New England Renewable Energy Zone (REZ)

Community Reference Group (CRG) North – Meeting #8

Held on: 10/09/2026 – 11.30am to 2.45pm

Location: Uralla Council Chambers, 32 Salisbury Street, Uralla

Attended

Role	Attendee
Chairperson	Margaret Harvie
Community Representatives	Alex Hunter Annette Kilarr Bruce McMullen James Reilly Justin Hoad Michael Luchich – Voice for Walcha Paul Butterworth
LALC Representatives	
LGA delegates	Inverell Shire Council – Mayor Kate Dight Tamworth Regional Council – Cr Brendon North Uralla Shire Council – Cr Sarah Burrows Walcha Shire Council – Cr Rachel Greig
EnergyCo Representatives	Damien Wilson, New England REZ Associate Director, Communications & Stakeholder Engagement Laura Hoffman, New England REZ Biodiversity Lead Lauren Tapp, Network Recommendations Director* Leanne Thompson, New England REZ Senior First Nations Advisor Melissa Maurer, New England REZ Community Engagement Manager
Guests	Kelly Carbery, Manager Strategic Projects, NSW Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW) Michelle Kirkman, Program Manager Strategic Projects DCCEEW

Role	Attendee
Note taker	Kate McGrath

*Online attendance

Apologies

Paul Gaddes - Armidale Regional Council, Rebecca Taylor

Declarations of interest

Member	Details
Kate Dight	Non-pecuniary interest. Personal relationship with project developer.
Sarah Burrows	Pecuniary interest. Landholder of property in proposed transmission line corridor and proposed wind farm area.
Kate McGrath	Pecuniary interest. Investor in Sapphire Windfarm.
Margaret Harvie	Non-pecuniary interest. Margaret has advised generators on community engagement and delivers a community engagement training course which generators participate in.

Agenda item discussion and actions

Item 1. Welcome

- Chair acknowledged that we are meeting on Aboriginal land and paid respects to Elders past, present and emerging.
- Housekeeping and apologies.
- Update on membership – welcoming back members who had withdrawn from the last meeting.
- Pecuniary interests – no new declarations.
- Noting of actions as distributed.
- Request for previous notes to be amended and “Energy Hub” to be amended to “energy information centre” to avoid confusion over its purpose.
- Comment from CRG regarding Action 9 on workforce accommodation. Uralla community are not happy with the Uralla Shire Council Draft Growth Strategy that was placed on public

exhibition for community feedback. There has been little consultation. There is a swell of backlash that may lead some people to deny use of their land.

- CRG comment that the plan is necessary for the required Local Environmental Plan, but unfortunately some people were not consulted about their land being identified as suitable for development, causing concern. The need for thousands of accommodation spaces in this area is causing stress.

Action: CRG request briefing on workforce accommodation across the REZ to be conducted before end of year and in alignment with the release of the EIS.

- CRG comment that several thousand houses and accommodation sites are needed, and how fast can they be built? No one can build fast enough, and Uniplan has not been talked to about the provision of accommodation. The money spent on contracting outside contractors to build and leave doesn't bring money or opportunity into Uralla. Outside contractors leaving doesn't create apprentice jobs and we are screaming for youth employment and real outcomes.
- Chair comment that the EIS is coming up and there's a lot of topics including housing that may need to be the topic of specific online sessions.
- CRG comment that it's impacting Tamworth too, that non-REZ projects are being forced to have onsite accommodation.
- EnergyCo noted that the issue has also been raised by the community in the Community & Employment Benefit (CEBP) community information sessions.
- CRG comment that EnergyCo need to tell CRG what the plans for housing during construction are so they can tell community.
- EnergyCo response that the EIS will include more information on workforce accommodation later this year, and EnergyCo will come back with information when it is confirmed.
- CRG comment that Walcha community-led forum had a community member from CWO sharing their experiences and EnergyCo need to avoid the same mistakes and disasters of CWO.
- Comment that EIS deals with cumulative impact and the broader workforce and accommodation seems to be the pressing need.
- Comment that Uralla has been advocating for staged identification of projects and not be faced with the situation of all projects trying to hook into the network ASAP and fill all the accommodation at once and then leave all at once. Identify the fact that it is going to be staged and who is in control of that staging, do councils have a say or is it just this is what's happening and bad luck.
- EnergyCo response that the EIS will focus on the network infrastructure project and related cumulative impact, and EnergyCo as planner will continue to progress work considering the broader REZ housing impacts.
- CRG comment can both be addressed at the same time?

- EnergyCo response that we will be able to talk about the REZ and network infrastructure housing needs but noted planning and co-ordination are at different stages for each.
- Chair said that there had been formatting and combining of the questions from members in the register. If people feel their question is missing, please let the Chair know.

#	Action	Responsible	Status
1	Share link to property webinar held for landholders on 10 Jun	M Maurer	**Completed.** Link was shared as part of distributed meeting notes.
2	Provide CRG members with a link to the Renewable Energy Sector Board Plan	M Maurer	**Completed.** Link was shared as part of distributed meeting notes.
3	EnergyCo to provide link and information for Draft Access Scheme Declaration to CRG when available		**Completed.** Link was shared via an update email issued on 6 July to all members.
4	Include Community Employment Benefits Program (CEBP) update as a standing item for future meeting agendas.	Chair	**Completed.** A standing item has been added to meeting agenda.
5	Request that EnergyCo reimburse CRG member travel expenses.	J Watson	The New England REZ CRGs have been framed to operate in accordance with the Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure (DPHI) Community Consultative Committee Guidelines for State Significant Development. Under these Guidelines, representatives are not eligible to receive 'sitting fees'. However, Section 4.10 does allow for proponents to consider reimbursement of reasonable out-of-pocket expenses. Accordingly, EnergyCo is now looking at applying this provision to members' travel expenses. If endorsed, payments would be aligned with the prevailing Australian Tax Office rate and would need to be declared as an individual member interest.
6	Include the CEBP and structure of other benefit payments in the next agenda for explanation		**Completed.** A workshop on the CEBP was held for members on 4 Aug.

#	Action	Responsible	Status
7	Offer online session focused on housing.	M Maurer	**To be scheduled.**
8	Deeper discussion about workforce accommodation	Chair	**To be included in future CRG meeting or online session.**

Item 2. Project Updates

- Presented by Damien Wilson, New England REZ Associate Director, Community & Stakeholder Engagement.
- Recent community engagement activities have included CEBP surveys and information sessions to inform design of the final guidelines for the program and plan for the start of the application process.
- CEBP survey is open until 18 September - please encourage groups and individuals to participate and advise preferences for how CEBP can be allocated.
- REZ Declaration Amendment consultation is underway and closes 14 September.
- Draft Access Scheme consultation closed in early August. Webinars and background information remain available on the website.
- Aerial survey took place last week along the alignment from south to north and is complete. Initially proposed for July and was rescheduled to September and the flight details were designed to minimise potential impact in response to landholder feedback. Now completed and EnergyCo had received no complaints about activity.
- CRG comment that there was an official complaint.

  EnergyCo response clarified that there were no complaints received by EnergyCo about impacts following the flyover, however complaints were received in advance of the work.
- CRG comment that someone complained about a drone flight being interrupted and they lodged a complaint.

  EnergyCo encouraged detail of the issue to be shared for investigation and advised that if CRG members were aware of landholders who experienced any issues, they should be encouraged to contact EnergyCo to resolve.
- Project team have been working on Infrastructure NSW Health Check around project progress and objectives.
- CRG asked if there is list or details about what this Health Check involved.

  EnergyCo response that they would need to check with Infrastructure NSW about what information on their processes is publicly available and advised Health Checks are a standard process undertaken as part of Infrastructure NSW project assurance.

- Acknowledged that workforce accommodation has created some anxiety and interest in the local community. EnergyCo has recently commenced early engagement with directly affected neighbours of five proposed accommodation sites to ensure awareness and inform planning prior to EIS exhibition later this year. EnergyCo has reached out to these landholders to offer conversations at this stage of planning. Details of the proposals are still being worked on and will form part of the EIS. The proposal and early engagement with neighbours of the sites have raised questions among the wider community and we are continuing to do the work to answer the questions. 5 sites across the corridor for 320 – 550 beds at each site.
- CRG asked will these consultations happen in group situations instead of one-on-one because people are concerned and want support in a group setting.

  EnergyCo response that the early engagement is an offer of conversations with these landholders to discuss the proposal and consider their concerns and questions in planning. The EIS will also provide an opportunity for landholders and the wider community to understand and provide feedback on the proposal, including different forums to engage with the project team prior to making a submission.
- CRG comment that directly affected people may want to discuss it as a group.

  EnergyCo response that impacted people can propose this to their dedicated project contact.
- CRG comment that we know groups have worked well for some stakeholders, not everyone can pull people together and in fact know who is affected, so EnergyCo should be facilitating this, not the affected people.
- CRG response that they don't know that they can ask, it looks like EnergyCo are picking people off, we had someone pull us all together, but the areas who don't have that are feeling more stressed and if EnergyCo facilitated that process you will look a lot better for it.

  EnergyCo noted the request and responded that community information sessions and landholder presentations are planned as part of the EIS engagement later this year.
- CRG response that it would be clever to do it with the directly affected stakeholders and help them - you'll get better engagement if you act fairly.
- CRG response that people aren't engaging one-on-one with EnergyCo and aren't reading emails or anything. If you engage with Walcha High Country Guardians, they can set up the meeting and get a group together of impacted landholders. If that's how people want to communicate with you that should be respected and if these conversations are available, then people will engage. EnergyCo have not responded to the Walcha High Country Guardians correspondence on this matter and requested EnergyCo respond.

  EnergyCo response – will investigate status of correspondence and ensure that the Walcha High Country Guardians request is responded to.
- CRG response it's about the landholders, like those around Kyabra for the accommodation camp - I couldn't name the farms, but you must know who is affected. If you approached

them all and said, “Hey can we get together?”, and if you say the same thing to everyone then they feel more comfortable.

CRG response that some people may want one-on-ones.

- CRG member response to offer both one-on-one and group meetings.
- EnergyCo spoke to the Northern connection deferral announcement, section near Boorolong for connection to existing network identified in national planning as not required to meet transmission capacity requirements. Affected landholders and councils have been advised and more detail is available on the project website.
- CRG member asked if the modelling that informed the decision is available.

Action: EnergyCo to investigate whether modelling around the decision for the northern connection deferral is available.

- CRG member asked what the projection is going forward, what does this mean for future development.

  EnergyCo response that the northern connection is not in the scope of the current network infrastructure project but may be required in the future. This would be determined as part of ongoing national planning.
- CRG comment it has impacted the northern communities and asked if landholders will receive any compensation for the loss of value in having prospective development.

Action: EnergyCo to advise if landholders in potential development areas for northern connection will be compensated.

- Ongoing direct engagement with landholders within the refined corridor.
- EnergyCo is preparing for EIS exhibition later this year. Project team are working to get the Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure (DPHI) the EIS documents ready to progress to exhibition stage.
- Ongoing roll out of mobile offices along the alignment to give opportunity to speak directly with the project team, in addition to attendance at community events.
- Encouraged CRG members to suggest community events EnergyCo can consider attending to raise awareness of the project and an opportunity to speak with the team.
- The EIS is currently undergoing an adequacy review by the DPHI where documentation is assessed against the Environmental Assessment requirements before progressing to public exhibition.
- Once the EIS goes on public exhibition, EnergyCo will deliver a broad engagement program across the alignment. This is expected to include landholder presentations focused on local areas, community roadshows (information sessions), and webinars. The exhibition will be supported with advertising across the region.

- Engagement will be focused on helping the community understand the EIS process, navigate the EIS documentation and make informed submissions to DPHI.
- EnergyCo is also planning additional supporting resources, including an online engagement portal with detailed mapping and accessible fact sheets to help the community navigate the extensive EIS documentation.
- CRG member asked what the timeline is for the exhibition of the EIS.

  EnergyCo response that we are targeting public exhibition next month (October), but it's a process that is ongoing and the exhibition period itself is managed by DPHI. We are aiming to avoid the exhibition extending over Christmas.
- CRG asked is exhibition period 28 days.

  EnergyCo response – yes, that's the statutory period managed by DPHI.
- CRG request for it to be extended.

  EnergyCo noted they cannot extend the exhibition period, this would need to be requested of DPHI.
- CRG member asked EnergyCo to request of DPHI 60 days minimum exhibition period, for the size of these documents this would be fair.
- CRG comment that given it's end of year, we would like longer to review and comment on the EIS.

Action: EnergyCo requested to convey to DPHI the CRG view that there needs to be an extension of the exhibition period to 60 days.

Action: EnergyCo to consider the CRG's request for EnergyCo to support the CRG request to DPHI for a 60-day exhibition period.

Acquisition process is underway and has involved contacting approximately 100 landholders across the alignment to offer a meeting in advance of the formal commencement of the acquisition process. The meeting has been offered to explain how the acquisition will proceed and allow them to ask questions and discuss before the process progresses to the next stage.

- CRG question about timeframe for the issue of the acquisition Opening Letter.

  EnergyCo response that they will start issuing Opening Letters in the next few weeks. Bayswater to central and east hub is the focus and then the north will be a later stage in the acquisition process.
- CRG comment that as a landholder they were told that east hub upward would be early next year.

  EnergyCo confirmed that Opening Letters for landholders north of Central Hub were planned for 2027.

- Uralla Thunderbolt Festival and Armidale Black Gully Festival are coming up and EnergyCo will be attending these events.

Item 3. REZ Declaration Amendment and associated consultation

Presented by Lauren Tapp, Network Recommendations Director. The proposed changes were set out in the presentation slide.

- Consultation is currently open on a proposed amendment to the New England REZ declaration.
- The declaration is a legal instrument that established the REZ, and its purpose is to establish the geographical boundary, intended network capacity, intended infrastructure, and it appoints EnergyCo as the infrastructure planner. The infrastructure component is proposed for amendment.
- Declared in 2021, since then the planning has progressed and there is a better view on intended network infrastructure and the proposed amendment seeks to describe the hub and key infrastructure including connecting infrastructure.
- The declaration is required to enable the declaration of the access scheme and enable EnergyCo to develop an infrastructure planner recommendation report for consumer trustee authorisation.
- EnergyCo have received feedback and some of the issues raised are grouped by theme to provide some clarity.
- Common questions have been around interaction of the declaration and the project's planning approval. The declaration doesn't pre-empt the EIS and approval processes, it is a high-level scope of infrastructure being proposed.
- Scope of the network infrastructure project within the REZ. The declaration describes the infrastructure at a high level to enable it to progress legal milestones, and it aims to strike a balance between being transparent and clear but also providing flexibility for a detailed design process to continue.
- The proposed REZ Declaration amendment includes infrastructure outside of the REZ boundary: the transmission line down to Bayswater and associated infrastructure, as this is part of the NE REZ network infrastructure scope required for approval and authorisation from the consumer trustee.
- Community benefits for impacted communities outside the REZ, feedback is being considered and EnergyCo will continue to work with these communities.
- The proposed amendment to the declaration is open for submissions to 14 September. Feedback is welcome on whether the proposed amendment is clear, issues that should be considered, how it is understood, and any additional information.
- CRG comment that the Act says the declaration can be amended only to add infrastructure, so once added it can't be changed or removed.

EnergyCo response that as it progresses there may need to be further changes but if there's infrastructure that's not required then we would not build it, this is a high-level description and allows for it to be refined over time.

- CRG comment that in relation to the hubs and lines, we've been told that the time for submissions is after the EIS is exhibited. That's when things can change based on studies and community feedback, so this is pre-empting that, you can't remove or change these, how is it not pre-empting the EIS.

  EnergyCo response that the EIS looks at location and impact on the ground, these plans are at a high level. We had to strike a balance describing what the planned infrastructure is without being so specific that the other processes can't continue.

- CRG comment that CWO timing was different, amendment to declaration wasn't made until after EIS. You're saying to communities you won't be changing the design and that's premature given that studies haven't been completed yet.

  EnergyCo response that it's on public consultation now to get feedback about the current level of detail, so there is an opportunity for the communities to provide feedback. The access scheme can't be declared until amendment is made and can't progress to the regulator, so there is sequencing to consider in terms of the timing of the process, and this is being managed in the broader program.

- CRG comment that there is talk about planned new and existing infrastructure, it's not just what's defined, but also anything new. It's open ended and you won't need to amend it again because points F and G allow you to put anything in it and it says to the extent not specified, which basically means you can add anything you want.

  EnergyCo advised that the declaration is intended to provide sufficient flexibility for further detail to be developed as the project progresses through detailed design, without requiring an amendment each time that detail is refined. However, this flexibility is not intended to allow significant new infrastructure or substantial changes to what is described in the declaration. If a significant change was proposed, EnergyCo would need to formally amend the declaration, including undertaking the required consultation and re-exhibition process.

- CRG comment that while that may not be the intent, this is a legal document giving you that power.

  EnergyCo response that all questions and comments are welcome and should be submitted to the email address and link provided for consideration.

- CRG question to group if they feel this is premature and should be delayed until after the EIS is submitted, the CRG may like to see the amendment deferred until the appropriate time.

- CRG response that we are talking at a high level and the EIS is the ground level, we can go along as it is.

- Chair commented people can put their submissions in to make their views known rather than needing a CRG position. Chair moved the discussion on to work through questions from other members.
- CRG question regarding page 15 and the proposed infrastructure: Is the Sapphire Substation near Squadron Wind Farm still proposed to proceed?
- CRG comment to clarify that the Sapphire Wind Farm is located between Glen Innes and Inverell and has been in operation for some time.
- CRG question: We had a snowstorm with no power and communications for four days; we are having a major planned outage soon. We are on the end of the line, in your capacity as planner, you may consider how the Uralla network could be considered as part of a grid so when part of it fails something else can kick in. Network connections and upgrades may cause our power to fall over without back up access apart from a 4-hour Telstra battery. Can you tell us whether any planning involves upgrading the grid, so Uralla aren't on the end of the line.

  EnergyCo response to take that on notice, not familiar with the specifics of Uralla power and potential impacts but will seek advice from our engineering team and provide a response.

Action: Share CRG feedback to EnergyCo about Uralla power, the vulnerability in being the end of the line, and ask engineering team about any potential future solutions to this situation as part of the NE REZ.

- CRG comment that there's energetic objectors opposing government. This forum is too low level for people to have a voice. Would like to see a facilitated meeting with someone in a position to make decisions on the future of the project itself. The objectors tried to take it to parliament and didn't get a showing. Suggestion of an international facilitator like Allen Parker to give people a voice. Maybe it has to go to the top of EnergyCo or the Minister so they can work through how to move forward, the middle ground is disappearing, and it is becoming divisive and destroying our communities.

  EnergyCo response – EnergyCo has been tasked with delivering a project by the NSW Government and our engagement is focused on understanding, minimising and mitigating the impacts of that project. Forums to discuss the project will be delivered including during the EIS, but if the proposition is a meeting to stop the project that is outside the remit of the project and EnergyCo.

Action: EnergyCo convey a CRG request to the appropriate decision maker for a facilitated meeting with objectors.

- CRG response that it is getting more divided and there is the feeling that objectors aren't being heard.
- CRG comment that objectors need to get to meet with someone, if it's not in the EnergyCo remit it should be the Minister.
- CRG member comment that they are not objecting, but those who are don't feel heard.

EnergyCo response that the planning process is still underway, providing an opportunity to formally object to the project and provide feedback on its impact and mitigations.

- CRG member indicated that they are cynical. We can do submissions for the declaration. I'd love to see a facilitated meeting for the whole project, maybe not specific to the declaration. There is some consultation fatigue, and it will just bowl through and there's nothing we can do.
- CRG response that we haven't had an opportunity here, the submission process is the best way to go forward, EnergyCo aren't going to do more than that.
- CRG response that EnergyCo need to note the frustration, and the change is adding to an already fraught scenario. We need to acknowledge that people are struggling and a deeper conversation has been offered, but EnergyCo are legally able to do what they are doing, but in the process, people are not being heard.

  EnergyCo advised that where feedback relates to opposition to the project, those views are recorded. Our engagement is focused on identifying opportunities to avoid, minimise or reduce its impacts while achieving the project objectives EnergyCo has been tasked to deliver.
- CRG comment that it's the level of the Minister and the Premier and that the message isn't being taken up to the government who can make decisions.
- CRG comment, what is the point, it's gone to Parliament and its clear they aren't going to get involved, it will be a one-sided mediation for energetic objectors to the project.
- CRG comment that we need some accountability, ask the questions and then it's on the record.
- EnergyCo advised that it has been directed to deliver the project in accordance with its legislated objectives and established government processes for delivering major infrastructure. The CRG and community are invited to provide feedback on how the project is delivered, including opportunities to make changes and reduce impacts.
- CRG members raised concerns about EnergyCo's governance and accountability, including questions about who sits on the EnergyCo Board, how Board members are appointed and the level of regional representation. Member expressed concern that he believes key decision-makers are Sydney-based and questioned how feedback provided through the CRG is communicated to and considered by those making decisions. It was suggested there be regional representation on the Board and greater direct engagement between the EnergyCo Board and communities within the REZ. Including opportunities for Board representatives to hear directly from communities and provide greater visibility around how decisions are made.
- CRG comment that we should have a representative on the Board from impacted communities.

- CRG comment that we know they are appointed and who they are, what we want is for communities to have some sort of say, the fact that they are all Sydney based is the problem and the structure means communities don't have a say, but they need a bit of a say.

  EnergyCo response that they would confirm the process, but typically Boards are appointed by the Minister, and the process is typically specified within the act.

Action: Clarify how EnergyCo Board members are appointed, including their tenure, expected time commitment and how they are informed to support their decision-making and recommendations. Communicate the CRG's request for regional representation on the EnergyCo Board.

Item 4. Break

- 1.04pm – 1.15pm

Item 5. Strategic Offset Delivery Agreement (SODAs) and Conservation Investment Strategy

- Presented by Kelly Carbery, Manager Strategic Projects, NSW Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW).
- DCCEEW working with EnergyCo to develop a framework for offset delivery and have come up with an approach to offsetting to avoid delays and ensure that the region where the transition is occuring will benefit.
- We recognise the development that is happening in a similar timeframe and the corresponding biodiversity offset requirement, so there's opportunity to develop long term outcomes for the region to deliver something more than like for like and deliver some long-term outcomes.
- Conservation investment strategies guide offset delivery and guide coordination for offset delivery.
- SODAs are where the department takes on the offset requirement from the proponent, and investment from the NE network infrastructure project will be foundational for biodiversity outcomes in this region.
- Conservation investment strategies guide prioritisation of offsets under the SODAs and we are taking account of the landscape, what is required for conservation outcomes, who is investing and where so we can integrate government decision making to amplify outcomes through coordinated common goals.
- Use the opportunity for partnerships and work with local people to deliver outcomes, there are active partnerships and projects in the region and other government conservation programs such as national parks acquisition, saving our species program, private land conservation, koala strategy and LLS activities, and these all need to act together toward the same common goals.

- The first step is defining organising principles, including integration. We also want to achieve conservation goals which are aligned with the goals of other projects such as protecting important habitats in the region and protecting and enhancing ecological connectivity to assist climate change resilience. Restoration is required to achieve these biodiversity outcomes and protect samples of the full range biodiversity. Make sure we have a comprehensive adequate and representative conservation protected area system and providing opportunities for people to participate in and benefit from conservation.
- When developing the strategy, we look at the region and do an audit of existing values and look at where existing reserves and areas are and opportunities to connect protected areas and habitats, endemic species, waterways and wetlands, unique features that need protection and recognition, large remnants of vegetation, threats and pressures and how those are interacting with conservation goals.
- Use conservation modelling to understand the biodiversity in the region.
- More than 80 individual threatened species models were combined to identify areas of valuable habitat and help understand where habitat connectivity can be achieved through protected areas and existing vegetation.
- The analysis considers the value of existing protected areas and reserves, as well as ecological condition and connectivity between high-quality remnant vegetation and opportunities for restoration.
- Put together through multi criteria spatial analysis and the areas with the most values are represented on the map. This informs what defines the priorities for the region, and talk with program partners, agencies, local councils and their strategies and goals, and the community such as the biodiversity reference group and workshops. This is to draw on local knowledge and expertise about important and threatened values and how to achieve the outcomes.
- Draft strategy is going through review, and hot spot mapping is turned into a map for investment and actions. The published document will indicate specific priority actions and there are some corridors identified and opportunities for connectivity and areas for restoration and protection of what already exist.
- Long term investment in land holders with quality vegetation and coordinating this to be strategic and promote these values and continue to build.
- All the contributions make a difference.
- Gaps identified to connect existing reserves.
- Implementation of strategy will guide SODAs, and they can also do their own offsetting but are encouraged to still align with strategy.
- Government colleagues working to improve integration of decision-making processes. Similarly, program by biodiversity conservation trust for private land conservation and offset, we will target programs toward these priorities.

- SODAs delivered are legally binding agreements between proponent and agency and funding in the agreement and obligation is transferred with three years to deliver. There are two ways to achieve, buy like for like credits and if needed there are targeted conservation actions for meaningful on the ground outcomes for that species.
- Features of framework - there is no discount to the offset obligation, what is in the planning approval must be an equal or better outcome and must be like for like offsets and they are delivered within the zone and as close to the impact as possible.
- CRG request for specific conversation about a plot of land - details to be provided.

Action: Contact details for Kelly to be provided to CRG to facilitate connection with local offset opportunity.

- Options to acquire land and create credits or enter stewardship agreements with private landholder. Expression of interest open now and interested land holders with matching value that meet offset can access free biodiversity assessments, and we will support them through the application process.
- Reverse auctions for offsets and landholder set price of credit and buyers can buy the offset credits.
- These are the main mechanisms for meeting offset obligation.
- Fixed amount of time to find what is needed, if credits aren't available then we look toward conservation actions guided by experts in community.
- CRG member asked under what circumstances can the credits be outside the area?

  DCCEEW response only if other opportunities are exhausted and the species would benefit more from a location outside, sometimes it might be that some are available outside, but we still do a project within area.
- Information about the agreements and associated obligations is publicly available on the website. Quarterly reporting will provide updates on offset delivery and expenditure, helping to provide an ongoing snapshot of investment and biodiversity outcomes.
- CRG request for the PPT presentation.

Action: Share presentation deck Strategic Offset Delivery Agreement (SODAs) and Conservation Investment Strategy with CRG following the meeting.

- CRG asked if the Great Koala National Park is included in offsets.

  DCCEEW response no.
- CRG comment regarding bushfire management coordination. There is risk that the more you stack together it all gets burned out together, look at the 2019 fires, do it on farm with grazing so the under fire is contained and we don't get crown fires and destroy everything.
- CRG comment that land near transmission lines isn't included.

  DCCEEW response that preference is within the REZ but not near the lines.

- CRG comment that the New England Biodiversity Reference Group is very grateful for the consultation, 54 people, ecologists and botanists provided feedback for corridors and creek and there was lots of knowledge from on the ground. Useful to know the strategy is a living document and can change and grow and this is very valuable too.

  DCCEEW response that the reference group was extremely valuable and has enhanced the project and they remain open for feedback at any time, data is rapidly evolving so we want to be up to date for the best outcomes.

- CRG member commented on opportunities to connect the CEBP with broader landscape restoration and fire mitigation initiatives, including building local capacity to deliver ecological restoration outcomes. The member encouraged broader thinking about connections across government programs and opportunities to achieve complementary outcomes across the landscape.

  DCCEEW response - yes there's avenues to explore together.

- CRG comment that fire management and feral animals such as pigs and deer are a real issue and particularly on areas taken up for carbon offset and it hasn't been managed properly.

  DCCEEW response that private reserves come with management plans, including pest management and there's funding for that, and before funding can be released, they must comply with that plan and outcomes.

- CRG question - have you worked with Walcha Landcare and have they given feedback?

  DCCEEW response Landcare representatives were in the biodiversity reference group from across the region.

Item 6. CRG Member Updates

- CRG question - will Julian still be coming to these meetings?

  EnergyCo response - only as a specialist if required, Damien will attend regularly moving forward.

- CRG comment that people still don't understand the project is coming, I don't know how to get to them, they think it won't affect them.

- CRG comment – people are more positive in Uralla, but there are still people adversely affected.

- CRG member raised the importance of identifying and implementing mitigation measures before construction traffic and vehicle movements commence. The member referred to discussions with the Salisbury Plains group regarding Central Hub B and potential measures to mitigate truck impacts, including early planting and landscaping, road and traffic assessments, and consideration of school bus stops and student safety. The member emphasised that these measures should be planned and implemented proactively, rather than in response to impacts once construction is underway.

- Chair asked if the EIS would have that level of detail.

EnergyCo response that the EIS considers potential impacts from the network infrastructure project, proposes mitigations and the approval may contain conditions that can be imposed on the network operator constructing and operating the infrastructure.

- CRG response it must happen before the build, or there's no point if the trucks and noise are already happening.
- CRG suggestion to put mitigations in your EIS so people don't have to fight for it, this is adversely affecting people, some cheap planting and windows make you the good guys. People shouldn't have to fight you for little things.
- CRG comment that Uralla NSW Farmers branch has been trying to explain the REZ and plan and work with council to have generators reduce rates, recommend benefits go to areas most affected, not population centres, and we need water security in the projects.
- CRG comment that the full spectrum of people is affected.
- CRG comment that farmers are being forced to host transmission corridors and anywhere you go there's opposition to forced acquisition. Locals will be overrun during construction, environmental hypocrisy around koalas and habitats and climate. Beetaloo Gas Project and coal mines are announced while there's a REZ to reduce emissions.
- CRG comment that representatives at the Farmers Conference opposed the line through Chaffey Dam - they protested and won. This year the protest was in Walcha and everyone as a group doesn't want it, no one wants forced energy. Look at Franklin Dam Hydro Project and people are opposed to Dungowan Energy and Narrabri Gas project, if you ask anyone to host nuclear, no one wants nuclear. It was taken to the election and defeated. No one wants to host electricity seems to be the problem.
- CRG comment - France just had the hottest summer on record, fires in Wales, Nepal two times global average, doomsday glacier, lots of environmental threats and biodiversity in a tinderbox. We lost more trees than the last 50 years and planting seems like a waste of time if it's just going to get burned.
- CRG comment that local benefits will keep the lights on, keep money and employment and facilities to a dying regional town, wool and timber industry almost gone, having trouble paying the rates.
- CRG comment that both sides are correct, and that's the trouble, and both sides are escalating their argument. Walcha is named to host a worker's camp, they don't want to, and this is inflammatory. Graziers taking the project to the Supreme Court to try and stop it happening.
- CRG comment people need to feel they are being heard, today is RUOK today and our communities are not ok.
- CRG comment regarding significant concerns about accommodation. Tamworth already has shortages that are halting growth, businesses can't get people and its added pressure. We're

disappointed there wasn't better planning for villages that feed into legacy benefits and everything we're seeing has very little legacy benefit.

- CRG comment about water concerns, the volume of water used to build the project and REZ, the concrete and servicing the camps. Tamworth will only host a few and we have projects outside the REZ causing problems with water.
- CRG comment about road damage and inconvenience of turbines, it's feeding up through to Walcha, Uralla and Glen Innes and must come through Tamworth. On those routes there are changes to roads and bridges and upgrades to bridges, there's a variety of adjustments.
- CRG member requested a 60-day EIS exhibition period, noting the volume and complexity of information the community will need to consider. The member acknowledged the importance of the energy transition in responding to climate change, while emphasising the need to continue advocating for strong biodiversity outcomes. The member also noted that many in the broader community may not yet be aware of the upcoming EIS exhibition and highlighted the importance of supporting the community to understand and participate in the process.
- CRG member referred to the Energy in the Pub events as an example of a different approach to community engagement, aimed at making complex energy, policy and political information more accessible in an informal environment. The member noted that sessions held in February and May had created opportunities for the community to come together, discuss complex issues and hear different perspectives, even where there may not be clear answers. The member suggested building on this type of engagement to encourage better communication and a less oppositional approach.
- CRG comment that housing and workcamps can be subject matter for community conversations, it takes more work than just telling us. We need to see this happening.
- CRG comment focused on housing and hearing that Uralla has a limited area for new development. They are looking to push it into areas that are privately held, but I gather some of that hasn't been well received. It was announced instead of a conversation with people who may be affected, some people's places might be desirable for housing and maybe they want to go in and acquire without the owner's permission.
- CRG response - no that would be illegal.
- Chair response that planning controls are just saying you have the right to do these things, they aren't saying we're going to come in and do this.
- CRG response people think they don't have the option and will have to give up their land.
- Uralla Council representative advised that the draft Growth Management Strategy was intended to generate community feedback and acknowledged that some assumptions had been made about prior consultation. Areas identified as potential locations will be removed in the next iteration. Following feedback received during Stage 1, the revised strategy will undergo further community consultation as part of Stage 2 before being considered for adoption by Council.

- CRG comment that the water issue is massive. We only have to look at Armidale's dam, there's plenty in the media about the need for more water and increasing dam walls and a possible pipeline and bringing water in for Armidale and Uralla and just to keep us afloat. Water will be the thing that stops some projects from going ahead because with climate and forecasting of what might come through in a significant dry period some very serious decisions need to be made. Councils are already talking about level 3 water restrictions.
- CRG comment that Inverell is invested in providing accommodation growth and there are several developments getting to the pointy end. That's met with opposition and we're in a different scope because we already have a windfarm and a benefit scheme and it's been in place for ten years now, very interested in the Access Scheme and the benefits coming through and will be talking to EnergyCo. $185,000 from Sapphire into the community has been an instrumental investment.
- CRG comment about roads. Uralla gets to have the largest transporter coming through in October.
- CRG member raised concerns about a perceived lack of coordination between agencies across the REZ, noting that while there has been discussion about agencies working together, the community is yet to see this translate into coordinated action. The member reiterated Walcha's request for Thunderbolts Way to be reclassified as a State road.
- CRG comment that Thunderbolts Way is a huge problem.
- CRG comment that community is really frustrated by how they have been treated and angry about the workers camp, the wrong address on a letter that went to a landholder is carelessness and damaging, and frustrating to the community.
- CRG comment about housing and coordination for the generators, we are starting to see a price war between existing business and EnergyCo. Water needs to be resolved and it's high on the agenda, roads is a massive issue and road safety particularly, they aren't designed for large vehicles travelling frequently. We don't have many overtaking lanes and it's a concern for individuals travelling between towns.
- CRG member attended a community forum held by CWA looking at Walcha health and medical issues and what was said was that we've lost a full-time nurse because they had rental accommodation that was sold, so they had to leave due to lack of accommodation. They've gone to Brisbane. Vacancies for 5 FT nurses at Walcha Multi-Purpose Service and doctor has been trying for 18 months to get another full-time doctor. There is no accommodation even if they were to find someone. Mayor Noakes said if it was on council to provide housing they just couldn't do it. Question asked why EnergyCo can't build houses to support the community, these health and medical needs are only going to increase.

  EnergyCo response to encourage people to feed that back in the CEBP survey and encourage the broader community to also provide their feedback.
- CRG member expressed concern that once a determination is made through the planning process, the opportunity to pursue a Section 29 request to prevent a developer from

connecting to infrastructure may be limited. The member reiterated a request for EnergyCo to consider a recent request from Voice for Walcha regarding Winterbourne Wind Farm and expressed frustration with the progress to date.

- The Chair clarified that the matter had been raised for the group's awareness and that it was being progressed separately outside the CRG.
- CRG member requested that the concerns and request be escalated within EnergyCo, notwithstanding EnergyCo's existing position.

  EnergyCo acknowledged the request, noted that the proposed project is subject to a planning process that considers community feedback, and advised that its position on the matter remains as outlined to Voice for Walcha in recent correspondence.
- CRG member raised concerns regarding an advertisement published in the Walcha Apsley Advocate.

  EnergyCo advised that the advertorial was not a paid EnergyCo advertisement and did not include EnergyCo or NSW Government branding. The circumstances were being looked into.
- The Chair clarified that the advertisement related to the South West REZ CEPB and noted that it had caused some confusion within the community.
- CRG members noted that the advertisement had generated community discussion and speculation, including questions about who was responsible for placing it. Members suggested that EnergyCo consider clarifying the situation in a future edition of the Advocate to ensure the public record is clear.

  EnergyCo advised that it would first establish the facts before considering whether a response was appropriate, and that it was not suggesting that anyone had acted improperly.
- A CRG member offered for the CRG to review any proposed clarification before publication.
- The Chair noted that formal government media responses can take time and that expectations around whether and when a response could be provided should be managed.
- CRG members noted that if a response could not be provided promptly, it may be preferable not to pursue it, while reiterating the importance of ensuring the public record is accurate.
- CRG member raised questions about the scope and rationale for the Central South Hub, referring to community survey results covering approximately 540 properties. The member advised that 364 respondents were not willing to host infrastructure, 118 were considered marginal and 28 had expressed interest in hosting infrastructure. The member questioned which generation projects the hub is intended to connect, noting a perceived lack of generator interest in the area and questioning the rationale for the infrastructure passing through the Walcha area.
- CRG comment about a class action against declaration of the REZ. Request for EnergyCo to take it back to the government that there is a high level of frustration about the refusal of Chris Minns to meet with the community and not to take part in the parliamentary debate on the petition.

Item 7. First Nations engagement update

- EnergyCo have been talking to Aboriginal stakeholders in Tingha, Guyra, Glen Innes, Armidale, Walcha, Tamworth and Muswellbrook. Interviewed over 20 people regarding CEBP priorities in addition to the 12 priorities identified, only difference is culture as a key priority.
- We have heard that priorities are culture, infrastructure for places to practice culture, build community, meet as a community, program delivery, and gather for funerals and events, and make it for all people.
- Land Councils have housing stock they manage and are looking at programs for repairs and maintenance and building houses on land in Walcha and Armidale.
- Feedback from these meetings, a survey and 2 upcoming First Nations CEBP workshops on 16 September in Tamworth and Armidale will be captured in a report.
- We have also heard about the priorities of remote communities compared to regional centres. Remote communities need access to services and want to be prioritised, rather than rely on outreach programs from the regional centres.
- Funding should be distributed with fairness and equity, it needs to be transparent, everyone wants the opportunity to apply but it must be fair.
- CRG comment that it's very good to hear.
- CRG member emphasised the importance of considering the ongoing costs associated with infrastructure funded through the CEBP, including depreciation, maintenance and asset renewal. The member noted that these costs are not always covered by grant funding and cautioned against funding infrastructure without a sustainable plan for its ongoing operation and maintenance.
- EnergyCo response that grant funding could be split to allow smaller funding for programs that are ongoing, people want sustainable solutions and legacy, and tangible outcomes for Aboriginal communities.
- CRG comment that CEBP priorities look like cost shifting, because a lot of it is the government's responsibility anyway and shouldn't be provided through grants. Money flowing is great, but we shouldn't miss out on services.

Item 8. Community and Employment Benefits Program (CEBP) update

- CEBP engagement program is underway, including Council and stakeholder briefings and community conversations in Walcha, Armidale and Uralla.
- Community survey is still open and 200 responses so far. Members encouraged to promote of the survey in their networks.
- Core themes include access to health and medical, workforce and economic development and then water and wastewater management.
- Will collate insights and survey results, with the feedback used to shape and design the program.

- The program is expected to be finalised by the end of the year, open for grant applications early 2027 to get money flowing to the community mid 2027.
- CRG comment that you've spent money on a consultant, can the CRG see the consultant's report before you decide, as a reflection of our experience in the workshop.
- CRG comment – why isn't information about the CEBP survey on the council websites, and this is important.
- CRG Council representative response that council has limited resources to promote these activities.
- CRG comment that it isn't on Council website, only found on the EnergyCo webpage.
- Chair clarified that there is no separate report from the CEBP workshop with the CRG, information is to be rolled into the one report.
- CRG question if that consultant was writing the report.
- EnergyCo response – yes, the consultant is developing the report.

  EnergyCo also advised they are working with councils to provide information about the CEBP program and package information to make it easy to distribute.
- CRG comment that information about the survey can go on council Facebook pages and social media.
- CRG question about the $60 million that will be spread from Bayswater to North Hub. That's the initial phase and not the CEBP for the later date. We still can't see how it is going to be divided fairly.

  EnergyCo response that part of the consultation now is to determine how to administer the funding across the entire project area. Feedback on how it should be distributed is welcomed.
- CRG comment that the access scheme should make it more about where the projects are.

  EnergyCo response that there isn't an answer to who gets what yet, and that's why the feedback is so important now.

Item 9. General business, questions and updates

- Consumer Trustee overview presentation has been requested, and a dedicated session may be offered online before the next CRG meeting.
- EnergyCo noted that they welcome any feedback on how to best engage with your communities during the upcoming EIS exhibition.
- CRG member asked about the status of the Social Outcomes Risks and Opportunities Analysis.

  EnergyCo response that the purpose was to identify social risks and opportunities associated with REZ development. Astrolab was engaged to complete this work. Phase 1 is now complete and was underpinned by a community co-design process, which some of our

members took part in, as well as members of CRGs from other REZs. The team carrying out this work advised their engagement included workshops, surveys, targeted sessions and one-on-one follow-ups with community representatives, Regional Leadership Executive groups and government stakeholders. Based on the expectations, priorities and themes emerging through co-design, three prototype information tools were identified:

- baseline studies for social outcomes – which is essentially a report to summarise the key findings and themes.
- sensitivity mapping – where key issues and themes would be mapped geographically.
- a monitoring and metrics dashboard – to track the progress of each project and how they were managing social impacts.

EnergyCo is now considering the feasibility of these outputs and how they could be delivered, which will form part of Phase 2 of the work.

Timing for Phase 2 has not yet been confirmed. EnergyCo will provide a further update once there is more certainty around timing and next steps.

CRG member questioned the practical value of the process, noting that some participants had disengaged because they did not feel it was delivering meaningful outcomes. The member expressed concern that the work was focused on longer-term studies and outcomes, rather than addressing the immediate social impacts communities are already experiencing or expect to face as the REZ develops.

EnergyCo advised that it could explore inviting the relevant team to attend a future CRG meeting to explain the work and its intended outcomes. EnergyCo noted that this is a statewide initiative, while the Social Impact Assessment being undertaken as part of the EIS will focus more specifically on localised social impacts associated with the project.

- CRG member sought greater clarity on the cost of the work, the benefits it is expected to deliver and what will happen next, noting that these were not currently clear.
- Other CRG members agreed that the language used throughout the process was overly technical and consultant-focused, making it difficult to understand its practical value.
- CRG member commented that the broad statewide approach did not adequately reflect the unique circumstances and priorities of individual communities. The member expressed concern that local feedback was not being meaningfully heard or reflected and that the resulting high-level findings may not adequately capture local issues.
- CRG comments that EnergyCo need to leverage some projects such as National Farmers' Federation Agricultural Trade Apprenticeship, biochar plant at Uralla, solar panel and turbine blade recycling at Uralla, 3D printed clay workforce accommodation.
- CRG comment that these can be considered as part of the CEBP.
- CRG member identified water as a key challenge for the region and emphasised that how water is managed will be an important long-term legacy issue for the REZ.
- Meeting closed 2.45pm

Actions

#	Action	Responsible
1	CRG request briefing on workforce accommodation across the REZ to be conducted before end of year and in alignment with the release of the EIS.	D Wilson
2	EnergyCo to investigate whether modelling around the decision for the northern connection deferral is available.	D Wilson
3	EnergyCo to advise if landholders in potential development areas for northern connection will be compensated.	D Wilson
4	EnergyCo requested to convey to DPHI the CRG view that there needs to be an extension of the exhibition period to 60 days.	D Wilson
5	EnergyCo to consider the CRGs request for EnergyCo to support the CRG request to DPHI for a 60-day exhibition period.	D Wilson
6	Share CRG feedback to EnergyCo about Uralla power, the vulnerability in being the end of the line, and ask engineering team about any potential future solutions to this situation as part of the NE REZ.	L Tapp D Wilson
7	EnergyCo convey a CRG request to the appropriate decision maker for a facilitated meeting with objectors.	D Wilson
8	Clarify how EnergyCo board members are selected and appointed, their tenure, the time they are they required to dedicate towards the role and how they gather the information for their recommendations. Communicate that CRG would like to see regional representation on the EnergyCo board.	D Wilson
9	Contact details for Kelly to be provided to CRG to facilitate connection with local offset opportunity.	Chair
10	Share Presentation deck Strategic Offset Delivery Agreement (SODAs) and Conservation Investment Strategy with CRG following the meeting.	M Maurer

Upcoming meetings

26 November in Uralla 11.30am-2pm