Shaping Renewables on the Downs Forum summary

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QUEENSLAND CONSERVATION COUNCIL

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Toowoomba Forest Park

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

More than 100 people, including landholders, community members, renewable energy industry, local government, state government, and third sector representatives, came together in Toowoomba in March for the Shaping Renewables on the Downs Forum. Whilst participants reinforced that renewable energy is welcomed in the region, the forum highlighted serious concerns that need to be addressed.

There was a palpable frustration that the lessons learnt during coal seam gas development have not been learnt by the government and renewable energy industry. A cross cutting theme was that participants wanted to move beyond a project by project approach towards a regional planning framework. The participants at the forum showed that community leaders and members across the Downs are willing and ready to work to improve the renewable energy rollout so that it empowers communities early, protects cultural and ecological landscapes, and ensures projects leave lasting local benefits.

Five key themes for improvement emerged at the forum:

1. **Regional planning** informed by up-to-date and updated land use mapping which have bipartisan support for their implementation and robust accountability on their achievement
2. **A focus on environmental protection** beyond impact assessment and offsetting which uses local knowledge to identify, implement and monitor projects for biodiversity improvements
3. **Equitable benefit sharing** which supports and empowers communities to engage in development processes, including proactive formulation of community investment priorities and a framework that allow regional benefit sharing to deliver lasting, legacy benefits
4. **Better regulation for decommissioning** to ensure landholders are not left with infrastructure, land is rehabilitated and materials are recycled
5. **Access to clear and trusted information** on renewable energy technologies and projects, supported by energy literacy and improved transparency of communications from developers

The Downs regions have the experience and willingness to lead better renewable energy development but needs support and leadership from the Queensland Government and industry.

Recent changes to individual project assessment at a state level will increase the amount of information collected for developments and require community benefit agreements to be signed with the local council.

Based on the participant feedback at the forum there is still a clear role for regional planning and coordination by the Queensland Government to:

- Develop and resource regional renewable energy plans to guide development, based on updated land use and biodiversity mapping, build bipartisan support for these and establish an independent monitoring and oversight body for their implementation
- Work with the Federal government to shift from offsetting to avoiding harm and delivering net positive biodiversity outcomes, including mandating long-term environmental monitoring and adaptive management
- Use Renewable Energy Zones to develop pooled community benefit funds which would expand benefit sharing to include neighbours, local towns, and regional communities and fund legacy infrastructure, including funding local communities to develop investment priorities for these
- Require indexed financial guarantees from project proponents for decommissioning and mandate pre- and post-ecological and land use assessments and develop standard legal clauses, potentially through Co-existence Queensland, for landholders to include in all contracts
- Establish a centralised publicly accessible information platform offering up to date information on renewable energy projects and supporting infrastructure, including summarised assessment documents as well as region-specific environmental data, research and case studies

The renewable energy industry should:

- Collaborate and coordinate with other developers working in the same region
- Invest in research on co-location with agriculture and post-project ecological recovery as well as ways to utilise existing local knowledge
- Trial participation in pooled community benefits funds and support development of community investment plans
- Extend asset life with modular upgrades and predictive maintenance and support regional infrastructure for recycling
- Rethink Non-Disclosure Agreements to promote open communication and make data on project status during development process and monitoring during operation more transparently available

These next steps are not only feasible – they are essential to ensure the renewable energy shift strengthens, rather than divides, regional Queensland.

Shaping Renewables on the Downs Forum, 26 March 2025

SHAPING RENEWABLES ON THE DOWNS FORUM

On 26 March 2025, more than 100 people from across the Southern and Western Downs, Toowoomba and South Burnett regions attended the Shaping Renewables on the Downs forum in Toowoomba, Queensland.

The regions

These regions already host 3.5 GW of operational wind, solar and batteries. A further 4.5 GW of projects are approved and there is an additional pipeline of more than 16 GW of projects announced at various stages of development.

In the Western Downs, there is already a significant legacy, both positive and negative, of energy transition. Coal seam gas was first extracted in 2005 and the industry now makes up 50% of the region's added value[1].

This has had significant impacts on the economies, communities, environment and landholders. There have been and are still concerns about housing affordability,[2] health impacts[3], subsidence[4] and contamination of rivers[5]. To help manage community concern, there are now independent advice and complaints bodies such as the GasFields Commissions Qld, now rebranded as Coexistence Queensland, and Land Access Ombudsman.

Sponsorship from gas companies has funded the development of community investment plans in several towns including Miles, Wandoan and Tara. Gas development has also helped fund the Western Downs Regional Council's Western Downs Futures network which has developed a 10 year regional plan to address priority areas such as housing, social infrastructure, education and employment[6].

The forum

The full day forum consisted of five panel sessions, each followed by facilitated table discussions covering:

1. Scene setting with informations from energy researchers and Powerlink
2. Industry perspectives with ACCIONA, Electrical Trades Union and Cubico
3. Farming impacts and opportunities with landholders, researchers, and AgForce
4. Biodiversity and nature with consultant ecologist Stringybark Ecology, Granite Belt Sustainability Action Network, Qld Conservation Council and Bunya Peoples Aboriginal Corporation
5. Community benefits and challenges with Community Power Agency, Western Downs Regional Council and Millmerran Progress and Commerce Inc

The forum was organised by the Darling Downs Environment Council, supported by the Queensland Conservation Council and RE-Alliance. It was in part sponsored by Powerlink. The Next Economy, Community Power Agency and Sustainify provided table facilitation support.

DISCUSSIONS FROM THE DAY BY THEME

THEME 1: COORDINATION, PLANNING AND REGULATION

Forum participants reported community frustration, stress and unnecessary environmental pressure due to a lack of coordinated development and complex planning regimes.

This starts from the top level state policy. The Queensland Energy and Jobs Plan was released in 2022, without prior community consultation, with a framework of Renewable Energy Zones including four in southern Queensland. Consultation started on these, but after the 2024 election, the new Government has not supported the QEJP and is reviewing the renewable energy targets. It is unclear what is progressing with the Renewable Energy Zones.

In the absence of coordination, each development is progressing its own consultation, impact assessment and infrastructure development community benefit funds. There is no incentive and so poor communication between developers. This has led to inefficiencies, community frustration, and unnecessary environmental pressure.

Rather than fragmented, project-by-project development, attendees called for proactive, landscape-scale planning that incorporates ecological, agricultural, and community values. Empowering councils and local groups early in the process would better align projects with regional needs and avoid unnecessary conflict.

RECOMMENDATIONS / SOLUTIONS

- **The Qld Government** should develop and resource regional renewable energy plans to guide development, based on updated land use and biodiversity mapping, build bipartisan support for these and establish an independent monitoring and oversight body for their implementation
- **The Qld Government** should progress the best practice code including requiring coordination between developers and guidance on avoiding sensitive areas for projects
- **Industry** should commit to understanding and collaborating with other developers working in the same region

THEME 2: ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AND NET POSITIVE BIODIVERSITY OUTCOMES

Many participants at the forum identified that current environmental legislation and over-reliance on offset policies is failing to protect nature from all kinds of developments and leading to overall biodiversity decline. For renewable energy projects, participants raised concern about outdated biodiversity and land use mapping tools which means that desktop assessments for projects don't identify areas of high ecological value. Renewable projects can be incentivised to develop in different areas which haven't historically been developed. This is leading to important ecosystems such as grasslands or fragmented woodland being systematically undervalued.

At a project level, participants expressed concerns that environmental assessments done for developers by external consultants under these laws can be tokenistic and not reflect local landholder and Traditional Owner knowledge of local ecological values. The processes are also often difficult for communities to engage with meaningfully.

Projects are often approved subject to offsetting to achieve no net loss. However, there was significant scepticism about the effectiveness of offsets, with concerns raised from poor choice of offsets to inadequate monitoring of them in the long term. There were also concerns raised about the long-term impacts of renewable energy projects on soil, hydrology, remnant vegetation and threatened species.

Participants noted that effective biodiversity protection requires a shift in attitude from no net loss to delivering net positive outcomes – such as improving habitat quality, enhancing connectivity, and increasing ecological resilience.

Without this shift, the energy transition risks replicating the environmental failures of past industries. With it, Queensland can lead the way in integrating ecological integrity into climate solutions.

RECOMMENDATIONS / SOLUTIONS

- **Federal and State Governments** to accelerate bioregional planning, in consultation with local landholders and Traditional Owners, to both identify areas for protection and areas of degraded land for development
- **State Government** to require evident in development applications that local landholders and Traditional Owners have been included and make these publicly available
- **State Government** to release a best practice guideline on set backs, habitat buffers, monitoring and restoration plans to empower landholders to negotiate
- **State and Federal Government approvals** shift from offsetting to avoiding harm and delivering net positive biodiversity outcomes, including mandating long-term environmental monitoring and adaptive management
- **Industry** to invest in research on co-location with agriculture and post-project ecological recovery

Dulacca Wind Farm

THEME 3: EQUITABLE BENEFIT SHARING

Renewable energy represents a significant investment into communities with flow on benefits in terms of land payments, employment, local procurement and distribution of community funds. Participants raised concerns about the uneven distribution of benefits which is already leading to, or risking, community division. Some of this is a concern that economic benefits are leaking from the host communities. There is also concern that impacts, whether social, environmental or economic, are not being addressed transparently and equitably.

Participants at the forum explored how to ensure that the community benefit funds in particular of projects are shared fairly between host landholders, neighbouring properties, local communities, and the broader region. What this fairness looks like is still undefined and likely to be different in each case. Participants in the session identified the importance of moving beyond one-size-fits-all models toward flexible, place-based frameworks that ensure benefits are shared not only with landholders directly involved in hosting infrastructure, but also with neighbours, wider communities, and future generations. Participants identified challenges from early stages of consultation with unequal representation in consultation potentially leading to division and unequal benefit sharing.

Since the forum, the Queensland Government has introduced regulation proposing that developments have to sign a community benefit agreement with the local government before submitting a development application, and allowing local governments to be compensated by developers for engagement with this process.

RECOMMENDATIONS / SOLUTIONS

- **State Government** should use Renewable Energy Zones to develop pooled community benefit funds which would expand benefit sharing to include neighbours, local towns and regional communities, and fund legacy infrastructure
- **Industry** should trial participation in pooled community benefits funds to work out governance
- **Industry** should use creative, inclusive engagement methods to define fairness in a flexible place based way
- **State Government** should develop clearer industry guidelines for benefit-sharing strategies

THEME 4: PROJECT END-OF-LIFE, DECOMMISSIONING, AND LEGACY RESPONSIBILITIES

Participants expressed concern about the long term impacts of renewable energy, in the absence of enforceable decommissioning plans for renewable energy projects.

Typically renewable energy projects have a lifespan of 25 -30 years, but there is anxiety among landholders about the lack of financial or legal guarantees for clean-up and land rehabilitation. Participants also expressed concerns that land may be degraded or of lower productivity post-project.

Landholders have to negotiate with a developer to put in place decommissioning plans, including setting responsibilities and timelines, and ensure that these are robust enough to weather potential company changes over decades. Without clear legal guidance for landholders, some are reluctant to host projects, for fear of long term costs and impacts.

The group also emphasised the importance of pre-project ecological and land condition assessments. These would set clear rehabilitation targets, provide transparency, and ensure accountability.

Participants called for a paradigm shift – from short-term project delivery to full-lifecycle responsibility. This includes binding decommissioning standards, sufficient and indexed financial guarantees, and circular economy strategies that prevent waste and regenerate local industries. Infrastructure reuse, local materials recovery, and innovative rehabilitation practices were suggested as priorities for regional investment.

RECOMMENDATIONS / SOLUTIONS

- **State Government** to legislate binding standards and timelines for decommissioning and site restoration
- **State Government** to require sufficient, indexed financial guarantees from project proponents
- **State Government** to mandate pre-project ecological and land assessments to benchmark rehabilitation
- **Government and industry** to develop regional infrastructure for recycling panels, blades, and batteries
- **Industry** to extend asset life with modular upgrades and predictive maintenance
- **Government t**o develop standard legal clauses, potentially through Co-existence Queensland, for landholders to include in all contracts

Ultimately, end-of-life planning is about respect: for landholders, for Country, and for the future viability of rural communities. It must be embedded in every renewable energy project from the outset—not treated as an afterthought.

MacIntyre Wind Farm

Wellington Solar Farm

THEME 5: ACCESS TO TRUSTED INFORMATION

Participants raised concerns about lack of publicly accessible, transparent and independent information on the energy transition. Many in communities now being approached about renewable energy have had little engagement with energy systems or land-use impacts and choices. Equipping people with the language, tools, and knowledge of how energy systems function will demystify the process and allow communities to advocate more confidently for their needs and values.

For communities to be partners in the energy transition, they need more than individual project consultation – they need access to trusted, transparent and regionally specific information. For regions which have not hosted renewable energy before, targeted research into the impacts and co-location implications with existing industries could help guide development.

Sharing stories of communities' experience with renewable energy will help people see what's possible and what's real. By opening up pathways for shared learning and transparent communication, we not only improve outcomes on individual projects, we lay the foundation for a more fair, informed and connected energy shift.

Currently, this level of information sharing is hindered by Non-Disclosure Agreements renewable energy companies get landholders to sign during the development phase, increasing the likelihood of division and suspicion. Information that is collected, for example, in environmental assessments, is often presented in dense approval documents posted on government websites without notice.

RECOMMENDATIONS / SOLUTIONS

- **Government** to fund a central, independent hub for renewable information, including energy literacy, employment opportunities, benefit sharing and environmental impacts, with potential contribution from industry
- **Renewable energy industry** to invest in regional research on renewables and their co-location with agriculture
- **Government and industry** to share community case studies to promote peer learning
- **State Government** to develop a central public registry of all proponents, project stages, infrastructure, impact assessments and benefits
- **Industry** to rethink Non-Disclosure Agreements to promote open communication

CONCLUSIONS

The Shaping Renewables on the Downs Forum offered clear signals about what is needed to ensure Queensland's renewable energy transformation is both effective and just. Participants brought deep knowledge, lived experience, and constructive vision to the table – and a shared commitment emerged: the energy transition must be done differently.

The conclusions are clear. First, planning must be more proactive, coordinated, and regionally grounded. This includes bipartisan-supported frameworks, comprehensive mapping, and community-informed siting strategies. Energy planning must shift from reactive approvals to landscape-scale design that builds trust and protects agricultural and ecological values.

Second, there must be a transition from biodiversity offsetting to delivering net positive outcomes. This means investing in restoring degraded land, prioritising on-site ecological restoration, and embedding biodiversity expertise into every phase of renewable development. Legislation, regulation, and practice must evolve to genuinely value ecological function, cultural landscapes, and regenerative land management.

Third, benefit sharing must be equitable and transparent. Forums like this reveal that fairness means different things to different people – so engagement processes must be inclusive, iterative, and creative. Regional coordination of benefits, support for legacy infrastructure, and compensation for neighbours are vital to maintaining social cohesion and long-term community support.

Fourth, we must plan for the full lifecycle projects. Communities need guarantees that infrastructure won't be abandoned, that land will be restored, and that companies will remain accountable long after construction. Circular economy solutions and clear decommissioning timelines must be mandated from the outset.

Finally, trusted information is the foundation of a strong social licence. Communities need clear, locally relevant, and independent data to make informed choices. Misinformation thrives in the absence of transparency, so governments, industry, and civil society must work together to create accessible, honest, and continuous communication channels.

Main Range National Park

NEXT STEPS

To act on these conclusions, we recommend the following:

- The Queensland Government should lead a process to develop and legislate regional renewable energy planning frameworks.
- A cross-sectoral working group should be convened to co-design enforceable biodiversity, decommissioning, and benefit-sharing standards.
- Funding should be allocated to build community and local government capacity in renewable energy planning and monitoring.
- A centralised, public information platform should be established, offering region-specific data and research.
- State and federal governments should jointly invest in circular economy infrastructure to support renewable component reuse and recycling.

These next steps are not only feasible — they are essential to ensure the renewable energy transition strengthens, rather than divides, regional Queensland.

MacIntyre Wind Farm

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