

Submission
No 144

**INQUIRY INTO IMPACT OF RENEWABLE ENERGY
ZONES (REZ) ON RURAL AND REGIONAL
COMMUNITIES AND INDUSTRIES IN NEW SOUTH
WALES**

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Submission to the NSW Parliamentary Inquiry: Impact of Renewable Energy Zones (REZ) on Rural and Regional Communities and Industries

Subject: Boree Solar Farm – consultation process and community engagement failures

Submitted by:

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Business associate and representative of directly impacted landholder, Peter Reardon

Introduction

I am writing this submission as a long-term business associate, friend and personal representative of Peter (Pete) Reardon, one of the principal affected landholders in the proposed Boree Solar Farm development near Geurie, within the Central West Orana Renewable Energy Zone (REZ). Although I am not a landowner directly impacted by the development footprint, I have been, at the request of Pete, involved in community engagement activities as well as attending Pete's face to face project briefing session (as a support person) and the Geurie community information session.

This submission highlights serious concerns regarding the communication and consultation practices undertaken by Venn Energy and their engagement consultant Ethos Urban. The issues outlined below raise questions about the integrity, adequacy, and fairness of engagement processes that were relied upon to justify progress for Boree Solar Project which is a State Significant Development (SSDs) in the Central West Orana REZ.

1. Lack of due process in notification

The first formal notification to Pete about the Boree Solar Project was a single generic letter posted 28 March 2025. This was confirmed during Pete's project briefing session on 8 April 2025. No effort was made to verify receipt of this letter, and no follow-up communication occurred via phone, email, in-person contact, or public advertising to ensure Pete (and other impacted landholders) received this notification letter. The letter also made mention of the Project Briefing Sessions.

The quality of the letter itself was poor, resembling marketing junk mail from an energy provider. The enclosed map was illegible, even to Pete, a qualified mining engineer, who could not determine the project's proximity to his property without requesting a clearer version. This lack of clarity, urgency, and verification undermined the legitimacy of the communication and consultation process from the outset.

2. Deficient consultation and inadequate information

During Pete's project briefing session, Venn Energy representatives were unable to answer basic and reasonable questions about:

- Project size and panel layout
- Footprint of battery infrastructure
- Environmental or vegetative buffer zones
- Fencing design and boundary treatment
- Mitigation of visual impacts

Most answers were vague, deflective, or deferred indefinitely. No follow-up commitment was made to source answers or provide a written summary after the session. The team's inability to provide responses or address concerns illustrated that the briefing was a procedural formality rather than a meaningful opportunity for engagement.

Adding to this, the official project website contained no information whatsoever at the time, displaying only a white screen. Venn Energy's corporate site held just four short technical statements. The community was repeatedly directed to a resource that was non-operational, compounding confusion and exclusion.

3. Unacceptable behaviour at Project Briefing Session

Pete attended his project briefing visibly distressed, knowing that his property may be surrounded on three sides by industrial-scale solar infrastructure. Rather than showing empathy or professionalism, the Venn Energy Community Engagement Manager directed derogatory and personal remarks toward him, including statements such as:

"I don't like the way you look at me, and what you do with your mouth" and "you are being aggressive."

As a witness to this exchange, I can state with complete confidence that Mr Reardon was not aggressive toward the project briefing team at any point. He was visibly upset, but calm, composed, and respectful in how he asked his questions. The characterisation of him as aggressive was not only unjustified but appeared to have been used as a tactic to deflect from the emotional impact the project was having on him.

I have known Pete for over 25 years. He is one of the most genuine, well-respected, and fair individuals I have worked with. To hear a stakeholder engagement professional speak to him in such a dismissive and demeaning way—particularly in a session intended to support open dialogue—reflected a complete lack of emotional intelligence, maturity, and stakeholder care. This conduct seriously undermined the legitimacy and credibility of the consultation process.

4. Transparency and recordkeeping concerns

Notes taken during Pete's project briefing were not offered proactively but were only provided when Mr Reardon specifically requested them. Even then, the team appeared reluctant. This lack of transparency around what was recorded and how it would be used further eroded public trust.

Moreover, no ground rules or expected outcomes were communicated prior to the meeting. There was no briefing pack or agenda, and no clear structure to facilitate questions, feedback, or resolution of issues.

5. Poor survey design and biased framing

Venn Energy released a community survey via their junk mail letter. The primary concern with the community survey is that its results are intended to inform the Scoping Report, yet the survey was fundamentally flawed in design, content, and neutrality.

The framing of the survey implied the project was already progressing, which may have discouraged objections. Several questions were poorly structured or loaded with positive language, while others

lacked options to express nuanced or moderate views. Basic demographic and experiential questions were too limited to yield meaningful insights.

Critically, key community concerns—such as bushfire risk, water runoff, property devaluation, mental health, and compulsory acquisition—were entirely omitted. The survey also failed to distinguish between directly impacted landholders and the general public, making interpretation of results unreliable.

The overall impression was that the survey was designed to support the project narrative rather than genuinely reflect the full range of community sentiment.

6. Pattern of deflection and unresponsiveness

Repeated requests for clarification or assistance, including those made by Pete and others have often been met with silence, delayed replies, or polite but non-substantive deflections. This has occurred with complaints, information requests, and feedback about the survey. The burden of follow-up has been placed entirely on the community, while the proponent has avoided accountability for the quality of its engagement.

7. Failure to provide requested information

Another serious concern is Venn Energy's ongoing failure to respond meaningfully to formal information requests from landholders and community members. Despite repeated efforts to engage constructively, requests for basic details—such as consultation timelines, engagement formats, communication plans, and how feedback will inform the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS)—have largely gone unanswered.

Last week, a formal request was issued by myself on behalf of Pete, seeking clarity on future consultation processes and how individual concerns (e.g. fire risk, water runoff, access) will be addressed. These questions align with the NSW SSD Guidelines and the DPIE's Engagement Guidelines, both of which emphasise transparency and responsiveness as core planning obligations.

To date, no response has been received. This ongoing lack of accountability further erodes community trust and highlights the urgent need for open, inclusive engagement going forward.

8. Absence of a transparent complaint handling system

Another key concern is the complete lack of a formal and transparent complaints handling process for the Boree Solar Project. Despite being classified as a State Significant Development (SSD), Venn Energy has failed to meet basic expectations for grievance management during early consultation.

The project's temporary website provides only a generic contact email and phone number, with no indication that these can be used for lodging formal complaints. There is no process outlined, no published response timeframes, and no escalation procedure for unresolved issues. Furthermore, there is no publicly accessible complaints register, nor any assurance that community concerns raised to date will be recorded, acknowledged, or reflected in the Scoping Report or Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).

This falls well short of the expectations outlined in the NSW planning framework and the nationally recognised standards of the Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner (AEIC), which emphasise the importance of accessible, accountable complaints systems for large-scale energy developments.

Affected landholders and residents are currently being asked to engage in consultation with a proponent that has provided no structured means for tracking, responding to, or escalating grievances. This undermines public trust and calls into question the procedural fairness of the entire engagement process.

Conclusion and recommendations

Based on what I have personally witnessed and experienced, it is clear that the Community Stakeholder Engagement Team associated with the Boree Solar Project has failed to establish any genuine trust within the Geurie and Wongarboon communities. Despite the project's significant scale and its potential long-term impacts on residents, there has been no consistent presence at community meetings, a refusal to respond to media requests for information, minimal proactive engagement, and a less than adequate communication channel for residents to seek information or raise concerns.

Concerns from Pete (and others) have been routinely ignored, dismissed, or inadequately addressed. This has created a growing sense of exclusion, frustration, and distrust. The engagement team's perceived alignment with the proponent—rather than serving as a fair and community-focused intermediary—has only deepened scepticism about their role, legitimacy, and purpose.

The broader consultation and communication practices associated with the Boree Solar Project have fallen significantly short of the standard required for a State Significant Development located within a Renewable Energy Zone. The conduct described in this submission reflects a persistent pattern of procedural inadequacy, lack of transparency, and community marginalisation.

I respectfully submit the following recommendations to the Inquiry:

1. Mandate independent auditing of REZ consultation processes to verify fairness, transparency, and compliance with community engagement guidelines
2. Require proactive, multi-channel notification strategies for all REZ projects that reach all impacted residents and landholders
3. Establish enforceable minimum standards for community surveys used in REZ planning, including fair question design and clear options to oppose or critique proposals
4. Ensure formal complaints processes are implemented and disclosed for all SSD proponents, including public response timeframes and escalation procedures
5. Introduce a stakeholder engagement code of conduct to prevent the kind of unprofessional conduct experienced during Petes Project Briefing Session about the Boree Solar briefing

I am available to provide further information or clarification to assist this Inquiry.

Yours sincerely

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