

## **INQUIRY INTO COMMUNITY CONSULTATION PRACTICES**

**Name:** Name withheld

**Date Received:** 4 June 2025

Name  
withheld

To whom it may concern,

We [REDACTED] Primary Producers [REDACTED] Kinnabulla, Victoria wish to formally express our concerns regarding the community consultation processes we have participated in – processes we feel are designed to **keep us complacent, ignorant of our property rights and voiceless** when it comes to being adversely impacted by a renewable energy project or being declared part of a Renewable Energy Zone (REZ).

Over the last eighteen months we have been inundated, overwhelmed, and bewildered by the activity of renewable energy companies and related government agencies in our district. To say we feel under siege is an understatement.

We live in Victoria's Southern Mallee Region and our farming business and home will be situated:

- within 2 km of the proposed Curyo Wind Farm & Battery Project, predicted to house 260 turbines at 240m high.
- 10 km north of the proposed Wilkur Energy Park with 97 turbines at 280m tall.
- Fence to fence neighbours to a rumoured Wind Farm to the northeast of us at Jil Jil.
- potentially in a Renewable Energy Zone (REZ)
- potentially on a minerals sand mine, with two mining companies engaged in active exploration of these in and around our farm.

From September 2024 until now we have engaged with:

- West Wind Energy, the developers of the Wilkur Wind Farm
- Vic Grid, twice in Birchip.
- Cubico Sustained Investments, developers of the Curyo Wind Farm
- ACEN, developers of the Corack East Wind Farm
- TCV, through a webinar, to hear information about the EES scoping requirements for VNI-West
- Engage Victoria Platform
- The Buloke Shire Council
- Southern Wimmera Mallee Development Association (funded by The Buloke Shire Council/us the ratepayer) whom have been instrumental in bringing renewable energy proponents into our area despite the majority of rate paying farmers being opposed to the development of such projects.
- The Birchip Business & Learning Centre/Birchip Neighbourhood House

Through the Engage Victoria Platform we have made submissions about:

- The EES scoping requirements for the Warracknabeal Wind Farm
- The Normanville Windfarm
- The Draft Handbook for Development of Renewable Energy in Victoria and the Discussion Paper for Managing the Biodiversity Impacts of Renewable Energy.
- The Colbinabbin Solar Farm
- EES scoping requirements for VNI-West
- TCV application for a licence to transmit energy

These interactions have made us feel insignificant, stripped of our human rights, and pressurised to sacrifice the viability of our farming business and family health for urban electricity production.

Whilst advertising the catch phrase “come and have your say” these consultation events in practice tend to be tokenistic with decisions already made and instead merely a forum for telling us what will happen. Specific questions about the abovementioned projects, which have been in the planning process for up to 4 years and beyond are never answered in real time but with a promise of a follow up email or a comment along the lines like we do not know that yet.”

One energy company we engaged with, **West Wind Energy** chose to answer our questions through paid advertorials in our local newspaper the Buloke Times. Interestingly at the same time, the editor of the Buloke Times announced that they would no longer publish material, like our letters to the editor, because they feared legal retribution. Now, it is with trepidation we purchase our local newspaper as it feels more like a glossy brochure for wind developers and their government allies than the provider of community news it once was.

**Cubico Sustainable Investments (Cubico)** developers of the wind farm that will have the biggest imposition on us have been abhorrent in the way they have treated us and other neighbours of the **Curyo Wind Farm & Battery project**. Initially shrouded in secrecy, it was only through rumours in September of 2023 did we first learn of the project.

Our first official notification from Cubico only arrived in January of 2025, over 12 months later. Since then, things seem to be moving relatively quickly with a map of the project sight released, attempts to obtain social licence through contact with Birchip Connect/Birchip Neighbourhood House prior to proper consultation with impacted neighbours and a submission for advice to the Victoria Minister for Planning, Sonya Kilkenney MP under planning act 8(3) to prepare an Environmental Effects Statement (EES). As we were concerned that proper and due processes will not be followed, we wrote to the Sonya Kilkenney’s office outlining our concerns and insisting an EES be required. We are yet to receive a response other than an automated reply saying they have received our correspondence.

The first level of “consultation” we experienced in relation to this proposed project was through interactions with our host neighbours. They are the first representatives of these companies that we must deal with and the narrative they create is one that aims to keep us complacent and ignorant about the planning that is taking place. When seeking to understand the nature of the project, we repeatedly hear the following replies to our questions:

- **“The project will probably never happen.”** This comment is made frequently. Publicly it was made at a meeting between proponents in February 2024 between four proponents and selected neighbours from the southern end of the project at the Curyo Fire Shed. A second public announcement like this was posted social media in September 2024, to an audience local to the Wimmera-Southern Mallee region of Victoria.
- **“The project is in its infancy.”** This is the next level of denial and deflection used by hosts to keep neighbours ignorant of the true nature of the project. This comment was made to us in September of 2024 giving us the impression the project was in its early stages, despite a website about the project being in existence. Also, in April of 2025, Cubico stated in their letter of advice to prepare an ESS to the minister that “initial

studies have included ...vegetation...fauna..cultural heritage..” This certainly sounds to us that the project is beyond “infancy stage.”

- **“I/we haven’t signed anything yet.”** This comment continues to be reiterated by some host farmers, even now, despite their farms being part of a map distributed by Cubico and as mentioned above Cubico seeking advice regarding preparation of an EES.
- **“The community will benefit greatly.”** We will discuss this aspect of consultation in greater detail further into the submission.
- **“We have control over the project, and we will not put turbines near you.”** Our host neighbour made the comment we have nothing to worry about as the turbines will be “7km from your place.” Other neighbours have also been told similar information. This marketing of a “win” for us is distressing as we know that means another of our non-hosting neighbour is set to suffer the adverse impacts more intensely.
- **“You will be well compensated.”** The promise of compensation was the beginning of our mistrust of the claims made by our host neighbours. In our opinion any project that requires a payment to keep us happy is inherently suspect and so began our journey of knowledge building. Our starting point was the document Land Host Matters (2022) by Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner (AEIC)

Our life has become consumed with researching all aspects of the energy landscape and when we challenge our host neighbours about the impacts of living next to a wind farm, they often disparage us with comments like these below and in a public manner.

- **Do you research.** Which we have! Extensively! We have learnt everything from how the energy grid works, the role renewables play in that, what nuclear energy options could potentially look like, the ISP and related costings. We have listened to acousticians, human rights and property rights lawyers who have represented parties impacted by windfarms and spoke with neighbours of other wind farms across Victoria.
- **You are misinformed.** Then we are simply directed back to the material provided by the wind energy developers to digest.
- **You are being divisive.** We did not invite these multinational companies into our communities, yet we are pressured into feeling guilty when we exert our democratic right to question and challenge impacts to us of the project.
- **You are a climate change denier.** We are not anti-climate change. We absolutely believe that our planet needs protecting but we just do not understand how industrialising our fragile environment and productive agricultural land will prevent it. A global change in our lifestyles is the only thing that can reverse or heel the effects of climate change.

The consultation process is also dehumanising and denies us the very people impacted most, a voice. These are some ways we feel that we have been made to be feel irrelevant by various wind energy companies and government agencies.

- Correspondence from Cubico addressed to us as neighbour/resident/business owner.
- Being provided with a map of the project that is hard to interpret because it is not to scale and inaccurately labelled.
- Our family homes being described as “habitable dwellings.”
- An information session presented online with cameras turned off, microphones muted and chat functions that did not work. (Cubico Neighbour Information Session – February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2025)

- Online presentations not lasting the advertised time instead being terminated early therefore denying us the right to ask and have our questions responded too. (again Cubico Neighbour Information Session – February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2025)
- Being told to accept these impositions to our business and homes “for the greater good.” (Vic Grid consultants Birchip September 2023)
- Listening with hurt to hear your home described as having “environmentally low value.” (ACEN representative at Birchip Information Session April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2025.) It is with horror I hear and read terms like “mitigation” and “offsets” used to justify destruction of native habitat and loss of native fauna like Wedge Tail Eagles.
- Being told our town is dying and it is your fault that it will continue to because you oppose renewable energy projects and the money it will bring to the community. Various hosts make this claim, but most notable and public declaration was at the Wimmera Mallee Environmental & Agricultural Protection Association (WMEAP) in January of 2025 by a host farmer of the Wilkur Project.
- The lack of meaningful engagement from Buloke Shire Council. The councillors that represent us at local government, [REDACTED] do not respond to emails about our concerns and despite being asked also, the Shire has not informed us that planning regulations now apply to our land due to Cubico seeking advice for an EES and section 8(3) of the Environmental Effects Act 1978 (Vic).
- Blatant disregard of agriculture as the backbone of industry and innovation in our area.
- The disregard of the value of farming land in food and fibre production for Australians and the world.

Cubico, developers of the Curyo wind farm and battery storage project that will impose upon us the most, describe us as a “priority project stakeholder” however it is evident we are not! Here are some of the ways Cubico has not treated us with the dignity of being a priority project stakeholder:

- Mailing correspondence devoid of our names
- Online consultations in February that was a regurgitation of the information already on their website and where upon seeing over 50 neighbours gathered at the Curyo Fire Shed, they promptly turned off the camera, muted the microphone function and closed the meeting early. The chat function for providing questions only worked intermittently and others in attendance had to log on so we could deliver questions.
- Seeking social licence from the Birchip Community by meeting with Birchip Connect and the committee of management of the Birchip Neighbourhood House prior to meeting with impacted neighbours, presumed to promote their Community Benefit & Development Fund and secure social licence to further alienate non-consenting neighbours of the project from their community.
- Meetings with neighbours planned in June of 2025 are scheduled at times that clash with winter sport commitments which are an integral part of rural communities and can only run with volunteer support and therefore making it difficult for people to attend.
- Insisting we register online to attend these meetings which are capped at 50 people. Cubico must meet with all of us and without restrictions and obstacles.
- Encouraging us to use an 1800 number that connects to an off-site reception service. The project managers are never available, nor do they return calls. Similarly, they rarely respond to emails.

- Most distressing to us, is that one committee member of Birchip Neighbourhood House who is neither a host nor neighbour of the project claims to be able to speak to [REDACTED] Cubico about the project whenever he likes yet us, priority stakeholders as I have mentioned earlier cannot!

The most undermining and divisive tactic wind energy companies use is to harness social licence through promoting their Community Benefit Funds prior to the project even having planning permission or being operational.

After the hosts have been offered monetary incentive, the next group to be bought is the community. In our case Cubico have “reached out” to Birchip Connect/Birchip which I have mentioned in a dot point above but feel needs further detailing. Cubico are garnering social licence to keep their investors happy prior to having neighbour consent to the project and therefore undermining us and pitting us and our neighbours (of which there are about 100) against this community group, whose charter is to remain neutral and inclusive.

- They are using an organisation that is managed by a potential host of another project along with committee members who could be potential hosts, with a strong personal stake to see these projects go ahead. We feel there is a strong conflict of interest evident in this committee. Instead, we believe a transparent and democratic organisation who truly represents all ratepayers should be contacted (if the project goes ahead) like the local Buloke Shire Council to oversee the distribution of funds.
- As the Curyo Windfarm & storage battery project spans across two shires, and some neighbours are situated over 50 km from Birchip, we would further suggest that both the Yarriambiack and Buloke Shire Councils work together to make decisions about potential payments from a CBF so that all ratepayers are equally represented in a transparent and democratic way.
- Proponents on these committees, who have a vested interest and who are prepared to accept funds accuse us of being selfish because we are denying the community access to much needed money to build key infrastructure like a netball court. We will not accept responsibility for the building of key infrastructure that is the job of local and state government to which we pay our levies, taxes, and rates without fail.
- From our research of wind farm projects CBFs do not appear to deliver any items that resilient communities like ours have always done prior to energy companies entering our economic landscape. Even during the Millenium Drought, many in our small community worked together to keep our towns functioning and viable.

Next, we will discuss our participation in the Engage Victoria platform. Whilst welcoming the opportunity have a say in how projects are shaped, it is an onerous process. Some of the challenges of having a say through this platform include:

- A lack of time to read all the documentation provided to fully understand the project, especially as we are full time workers, parents, and carers.
- Lost productivity due the preparation and synthesis of information for these submissions.
- The supporting documents are prepared by specialists using specialist language that is not always easily comprehensible even after a second or third read.
- Experiencing stress as we try to meet submission deadlines, continue meeting our business and personal obligations along with helping our neighbours complete theirs.

- Generic responses to our submissions or emails that make us wonder if they really are considered or a decision has already been made and the work we have done rarely has any influence on the outcome.

We are concerned that the importance and value of agriculture is not being addressed in meetings or EES scoping documents. This agricultural industry is the backbone of these communities and readily disregarded. There is never any mention:

- Of the contribution our farming business and associated service industries make to local economy. These include machinery dealerships, livestock agents, grain traders, transport carriers, chemical suppliers, and research bodies such as the Birchip Cropping Group.
- That as farmers in northwest Victoria, we contribute to the Mallee's production of 28.3% of Victoria's grains with a gross regional product of \$4.1 billion, exporting 4-5 million tonnes of wheat and other grains, along with lentils and seed oil. (Farms. For. Food.org)
- That as Victorian Farmers, we contribute to 25% of Australia's total agricultural production even though collectively Victorian farmers only control 1.5% of Australia's land mass. (Wimmera Mallee Environmental & Agricultural Protection Association).
- That as farmers we contribute to feeding our population (through grain and meat production), and the 14% of Australia export revenue. (Wimmera Mallee Environmental & Agricultural Protection Association).
- That as farmers we contribute to feeding 8.2 billion people on our planet today which will increase to 10 billion by 2061.

To conclude, it feels as though community feedback is often skewed toward those with the time, resources, or expertise to navigate complex consultation documents and attend public meetings. This results in the underrepresentation of vulnerable voices like ours, the neighbours of wind farm and battery projects – the very group most affected, impacted, imposed upon by these policy decisions.

The toll to our mental health is beginning to mount. Whilst overall we are resilient and prepared to stand up for our rights, the consistent worry about our future, the threat of compulsory acquisition of our land and the consistent lies by our host neighbours, the wind energy companies, TCV and Vic Grid alike are at an intensity that defies even the worst droughts, floods and plagues we have endured.

Moving forward, we urge the Parliament to:

- Conduct an independent review into the efficacy and outcomes of recent community consultations.
- Improve transparency on the Engage Victoria platform, including detailed summaries of feedback and how it shaped final decisions.
- Mandate that submission like this one be followed up with two-way engagement and dialogue.
- Mandate reporting on how public feedback influenced decision making.
- Mandate that developers do not seek social licence from community groups by offering funds prior to securing neighbour acceptance, planning approval and the renewable energy facility becomes operational.

In closing, we feel there is much more we could expand upon however time eludes us. We ask that you see how experience not as an isolated one but as indicative of broader systematic issues in the current approach to community engagement throughout Victoria and even Australia.

Thank you taking the read our submission, we hope it contributes to improving the outcomes for impacted neighbours of these large-scale industrialised project.

We look forward to following the parliamentary enquiry closely.

[REDACTED]

Kinnabulla VIC