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Submission to the Federal Senate's Committee on Community Affairs (the 'Community Affairs Reference Committee') Inquiry into the 'Social and Economic Impact of Rural Wind Farms'.

The Lake Bolac Eel Festival has been held annually since 2005 and is an art and music festival underpinned by environmental and indigenous cultural themes. An Environmental Forum is a key feature of the festival. Over the years the forum has discussed a range of topics related to water, healthy catchments, climate change, sustainable energy use, brologas and wetlands, and in 2011 will examine the biodiversity of indigenous grasslands.

The Festival Committee is supportive of well-planned and appropriately sited rural wind farms both for their provision of clean energy and for the benefits to the local rural communities. Wind farms use a renewable energy source efficiently and cut greenhouse gas emissions, thus making a contribution to meeting greenhouse gas targets.

The planning process is critical. While supporting the concept of wind energy we do not want to see large wind turbines scattered all over the countryside, rather, they should be sited in carefully selected locations with ready access to the power grid, but not where they will destroy iconic landscapes. Smaller wind turbines on farms may be a good option to generate power for domestic and small enterprise use.

Planning permit conditions should ensure that windfarms are developed with minimal disturbance to biodiversity, eg. careful monitoring of potential windfarm sites to ensure there will be no impact on brologa migratory patterns or gathering places.

Windfarm developers must also ensure that the process for determining turbine locations is totally transparent and has the full support of the local community, rather than a situation where secrecy in the planning process results in neighbours being set against each other.

The general benefits to the community of a well planned and well managed windfarm include increased employment (small, but significant as it is skilled and often local), clean energy, rental payments to landholders, decentralised production of energy, and safety compared with coal-fired or nuclear power generation. Tourism can also bring extra income to towns near windfarms.

An additional benefit in the Ararat Rural City area is the generous provision by Pacific Hydro of a Community Fund which assists all sorts of community groups generally eg local sporting clubs to buy and maintain plant and equipment, the Elmhurst Festival of the Wind, as well as environmentally based community groups such as the Ararat Community Vegetable Garden and the Lake Bolac Eel Festival. Pacific Hydro support for festival has created a strong partnership and contributed to the sustainability of the Festival.

Pacific Hydro has also been supportive of several major landcare projects in the Chalicum Hills area, which have resulted in many kilometers of waterways and erodable gullies fenced off and revegetated, and a major research project on the value to farmers and the environment of summer growing perennial pastures.

Una Allender
Secretary, Lake Bolac Eel Festival Committee
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