

Why community engagement is failing for the energy transition.

Failure

Firstly, the evidence of large and recurring protests both in-person and online are enough to say that the current engagement process is broken, or in fact has failed. Also, witness the fact that most public and even AEMO's community consultation groups have security personnel or even police present.

One of the problems is that the vast majority of people and companies involved in the energy transition are not involved in community engagement, they just assume it's happening or even that it has already happened. It's not clear where the responsibility for community engagement lies because the energy transition is a mash up of federal and state government bodies and a big contingent of industry. Leadership is scarce.

There are many people, especially (almost exclusively) online who make statements about how successful and extensive community consultation is occurring. Very few of these people are actually engaged in the process and their views must be heavily discounted. This includes everyone from ministers of government to AEMO and industry executives. It's a matter of fact that these people are far removed from the engagement process, yet they make many unsubstantiated statements about the process.

As a member of the AEMO Community Reference Group for VNI West it was enlightening when it was admitted by the senior AEMO representative that the minutes are not passed up to anyone at AEMO, or anyone else, ever.

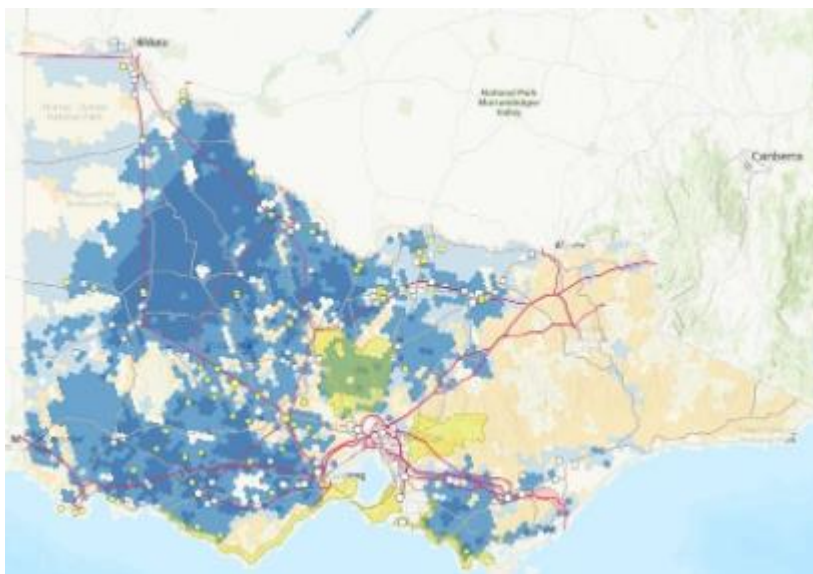
The Bubble

The speed and the way that governments have engaged with the energy industry has meant that most of the people involved in the energy transition are inside a giant bubble. The scale of this bubble completely dwarfs the community groups affected by the renewable energy projects. This gives the impression that everything is ok because voices to the contrary are minimal. Just look at the sheer number of conferences and briefings that are reported on professional social media such as LinkedIn. Then look at the comments. The furious self-congratulating is astounding. The bubble is self-sustaining.

Just as an example, the All Energy Australia conference was held in October 2024. Check out the comments on LinkedIn **#allenergyau** after the conference for more

bubble evidence. Read through the responses of all the exhibitors and industry participants, it's all about just how great the transition is, how many opportunities are coming up and so on, which is fine, but there is practically no recognition of the impact on communities. The assumptions about the availability of so-called renewable energy zones have created a mindset that completely ignores any negative impacts. This mindset has well and truly permeated throughout the bubble. Of course, there was the obligatory session on social licence with representatives from VicGrid, TransGrid and WestWind Energy. Wow, how about a representative from the people you are seeking a licence from!

The recent release of the Victorian government Renewable Energy Zones is another good example of the bubble. A LinkedIn post celebrating the mapping of the zones declared, *"The map includes all planned and operational solar, wind, and battery projects, along with transmission infrastructure. It features renewable study areas - potential sites for future clean energy generation and transmission"*.



Well, actually this is a map of highly productive farmland, of people's homes, their backyards and chicken pens. The bubble people just **take it as a given that the land is available**.

At a recent community meeting it was suggested that wind towers could be placed at large open spaces in Melbourne, but this was labelled as "absurd". However, most rural people think it's just as absurd to place them in their backyard. This is engagement class 101 – see the other point of view.

Presentation of Facts

One of the truly frustrating aspects of the energy transition is the lack of transparency. It is no doubt frustrating for the bubble people to have to repetitively explain themselves too, but that's what it takes, some effort.

Government and industry have done a terrible job of explaining.

As a part of being on a community reference group, I talk to many local people in order to convey their concerns. The most common questions are the big ones.

Why do we need these transmission lines?

How many more lines are required?

Why can't the lines be underground?

There are valid questions arising here. AEMO simply state that it's too expensive. But how was that calculated? Commonly mentioned examples such as Germany starting construction of a 700km 4GW underground HVDC transmission line. According to the developer "The underground route has been chosen in order to have minimal impact on the landscape". It would be great to hear a comparison for AEMO proposed aerial transmission. Another common question is - why is sending power 4000km underwater to Singapore a commercial proposition but not a few hundred kilometres between NSW and Vic.

How much land will be needed for wind and solar?

Will it affect insurance costs?

This is a big question and goes to the heart of the compensation package. What if there's "an event" after the line is completed that causes insurance premiums to skyrocket? Really the landholders should not be exposed to any additional risk, now or in the future.

What happens if agricultural machinery damages a tower or causes a fire that damages a solar/wind facility?

What are the dangers and rules around firefighting near renewable energy facilities?

Some advice includes, “stay 25m outside the easement” and that “smoke may cause arcing”, so you can’t go under the transmission lines. Look at this image from the recent VNI West easement refinement. Apart from the appalling proximity to houses, what happens if there’s a fire at the two homes west of the line?



Some very difficult decision making for fire crews has been introduced.

Around Wind, Solar and especially Storage facilities, many of the increased dangers have yet to be uncovered and while some may point to previous experience with transmission, that is not the case with these other facilities, not much experience is on hand. Current experience with electric vehicle battery fires seems to indicate that it’s going to be very difficult. And remember these facilities are generally remote so the first crews on the scene will be small local brigades. Ironically these brigades are crewed by volunteers who are each paying thousands of dollars per year in fire services levy and yet the renewable energy facilities receive a concession on fire services down to almost zero. Maybe high-risk facilities should have mandatory firefighting capabilities onsite?

What is the compensation package?

Once again, it is staggering that there is no consistent approach. There should be a common approach whether towers, turbines or panels. For transmission, the fallback position seems to be various forms of compulsory Land Acquisition. But most land acquisition legislation is around things like freeway widening, where transfer of land title is necessary. Land Acquisition is not the right tool for transmission. A farmer should not be asked to take on future risks for a set fee now, that’s not sensible.

For wind and solar, there are no rules around compensation. It’s appalling. It is also creating tension around properties where transmission and generation are

competing, because one is much more lucrative than the other – again, no consistent rules.

Why is there no compensation for neighbours to energy infrastructure?

Although the physical impact is less for neighbours than for landholders, the numbers affected are huge. There are way more neighbouring properties than landholder properties, its simple geometry. Impact on visual amenity and property values is undeniable, why is there no recognition.

Why are there no comprehensive policies and regulation for wind and solar development?

Wind, Solar and Storage facilities are just springing up randomly without any rules. This is creating havoc within communities.

While there has been much, much discussion and decisions made about these questions within the bubble, very little has been done to provide information to local communities and the broader public. In the community reference group for VNI West, with over twelve months of meeting, not a single question put forward has been answered. Some have been rejected, but none answered. If AEMO can't even put in the effort to convince people who have voluntarily come forward to hear more, then the only conclusion is that there is **no serious intention to inform**.

While the communities are crying out for real factual data it seems more and more that the whole basis of what is proposed is still in question. No one seems to know whether any particular renewable energy facility is a good idea or not.

There is clearly a need for better explanation of the role of AEMO, the Integrated System Plan (ISP), the Regulatory Investment Test – Transmission (RIT-T) and how Transmission Network Service Providers (TNSPs) collaborate and especially all the constraints on the cost-benefit analysis. How are community compensation and benefit costs included and are some initial assumptions now constraining just outcomes? The ISP is a two-year process that basically ended in 2023, so started in 2021, well before many of the current projects were announced, so how could affected communities have provided relevant and contemporary input?

It's not good enough to simply state that the ISP process and AEMO are transparent just because there are a lot of spreadsheets online.

At the recent Senate SELECT COMMITTEE ON ENERGY PLANNING AND REGULATION IN AUSTRALIA there were many, many statements by AEMO that indicated the very constrained way in which they do cost-benefit analysis, which is limited by ministerial rules. This seems particularly applicable when discussing transmission. As said by Daniel Westerman – "... if the rules changed, obviously we would change our analysis".

The whole approach is making people even more suspicious about the validity of any statements made. And maybe also explains the reluctance to answer the big questions that people still have.

Policy making

Policy making is failing at the very highest level. Current policies, where they exist, are full of unconscionable outcomes that impact local communities.

Renewable resources such as sun and wind are not owned by anyone. And yet some landholders are receiving millions of dollars each year for wind turbines after the wind blows off a neighbour's property and yet the neighbour receives nothing. This divisive policy (or lack of any policy) is **destroying communities, not assisting them**. What policy allows this outcome? How is this outcome compatible with statements like this from VicGrid. *"He stressed that giving First Peoples, landholders, communities, and regional stakeholders a real voice in the process is crucial to the success of the energy transition. So is an approach to community benefits where locals benefit in a meaningful and lasting way based on their vision of the energy priorities for their region"*.

Such statements are just platitudes, replicating like a virus, same words, different order. Meaningless and the actual outcomes are devastating.

I'm not sure many people anywhere have a *"vision of the energy priorities for their region"*. What does that mean? But there are real obvious problems in rural areas that might have been worth inputting to high-level policy making. At the high level, pretty much all of the locations proposed for generation and transmission are suffering population decline. At a lower level, if you live in a rural (not regional) area, you will know that the local government area (LGA) rate burden is enormous compared to that for urban dwellers.

How good would it be for the benefits from the capture of renewable resources to flow and make our rural LGA's more competitive and viable. Electricity consumers in the area where I live regularly receive a rebate on power charges because the delivery is outside the service level, that seems pretty strange for a renewable energy zone.

Solar and Wind facilities are even more opaque than transmission, there seems to be no rules at all. Private companies (mostly foreign) just cold call farmers to see whether they would be willing to host or sell, but after that any engagement is minimal and community benefits are dependent on the individual company's willingness. There are government people thinking about these issues, but it's happening now. Why wasn't there some policy guiding all this ad-hoc development?

The dichotomy between investor led generation and government led transmission is leading to much confusion and no real overarching policies that focus community

benefits. Possibly the structure of all the energy market participants is even preventing coordinated policies.

With all the might of multiple governments we still don't have policies that link the broader energy transition to real benefits for local communities?

Platitudes

In a recent letter to the Victorian Minister I asked the question about why as a neighbouring property I must suffer a massive valuation fall without compensation. The response from the head of VicGrid was "*VicGrid is committed to listening to the views of individuals and the broader community and we are keen to ensure we can factor your thoughts into how the project develops*". This is absolutely typical of the platitudes handed out at every community consultation group. It doesn't matter whether its Solar, Wind, HumeLink or VNIWest the community groups get the same brush off.

Transition to a new normal

In the future it may be that farmland will be multipurpose and some forms of agriculture can coexist with renewable energy facilities. Perhaps younger generations will welcome any additional income to get started in a difficult industry.

But that's in the future, any transition plan needs to get there first.

So why is community engagement failing for the energy transition – well nobody likes to be taken for granted.

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