

OFFICIAL

Inquiry into Information Integrity on Climate Change and Energy

Net Zero Economy Authority submission

Our interest in the inquiry

The Net Zero Economy Authority (the Authority) is a non-corporate Commonwealth entity established by the Net Zero Economy Authority Act 2024 (the Act). Our purpose is to support the communities impacted by Australia's transition to a net zero economy. Our vision is for a better future for industrial regions, communities and workers in the net zero economy. To deliver on our purpose and vision, we have defined the following missions that guide our efforts:

- Help workers in coal and gas facilities affected by the transition to prepare for and secure well-paid, safe and lasting jobs.
- Support communities significantly affected by the transition to net zero to prosper, including through economic development and investment.
- Be a trusted and influential voice to build understanding of, and shape policy on, the regional net zero transition.

The Authority coordinates policies and actions to support the transition, provides advice to the Minister and develops and delivers initiatives to enable participation in the transition.

A key function of the Authority is supporting and delivering educational and promotional initiatives to promote an understanding of, and encourage participation in, Australia's transition to a net zero emissions economy.

With the legislated function to promote an understanding of the net zero transition, the Authority has a particular interest in the impact that misinformation and disinformation may have on community understanding of the transition. The Authority's submission is largely focused on the first two terms of reference:

- (a) the prevalence of, motivations behind and impacts of misinformation and disinformation related to climate change and energy;*
- (b) how misinformation and disinformation related to climate change and energy is financed, produced and disseminated, including, but not limited to, understanding its impact on:*
 - (i) Australian politics,*
 - (ii) domestic and international media narratives, and*
 - (iii) Australian public policy debate and outcomes.*

OFFICIAL

OFFICIAL

Impacts of misinformation and disinformation on the net zero transition

In Australia, misinformation and disinformation around the net zero transition persist with worrying prevalence, particularly through social media and targeted campaigns. Heavy reliance on these platforms for news accelerates the spread of misleading claims, shaping public perception and undermining confidence in renewable energy.

Common myths about wind energy persist, such as false narratives targeted at coastal communities alleging offshore wind projects harm whales and marine ecosystems. Solar energy is also a target of misinformation and disinformation, with claims that solar farms create significant weather-altering 'heat islands' as well as negative messaging around rooftop solar that diminishes recognition of its proven benefits (such as the claim that solar panels do not produce electricity on cold or cloudy days). Gas and carbon-credit schemes also feature prominently in disinformation narratives.

The combined impact of these issues erodes public understanding and trust, hampers informed decision-making, and can slow the transition to sustainable energy. It fuels scepticism around wind, solar, and offshore developments, distorts perceptions of the pace and scale of renewable progress, and negatively impacts judgment about viable alternatives like gas or carbon offsets.

Misinformation is difficult to overcome

In 2023, the Authority undertook research to inform its approach to building an understanding of the net zero transition. Around 2,500 Australians across regional and metropolitan areas participated in the research to understand sentiment towards, and knowledge of, the net zero transition.

The research found that without an authoritative narrative on the net zero transition, confusion, misinformation and negative voices risk dominating the conversation. Respondents recognised the transition's complexity, and wanted to know how the transition would impact them locally. Place-based and tailored stakeholder communication and engagement was identified as a key requirement for effective communication. The research found that it was important to ensure that factual information is communicated before misinformation could influence individual perceptions.

The Authority undertook further research in 2024. The research found that misinformation and disinformation is highly believable and widespread in impacted regional communities and investigated how misinformation could be addressed. The research found that proof points that were designed to address existing misinformation were seen as less credible when participants had already been exposed to misinformation.

Specifically, the research presented respondents with the following two factual statements relevant to existing misinformation narratives:

- **Research has found no evidence** of wind turbines causing harm to whales or other animals. By reducing Australia's reliance on fossil fuels, wind farms help protect ocean habitats from the impacts of rising temperatures and ocean acidification.
- The National Health and Medical Research Centre's statement on the impacts of wind farms on human health has found **there is no direct evidence** that exposure to wind farm noise affects physical or mental health.

The research found that proof points aimed at dismissing misinformation have little impact on those who support the transition and aggravate those who oppose it. Messages that included

OFFICIAL

OFFICIAL

the phrase 'no evidence' come across as vague and further embed a sense of mistrust. The research found that factual messages with a strong local focus proved most effective. This includes messages that practically demonstrate how the transition is impacting local communities – for example, showcasing local businesses that are making the most of new manufacturing opportunities or workers that have transitioned into new jobs.

Further research underway

The Authority is in the early stages of undertaking further research on community understanding of the net zero transition. The research will also assess the extent to which misinformation about the transition continues to shape community perceptions. There may be an opportunity in the coming months to share some insights from this research with the Committee.

OFFICIAL