lunch

- Break from 2.02pm to 2.21pm.

Item 8. REZ-wide studies

- Electricity Infrastructure Investment Act is the legislative context for the REZ.
- The Act isn't just about energy, but also people and places.

- The project seeks to power NSW and empower the New England.
- Benefits and impacts are the two sides of the transition.
- Impacts are acknowledged and need to be offset.
- There is community benefit through intentional positive outcomes for impacted communities.
- Aim to create a net positive legacy and foster shared prosperity, and this is the beginning of the journey.
- Studies are developed through data collection of public information, Department of Planning, Housing & Infrastructure (DPHI) Planning Portal, direct engagement with projects, project team expertise, and market benchmarking to understand the empirical data and build the foundation of knowledge.
- Stakeholder engagement over the last nine months with input from council, agencies, regulators, Business Chamber, First Nations communities and a cross section of input.
- Studies were grouped under priority topic areas training and skills, local supply chain, workforce accommodation, water and wastewater, and circular economy, some remain to be finished.
- Studies are to understand the baseline conditions and seek to model the impact of infrastructure for REZ and some non-renewable projects.
- Studies look to provide government with a contemporary and detailed perspective of empirical datasets for informed decisions.
- Process and role of the studies is to gain a deeper and wider perspective, they are not a silver bullet, they are part of the wider puzzle to understand current conditions, likely impacts, and opportunities to mitigate impact and create benefit.
- Differences and similarities with Central West Orana REZ, studies undertaken there and coordination with underlying assumptions and methodologies to ensure consistent approach across REZs.
- New England is completing studies in advance of commencement of impact, and agencies have more time to consider what to do next. EnergyCo are delivering these studies earlier in the process compared with CWO and lessons can be learned from this experience.
- Role of regional forums like the CRG are avenues for community involvement, the value can't be understated.
- Connecting with Councils and LALCs, EnergyCo keen to connect with other stakeholders and organisations to gather contextual and empirical information.
- Finalising studies through reports and analysis, considering breadth of reports there is a significant level of internal review. Studies need to accurately reflect the data captured.
- Finalising the studies is seen as the 'End of the beginning', gathering a deep and broad perspective of current conditions, anticipated impacts, and future opportunities.

- Three phases to the evolution of the studies, baseline assessment, demand assessment, and gap analysis.
- Not a shopping list of exact actions to take, as many areas sit outside EnergyCo responsibility.
- Demand considers phasing, size, location and as each project comes online or varies through design process, the studies present prediction of peaks of workforce, water usage, and shows the gap between the baseline and expected demand and it is this that must be mitigated.
- Studies are one piece of the puzzle, and EnergyCo want to understand more from the community about what is important, the study is a foundation for next steps to be identified and decisions to be made. Having access to this type of information makes the decisions easier, not simple.
- EnergyCo asked if there is a particular area of priority for the discussion. The group opted to briefly work through each of the studies.
- Workforce accommodation study looked at how to accommodate workforce and provide legacy housing.
- Study area included boundary of REZ, transmission corridor, and every intersecting council LGA boundary to ensure a regional approach.
- CRG member asked where base numbers came from.

Response: ABS data, council supplied information about population and then data aggregated over entire area.

- Study provides sub-regional data.
- Baseline assessment show 1.5% vacancy rate and 1736 rooms available in short-term market (i.e., hotels, motels, etc.). Demand assessment shows peak of 7000 jobs. Temporary worker accommodation mix required.
- Timeframe and location for accommodation must be considered. Study considered the housing needs both during the construction and operation phases of the projects.
- CRG member asked if 7000 jobs is just for the construction of poles and wires.

Response: The estimate of 7,000 jobs represents the total projected peak workforce across the entire study area and includes a mix of renewable and non-renewable energy projects. This estimate accounts for both the construction and operational phases of projects, not just the delivery of transmission infrastructure (i.e., poles and wires). It is based on current assumptions and is subject to change as project scopes, timelines, and workforce needs evolve. The modelling accounts for projects being in different phases at different times, which may shift the overall workforce profile over the delivery period.

- Opportunities for economic revitalisation and housing development through mix of temporary and permanent, legacy benefits to maximise the opportunity through consultation with

Councils and ensure integration and coordination with Council planning and development and the realities of the market.

- Stakeholders to be consulted to determine what the best mix will be.
- Temporary accommodation may be a mix of remote and close to town and will be informed by the individual project needs and input from councils.
- CRG member asked for information about potential impacts and issues.

Response: This presentation is an overview and greater detail will be provided in the studies.

- Waste and circular economy looks at what are the demand in relation to the existing infrastructure.
- Waste generated from renewables by volume is less than non-renewable, but it is much more complex and that makes it harder to process, transfer, and manage. Waste profiles for different types of projects and opportunities to address this highlights the challenges associated with complex waste streams. Majority of the complex waste streams come from materials that are imported and the remoteness of the projects can make the economics of resource recovery very difficult. Existing waste facilities have various constraints and Councils have varying capacity based on licensing, space and other factors. Spatial rollout of the projects will need an evolving understanding of complex waste.
- Three main pillars of opportunity, being council and industry support, circular economy, and policy and coordination.
- An example of circular economy might be a digital marketplace for waste products, where a solar panel might meet the end of its functional life for commercial application but have use in a residential context – and connecting supply and demand might be an option.
- CRG member asked if waste includes that prior to operation waste such as packaging.

Response: Yes, it does.

- Water and wastewater looked at available raw water and treatment capacity to meet demand. Study acknowledges challenges around water including access, water rights, regulations, and number of competing demands for the physical volume available. Study analyses data and there is enough water in the study area to meet the demand, but access, quality, market and security creates challenges. Dry years will present significant challenge. Studies acknowledge the challenge of portability, and the details of the study look at raw water volumes versus accessibility versus trading markets.
- Meeting the potable water demand will require various solutions like on site treatment, tanking of water, and other approaches. Existing wastewater treatment capacity can accommodate the needs at a macro level, but there is a need to learn more from each individual area within the study.
- CRG member asked what is meant by wastewater.

Response: Wastewater is water that has been used and then discharged and often needs treatment (shower, toilet etc).

- An influx of projects may require augmentation or projects treating their own wastewater. On balance, there is capacity across the area but there needs to be localised consideration. Solution isn't limited to creation of additional facilities, but also reducing demand on facilities and improving efficiency.
- Local supply chain looks at how the supply chain can be scaled and supported to meet the demands of the REZ. Sectors and components examined, broadly categorised into scalable with identification of constraints and those easily scalable. Potential opportunities include business support, connections and compliance. Reduce barriers for businesses to enter market. Connecting businesses with proponents. Specify requirements and make procurement and approval process easier. Business forums, requirements for suppliers to have procurement information sessions and other approaches.
- Delivery partners will have local content requirements and minimum local employment requirements.
- Training and skills study looks at fluctuating demand, tight labour market, skills shortages, lack of diversity in sector, training capacity, insufficient investment in training by project developers, use of skilled migrants. Study looks at opportunity for redeployment, ongoing connection. Opportunity to increase workforce supply, pathways for students, and increased training capacity. Reduce barriers and build pathway to entry. Expand training capacity and availability.
- EnergyCo is seeking broader feedback on these priority topics and are sharing the studies publicly to seek community input and will undertake a social research approach to understand key community priorities and identify opportunities.
- Invitation for CRG to suggest groups EnergyCo may approach as part of this engagement program.
- Comment from CRG member that improper data has been used, as ABS population projection surveys are inaccurate. Additional information - Uralla has developed a Housing Strategy. Uralla is anticipating double the population, and the build of the most recent project caused many people to be unable to remain in the town because it was too expensive.
- Comment from CRG member there is a plan for a large waste facility near Uralla.
- Comment from CRG member that NSW Government put \$10 million to projects to recycle solar panels, and our communities are advocating to state government for local recycling options.
- Comment from CRG member that 2022 drought required drinking water being supplied to Uralla in bottles, and subsequent studies indicated there is 30% less water than was thought, and there will be a need in the future to truck water in.

- Comment from CRG member that with 3000 extra people there will be increased demand for medical services and Uralla is already facing severe shortages.
- Comment from CRG member that Armidale TAFE recently closed the electrical trades courses.
- Comment from CRG member that there are 280 students at the school (Uralla), and there needs to be projections for the future demand on the education system.
- Comment from CRG member that Uralla only has one supermarket, which would not be able to manage significant increases in population.
- Comment from CRG member that this study has been done by a person in Sydney and doesn't reflect the reality.
- EnergyCo advised studies will be released once finalised.
- EnergyCo has to consult and coordinate with other areas of government to ensure there is a clear understanding and a clear position. There is a whole of government steering committee to steer the interface of the broader impacts of the REZ and there will be a local steering committee to ensure representation.
- CRG member thanked EnergyCo for the overview and said they are looking forward to looking at the detailed studies. Comment that averages across the whole study area won't work, there are some constraints for water and other priorities.
- Comment from CRG member that studies have been outsourced to different consultants. Member asked if they are the same organisations that did the Central West Orana studies.

Response: The consultants were selected through a competitive tender process. In cases where it is the same consultant the benefit will be consistent methodology and assumptions.

- Comment that there is a need to prove that the studies aren't a rinse and repeat from the Central West Orana REZ.

Response: The development of the studies include regional consultation, datasets through RFI process, business surveys and other touchpoints informed the data, it was not just desktop analysis. The next step is seeking community input to gain ideas to mitigate.

- Comment from CRG member that Walcha has completed off creek storage supply for water to drought proof the LGA, and Winterbourne Windfarm project found some aquifers on private land which will be used.
- EnergyCo advised the studies do acknowledge the sensitivities around water, and this brief overview doesn't do the level of analysis justice, and the challenges are well understood.
- Comment from CRG member that it sounds like there is a grand plan for social change. What will avoid this being a pie in the sky plan?

Response: The Act under which this is developed has some specific objectives and EnergyCo has a role to deliver on these, alongside other stakeholders and agencies. It is a challenge of significant scale, and there is an obligation as the infrastructure planner to deliver a legacy

through jobs, employment and the like, and to gain social licence there needs to be assessment of the social impact, and this requires support from community.

- CRG member asked about the methodology of the reports and did these go out to tender.

Response: Yes, they went to tender and are individual studies.

- CRG member asked where the social impact assessment information sits regarding the REZ wide study.

Response: The social impact assessment is a requirement of the EIS for the project. A social impact analysis for the broader REZ will also be delivered this financial year.

- Comment that the Social Impact Assessment and REZ-Wide Studies is a duplication of data collection. Why isn't information shared across the two processes.

Response: The teams are integrated, and data gathering hasn't been duplicated, but shared, as the two serve different purposes. Acknowledgement of stakeholder engagement fatigue and the need for a clear, uniform and purposeful approach to foster impact.

- Comment from CRG member that Armidale Regional Council is arguing for a water security package due to Category 5 risk, and development can't go forward without water security. Where does this sit in the planning process?

Response: EnergyCo is not the expert in water security, so we will take this question on notice. However, we understand the categorisation is a tool by which the eligibility for funding is assessed and there isn't a direct statutory link between the risk categorisation and the ability of a project to gain a planning approval. It is acknowledged this is a priority for Armidale Council and EnergyCo continue to engage with council on this (and many other) matters via our regular interface meetings.

Action: EnergyCo to clarify if there is a statutory link between the risk categorisation and the ability of a project to gain a planning approval.

- Comment from CRG member that there is interest in seeing the studies and looking at how to approach and mitigate the risk and collaborate to deliver a tangible long-term legacy, if it happens to us without us, then it isn't for us.
- Comment from CRG member stating appreciation of the ambition behind the REZ-wide studies, and the aspect of water is serious and plans for pipelines and other measures to meet current population are ambitious and unlikely to meet future demand. Aquifers are unreliable and drought is frequent; we are all mindful that we need to drought-proof ourselves.
- Comment from CRG member that more housing is great, but knowing the mix of permanent versus demountable is important.
- Comment from CRG member that only certain subjects are available at TAFE.
- Comment from CRG member that there is a need to get ideas together for creating a circular economy.

- Comment from CRG member that training is important.
- Comment from CRG member that numbers for Uralla may be incorrect, as this has been a recent issue with NSW Public Works.
- Comment from CRG member that projected number of workers during build and operation are very different, and then there's people needed for compliance who also need to be housed, and these numbers need to be known so the demand can be met.
- CRG member asked if studies go into more local detail or only the whole area.

Response: The studies go from the macro perspective into each individual LGAs and the different profiles between different projects and communities.

- CRG member asked if studies cite where the data came from.
- Comment from CRG member that there is enormous sensitivity about groundwater use and we need to consider replenishment.
- Comment from CRG member that housing can bypass council approval due to being associated with state significant project.

Response: Sources are listed, but some information is commercial in confidence.

Response: There is a temporary accommodation model, but also need for dialogue with council to ensure there is a legacy outcome that aligns with local housing strategies and looking to build a model that balances the need for certainty.

- CRG member asked how current the data is derived.
- CRG member asked what Uralla will look like in 2040 and how do we prevent a boom-and-bust scenario where existing residents leave due to influx of short-term residents.

Response: The data is a static, point-in-time set, taken as at end-2024 to enable the studies to be completed. Because projects ebb and flow there is a need to select a point in time and then consider changes as they develop.

Response: Purpose of REZ-wide studies is to help inform approaches to avoid that scenario.

- CRG member asked about timeframe of EIS.
- CRG member asked when Social Impact Assessment will be completed.

Response: Draft expected by the end of this year.

Response: It is underway now and will be developed as part of the EIS.

- CRG member asked what happens if the social environment can't tolerate the cumulative impact.

Response: The studies, along with input from regional forums will seek to support the development of regional solutions to the regional issues. This is a challenge and EnergyCo are looking to develop a REZ wide social impact analysis to understand the challenges and define actions to address these issues. EnergyCo see value in regional level advocacy and

support in making challenges known to NSW Government to ensure appreciation of the areas that requiring attention, funding, resource support or other measures.

- Comment from CRG member that this a big elephant that is being eaten one bite at a time, and we appreciate the effort. Challenges with where this can land.
- Comment from CRG member that our region has a low unemployment rate and sits at 0.1% currently with a high participation rate, we don't have fat for the need for additional workforce.
- Comment from CRG member that cost of living and supply chain resourcing is already tight and impacting businesses.
- Comment from CRG member that cost of building housing faces challenges due to fees and charges and developers don't find building housing to be profitable.
- Comment from CRG member that state government isn't funding the regions and is tightening its belt, but in the New England the business and community simply can't carry the cost, and we must go back to the state government and demand that there be something in the budget for our region. There is a lot leaving our region to support the city, and we need to be supported by the state and adequately resourced. High level decisions having an impact at a community level.

Response: The state government's engagement with the Regional Steering Committee is designed to help address this. There is also joint advocacy underway through the Regional Coordination team within the Department of the Premier and Cabinet to ensure regional priorities are heard and considered in delivering the Electricity Infrastructure Roadmap.

- Comment from CRG member that we need to see the state government being pro-regional and supporting us.

Item 9. First Nations Engagement

- Presentation not provided due to time constraints.
- Update available in the powerpoint presentation to be provided to members.

Item 10. General business and questions

- EnergyCo gave a presentation to Walcha Rotary and a letter from Rotary was read to the CRG thanking EnergyCo.
- CRG member acknowledged an update on the Community Employment Benefit Program will be provided at the next meeting, however requested an update on how it was progressing and timeframes for delivery. Question taken on notice and to be added to question register.
- CRG member shared information about NSW Net Zero Commission and submission period. Member asked where EnergyCo sits in the advocacy process. Question taken on notice and to be added to question register.

- CRG member asked for breakdown of workforce into operations, maintenance, compliance. Question taken on notice and to be added to question register.
- CRG member asked for community meeting in Walcha and asked if Walcha South Central Hub will be deferred until there is significant generator interest.

Response: Hub will form part of the planning application to future proof generation in the area.

#	Action	Responsible	Due/status
1.	Provide link to Central West Orana Conservation Investment Strategy once published.	Darren Clarke	Completed. Shared via email on 25 July 2025.
2.	Provide link to credit list of species	Laura Hoffman	End of August 2025
3.	Share Home Hills ecological data	Laura Hoffman	End of August 2025
4.	EnergyCo to clarify if there is a statutory link between the risk categorisation and the ability of a project to gain a planning approval.	Michael Burden	End of August 2025

Actions carried over

5.	Creation of register of questions asked by members between meetings	Melissa Maurer	Mid-August 2025
6.	If information is available EnergyCo will provide rate of build for approved, commissioned, under construction and rate completed in NSW for 2024	Julian Watson	We are currently seeking more information from other organisations and will provide an update when available.
7.	Need to have deeper discussion about workforce accommodation	Chairperson	To be included in a future CRG meeting or dedicated online session
8.	EnergyCo to investigate developing a post-event summary to meet landholders' biosecurity needs.	Julian Watson	Considering the development of a post-event summary that would provide landholders with a record of site visits, including who attended, when, and any relevant biosecurity measures undertaken. Update to be provided once options have been explored.

#	Action	Responsible	Due/status
9.	Community Employment Benefit Program targeted session will be delivered later in the year.	Julian Watson	To be added to the agenda for September or November CRG meeting.

Next meeting

Proposed for Thursday 25 September 2025 in Uralla.

Plans to cover other topics requested

Online sessions (North and South combined)

- Topic 1: An overview of the network infrastructure to be delivered for the project
- Topic 2: Explainer of EIS and supporting studies
- Dates proposed are week commencing 18th August and 1st September
- Members agreed these weeks would be suitable for the online sessions

Meeting closed: 4pm