



Additional Senate Budget Estimates (Monday 24 February 2025)

Opening Statement – Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner

Good afternoon, Senators. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the committee. I would like to make a brief opening statement which I have provided to the Committee.

I would like to start today by briefly introducing myself and providing a short overview of my key priorities.

They are, in essence:

- supporting rural and regional communities and working with industry to make sure we get the best outcomes possible as part of the current energy transition, and
- providing advice to governments on the implementation of the previous Commissioner's *Community Engagement Review*.

Briefly for background I was appointment to the role of Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner – late last year.

This role was established under the previous Australian Government in 2015 as the **National Wind Farm Commissioner**. After an initial three-year term, in October 2018 the Commissioner's role was expanded to include large-scale solar farms and storage facilities and extended for a further three years. In March 2021, the role was further expanded, to include proposed, significant greenfield transmission projects.

I would like to take this time to thank the previous Commissioners for their contributions and acknowledge the important work they have done, which I will continue in my tenure as Commissioner.

2024 was the Office's third busiest year since the Commissioner was created in 2015, with a total of 152 new cases from January 1, 2024, to December 31, 2024.



In terms of new cases by the project's primary asset type:

- **66%** of related to wind farms (100 cases over 33 projects)
- **12%** to solar farms (18 cases over 9 projects)
- **11%** to transmission (17 cases over 4 projects)
- **2%** to an energy storage facility (3 cases over 3 projects), and
- **9%** were general inquiries (14 cases).

The four most common complaint issues raised in new cases in 2024, across all asset types and jurisdictions, were:

- **46%** related to Community Engagement (70 cases)
- **33%** related to Safety (50 cases)
- **32%** related to the Natural Environment (49 cases)
- **31%** related to Amenity (47 cases)

Senators, like you my motivation for taking on a public role is to make a real difference. I am passionate about rural and regional communities who are on the front line when we talk about the energy transition.

I see my role as a key contributor and participant in the effort to make the energy transition more equitable, more transparent and more fair.

So, in plain English – that means working collaboratively with all stakeholders, including farmers and rural communities where energy infrastructure is (largely) being hosted, all levels of government, and *definitely* including the energy and transmission industry.

It means pointing out where things have not gone well and learning from those situations and it also means seeking to replicate the scenarios when things have gone well.



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Key principles for me are to:

- build relationships – and I will come back to this point
- getting stakeholders to think more deeply and commit more fully to ensuring a balanced approach
- learning from what has been done to date – both good and not so good, and
- having honest, fact-based and practical conversations about how we can achieve positive outcomes.

As part of my first month or so I have been getting to know who's who in the preverbal zoo.

I have met with many of the large energy developers and stakeholders and they will obviously be a key partner and I look forward to working with them in my role going forward.

I have also had the opportunity to visit a number of areas such as central highlands of Victoria, Central West NSW and south-western NSW and I am scheduled to visit Queensland next week – to hear from the community.

These initial meetings have confirmed what I had thought – that is – it's a complex scenario with many different agendas and views.

Talking with some communities in particular – it has been troubling that some feel they are having this energy transmission done to them rather than done with them.

Some are being asked to bear the burden of energy and transmission projects while receiving few or no advantages in return.

They feel like they are being kept in the dark, not listened to, actions not being followed through and their concerns not being responding to in an empathetic way. In short there is a cohort of the community that have completely lost trust in some stakeholders – which includes governments, energy industry and many of the people in between.

Those visits have reiterated in my mind a few things ... the complexity of the issue – there is no simple panacea for the challenges that we face in this space. There are a range of views on what this energy transmission can



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mean and there are many regions where this is and has not gone well and we – collectively need acknowledge and accept that and then actively commit to doing better.

That being said – there are people and regions where this energy transition is going well and we should try and learn from those scenarios. The most valuable aspect in these specific scenarios has been relationships. And the trust that is the basis of that relationship.

I had the opportunity to talk to the Hay Shire Council in southern NSW – this is an example of where the community has taken a constructive and proactive approach. They have identified a plan and communicated openly and clearly what they think good looks like and put steps in place to make it happen. While not finalised – this is a good news story that we can all learn from.

Of course my role also includes working cooperatively with the energy sector – such as project developers and generators, who want to do the right thing while managing complicated projects in complex circumstances.

An ongoing theme among my conversations is the value of relationships.

If communities and stakeholders from the energy sector and government can build relationships based on trust and respect we are on our way to a better place. I have heard horror stories about different people turning up unannounced, from a different company every month with a different story. This is a small example of what we can do better and I am committed to doing so.

I think at some level we all accept that to reach our shared goals of long-term reliability, affordability and sustainability, we need investment. Investment happens when there is increased certainty. Ultimately what we are all seeking is to get the transition right as soon as possible to (among other things) help keep the lights on in the most affordable, reliable and sustainable way.

So the challenge for me in my role – and for the community more broadly – lies in striking the right balance, with equity, transparency, and meaningful



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engagement at the heart of building renewable energy projects in communities.

This is not a new challenge, nor is there a lack of ideas, initiatives, and commitments already in-play. Many charters, guidelines, frameworks and plans exist, but they need to be streamlined and strengthened.

As I flagged earlier, a big part of my motivation in taking on this role is wanting to see meaningful progress on the sensible recommendations in my predecessor's *Community Engagement Review*.

My firm view is getting things done will require an increased joint effort on key measures, including:

- A clearer, more compelling story, explanation and demonstration on the practical reasons for the energy transition
- A more comprehensive, transparent, country-wide planning framework to make sure we are conscious of what the transition will mean for things like prime farming land, for business opportunities, for the social fabric of our communities and for the environment, and
- Practical tools, such as the Developer Rating Scheme, and more stringent and mandatory measures which carry real consequences when standards and expectations are not met

So while I am early in the role – it is clear in my mind that for long-term success, energy infrastructure projects must better shaped by a spirit of true equity, transparency, and shared community benefit. Communities that host this infrastructure must not be left behind – they must be at the heart of Australia's clean energy future.

Thank you for your time today. I look forward to answering any questions you may have regarding my role as the AEIC and the work of my office.

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