

Inquiry into Tackling Climate Change in Victorian Communities  
Victorian Legislative Assembly – Environment and Planning Committee

Submission by Dr Rowan O’Hagan (individual contribution) – August 2019

*How are Victorian communities responding to climate change? What actions are communities taking to reduce the severity of climate change and adapt to its current and future impacts?*

Climate change adaptation and mitigation is all of the ways we are changing in response to climate change. We are changing our business and household practices, we are changing our world view in some cases, we are changing legislation, we are changing the way we speak about climate and the environment (O’Hagan, National Rural Women’s Conference, 2013).

Victorian communities are responding actively to both the lived experience and the future threat of climate change by working together to effect change at the local level through practical actions, and systemically across the economy through advocacy and collaboration. This is generally a multi-faceted approach acknowledging the need for transformation of our energy, waste, water, natural resource management, food, agriculture and social systems to reduce emissions and adapt to climate change.

Across North East Victoria, communities and individuals are working on reducing their carbon emissions through increasing the use of renewable energy, and action at the household level to reduce waste, water and energy. On-ground action to increase the resilience of the natural environment includes the restoration of waterways and forests through revegetation, the removal of pest species and the re-introduction and encouragement of native flora and fauna. Waste wise activities include Plastic Free July and plastic wise food outlets, Boomerang Bags and Repair Cafes.

The North East Regional Sustainability Alliance (NERSA) is an alliance of like-minded sustainability groups across the North East (Beechworth Urban Landcare and Sustainability – BULS, Benalla Sustainable Future Group – BSFG, Wangaratta Sustainability Network – WSN, Yackandandah Sustainability, Albury-Wodonga Toward Climate Health – WATCH, Sustainable Upper Ovens and WULN Wodonga Urban Landcare Network amongst others). NERSA also collaborates with local government, natural resource management and state government agencies and local political representatives and is generously provided a meeting space by Indigo Council.

NERSA recently celebrated its 10-year anniversary and continues to meet bi-monthly and provide a detailed account of activities, events and outcomes across the region, predominantly achieved by volunteers (available to the Inquiry on request). A surge in interest in community renewable energy has seen the addition of more groups, either as sub-groups of the existing sustainability groups or as stand-alone community energy groups. The community energy groups have a separate alliance, the North East Community Energy Network (NECEN), convened by Indigo Power, which works to enable community energy projects and raise awareness of the potential for community renewable energy across the region.

All these activities, whilst primarily driven by the urgency to take action on climate change, have a positive benefit for the regional economy and the well-being of communities. Enhancing our natural environment is beneficial for our agriculture and tourism industries and local generation of renewable energy increases the resilience of business in our regional economy to fluctuations in prices and puts us at the forefront of the transition to renewable energy in the long term.

*How can the government best support communities in their efforts?*

#### Policy Frameworks and Plans

It is imperative that governments have the right policy settings in place to support the work of climate action and sustainability groups. Legislation such as the *Climate Change Act 2017*, *Environment Protection Act 2017/Environment Protection Amendment Act 2018* and plans such as *Water for Victoria* and *Victoria's Climate Change Adaptation Plan* and the strong emissions reduction targets recommended by the Independent Expert Panel are essential to drive the implementation of strong action for climate change mitigation and adaptation.

It is also the expectation of regional communities that Aboriginal Victorians, as the traditional custodians of the land with rich cultural connections to country, are consulted in planning, decision-making and programs in relation to climate change action.

It would be helpful for communities to have comparable legislation and strategies at the Federal level also, however knowing that the Victorian government is committed to climate action and has the policy settings in place is heartening for Victorian communities.

#### Support for Local Communities

Small grants programs through government agencies can be highly leveraged by local communities, in terms of financial cost-benefit, community engagement and commitment, so these are encouraged. Larger grants can also be highly leveraged, particularly if the community is consulted on the strategy, approach and implementation of these projects throughout their life. For example, the achievements of the Hume Renewable Energy Roadmap project to date, which are anticipated to continue to benefit communities and business across the Hume Region as the Roadmap is implemented. The *Take2* initiative is also an innovative way of encouraging further participation in climate action.

Local government is leading the way in many instances however others are still coming to terms with the science and the impacts of climate change and require continued support and resources to understand and implement climate adaptation and mitigation strategies for the benefit of their communities and to contribute to the wider effort of tackling climate change. Community expectations of local government to drive climate change action is high, as well as expectations around emergency management and hazard amelioration.

Therefore, for the Victorian government to best support regional communities in their efforts to tackle climate change and to drive mitigation and adaptation activities, the provision of funds, personnel and expertise that is accessible to community groups, local government and business is vital. The ability of regional communities to contribute to planning and decision making through robust and consultative governance practices is also essential.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this brief submission – views are my own. Further information is available on request.

Dr Rowan O'Hagan has a background in agricultural science, regional economics and finance. She is a founding member of Wangaratta Sustainability Network, the North East Regional Sustainability Alliance, Voices for Indi and Australian Women in Agriculture Ltd, and holds governance roles in the water, health, higher education and renewables sectors.

