

Climate Change Inquiry
Submission S068
Received 26/08/2019



BRACE
Barwon Region Alliance
for Community Energy

26 August 2019

Committee Manager
Legislative Assembly Environment and Planning Committee
Parliament House
Spring Street
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

By email: climatechangeinquiry@parliament.vic.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam

RE: Inquiry into Tackling Climate Change in Victorian Communities

The Barwon Region Alliance for Community Energy (BRACE) welcomes the opportunity to provide comments on the Victorian Legislative Assembly Environment and Planning Committee's Inquiry into Tackling Climate Change in Victorian Communities (the Inquiry).

Established in September 2018, BRACE is a network of community groups in the G21 region whose purpose is to facilitate co-operation and collaboration among its members to support a wide range of local community energy initiatives. The G21 region is comprised of five local government authorities: Borough of Queenscliffe; City of Greater Geelong; Colac Otway Shire; Golden Plains Shire; and Surf Coast Shire. Current BRACE members include:

- 100% Clean Bellarine (based in Barwon Heads)
- Anglesea Community Energy
- Barwon Sustainable Energy Alliance (based in Winchelsea)
- Birregurra Community Association
- Colac Otway Sustainability Group (based in Colac)
- Geelong Sustainability
- Southern Otways Sustainable (based in Apollo Bay)
- Surf Coast Energy Group (based in Torquay)

While some BRACE members have a singular focus on community energy and others have a broader sustainability and/or community focus, all BRACE members share a common objective: to act locally to increase energy efficiency and renewable energy generation and storage in order to reduce carbon emissions and address the climate crisis. In these ways, BRACE members are tackling climate change in Victorian communities.

It is within this context that BRACE outlines the actions its members are taking to mitigate and/or adapt to climate change and the ways in which government can best support them.

Mitigation actions

BRACE members have co-ordinated solar and battery bulk-buy schemes for residents. The most recent bulk-buy scheme (in 2018) coordinated by Geelong Sustainability resulted in the installation of over 1.3 MW of solar PV and 1.4 MW of battery storage with over 220 households participating across the G21 region. In addition, BRACE members have installed solar power systems for schools and aged care homes using donation and investment models. The largest system installed to date has been a 156 kW community owned solar system at an aged care home in North Geelong, implemented by Geelong Sustainability.

Looking forward, BRACE members are progressing plans to: provide energy efficiency audits and upgrade services to low-income households; develop a 2 MW community owned solar farm; establish a peer to peer energy trading platform for solar and non-solar households; enable community ownership of large-scale renewable energy developments; and make our towns 100% renewable. Further details about these projects are available on request.

Adaptation actions

While most BRACE members are focussed on mitigating climate change, Geelong Sustainability has implemented a climate change adaptation program that protects vulnerable citizens from extreme temperatures. The Climate Safe Rooms program offers free home energy upgrades for low-income households where at least one resident receives home care services for an existing chronic health condition that puts them at risk from heatwaves and extreme cold. The program aims to improve comfort levels within the home by ensuring that one room remains comfortable during both summer and winter temperature extremes.

Government support

In our collective experience, community energy projects are far more likely to succeed when they can employ program/project management personnel and access specialist technical, financial and legal expertise. In addition, access to grant funding in project feasibility and planning stages is often critical. For pioneering social access projects, like solar gardens for renters and low-income households, significant capital grants are essential.

In January 2019, BRACE submitted a detailed funding proposal for a Barwon Community Power Hub to Libby Coker, then Federal Labor's candidate for Corangamite, to secure the requisite resources for a wide range of community energy projects in the G21 region. Coker backed the proposal and in March 2019 pledged up to \$10 million for the Hub if Labor won the election. Although Coker won her seat, Federal Labor lost the 2019 election and so the pledge could not be fulfilled. Nevertheless, the proposal was sound and BRACE continues to advocate for the establishment of a community power hub in the Barwon region. In our view, funding community power hubs is one of the best ways government can support communities in their efforts to decarbonise and decentralise electricity generation.

Decentralising electricity generation is important from a climate adaptation perspective as some communities are concerned about security of electricity supply as bush-fires become more frequent and severe. Lorne and Apollo Bay, for example, have electricity supply lines traversing difficult and heavily forested terrain. In extreme weather events, AEMO has indicated it will cut supply to minimise the risk of starting fires. Also, in a significant bush-fire event, there is a real risk of damage to electricity supply lines. Either scenario would challenge many residents, particularly the elderly. Government can support such communities by making climate adaptation funds available to help them develop greater energy independence, especially during and after bush-fire events.

Should you wish to discuss the details of this submission further, please contact me via email at brace.members@gmail.com or mobile [REDACTED]

Yours sincerely,

Adrian Ford
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Barwon Region Alliance for Community Energy