

Customer Service **1300 728 500**

www.wdrc.qld.gov.au

info@wdrc.qld.gov.au



22 SEPTEMBER 2023

Renewable Energy Zone Roadmap Feedback

**WESTERN DOWNS REGIONAL COUNCIL
SUBMISSION**

1. **Question One:** What should the strategic and detailed REZ Readiness Assessments focus on to maximize local opportunities and manage impacts from REZ development?

RESPONSE: Western Downs Regional Council supports the commitment of the Queensland Government to allocate at least \$6 million to undertake REZ Readiness Assessments. Through strong community engagement, the particular focus of these assessments should be on the impacts of the REZ on infrastructure and transport, housing & accommodation, workforce and social infrastructure.

From a Local Government perspective, meaningful and early engagement with local government, community and local leaders is encouraged as a key focus of REZ Readiness Assessments. To ensure that communities can seize the opportunities from renewable energy development in REZ, it is strongly suggested that the REZ Readiness Assessment process involves already existing networks / initiatives, further strengthening local capability. An example of this can be supporting and presenting at Chamber of Commerce Business Events. This engagement with the community/stakeholders will allow for the early identification of opportunities and priorities for the regions the REZ will be developed in, and gaining input from those who will be most affected. The development of a REZ will be more highly regarded when requesting input from the community/stakeholders in this early stage. This is particularly important in communities who have already experienced growth in the renewables sector and seen the development of multiple renewable energy projects, and the mining and gas construction prior to this. Early consultation with these communities about what has made past local developments effective, or the challenges created by these developments, can help inform best practice for the roll out of future developments.

The REZ Readiness Assessment should focus how opportunities for local businesses can be captured and leveraged to build capacity and stimulate the local economy within the REZ. This could include how renewable energy projects can utilise existing local capability and embed local content targets within procurement policies. Local content targets should be applied to subcontractors of renewable energy projects and be aligned to reasonable payment terms, and incentives for small businesses (such as a weighting and / or faster payment terms) to strengthen local procurement. The Western Downs region has a particularly strong construction, energy and manufacturing capability due to strong resource value chains, which renewable energy companies can leverage. Renewable energy projects could reduce their carbon emissions footprint during construction, operation and decommissioning phases by procuring from local Regional Queensland manufacturers.

If projects in the REZ can provide more clarity to local business regarding the pipeline of works, manufacturers can confidently diversify or expand their business to produce components and be direct suppliers to renewable energy companies (e.g. transformers, electrolysers, wind turbine bases). Local manufacturers in the Western Downs have already indicated that they have the capability to manufacture wind towers now if renewable energy companies would support local.

Due consideration should also be given to the needs of landholders affected by proposed developments in the REZ. Particularly with respect to support and education for landholders to ensure they are informed of their rights

and roles and can leverage available opportunities when exploring renewable development on their properties while managing the impacts of development.

The Western Downs Regional Council also supports the inclusion of potential implications for infrastructure, road network, transport, housing and accommodation, workforce, supply chains, waste management, social infrastructure and other land uses in Strategic REZ Readiness Assessments as outlined below.

Infrastructure & Transport: The REZ Readiness Assessment should consider how the Department of Energy and Public Works, together with other key state departments and local government authorities, can ensure that the cumulative impacts of REZ project development and operation on the communities and infrastructure is measured, planned for and mitigated.

The REZ Readiness Assessment should consider the renewable energy potential and which area in the Western Downs Region has the highest engager generation potential. The REZ Readiness Assessment can assess the existing grid infrastructure and its reliability and identify any necessary upgrade and expansion in the region to accommodate increased energy capacity.

Heavy vehicles substantially reduce the condition and asset life of road infrastructure. The Western Downs region is currently experiencing a backlog of urgent maintenance on state-controlled and national highway networks. This already significantly affects primary producers and the state of the road network can result in delays in the delivery of produce.

Housing & Accommodation: Expected development in the REZ will bring a significant workforce to the region, placing further pressure on housing. This sector is already significantly under pressure. The REZ Readiness Assessment should consider how the Department of Energy and Public Works, together with Department of Housing and other key federal, state and local government authorities, should ensure that the cumulative impacts on communities and infrastructure is measured, planned for and mitigated.

For example, the threshold of A Construction Worker's Accommodation Options Report is required where more than 50 beds on-site is required should be reduced for renewable energy developments in the REZ. The Western Downs Region is experiencing a significant housing supply issue and accommodation for project workers should be a critical consideration of any REZ Readiness Assessment. It is critical to ensure that development of the REZ does not further exacerbate any housing supply issues already being experienced by the region.

Workforce: The REZ Readiness Assessment should consider the readiness of the local workforce to fulfill positions created by the construction and operation of clean energy projects.

In 2021, Toowoomba and Surat Basin Enterprise (TSBE) commissioned Deloitte to undertake a study: 'Western Downs Workforce Gap Analysis'. The report indicates that 20% of the jobs within the region are currently filled by skilled workers residing outside the region. By 2030, this figure is estimated to rise to 28% equaling a workforce gap of 7,778. Western Downs Regional Council notes that the estimates in this

report were delivered prior to the announcement of the 'Queensland Energy and Jobs Plan', hence we expect the skills gap to be larger than the estimation in this report by 2030.

The REZ Readiness Assessment should include the estimated number of jobs and the range of jobs that will be created, including local manufacturing and supply chain development related to renewable energy projects. This should also include a work force development need analysis on how to skill up local residents to undertake further education and training for new roles being created by the REZ and how overseas labour or permanent workers can be attracted to the region. Where it is necessary for workers to be brought in from out of region, the REZ Readiness Assessment should account for the implications on housing and community cohesion created by the introduction of a significant and temporary workforce, particularly in small communities where many renewable energy projects are developed.

Social Infrastructure: Expected development in the REZ will bring a significant workforce to the region, providing further pressure on social services such as housing, health services and childcare. These services are already under significant pressure. The REZ Readiness Assessment should consider how the Department of Energy and Public Works, together with other key state departments and local government authorities, can ensure that the cumulative impacts on the communities and infrastructure is measured, planned for, and mitigated.

Supply Chains: The REZ Readiness Assessment should consider how the Department of Energy and Public Works, together with other Departments to coordinate with transmission operator to plan for efficient energy transport from REZs to demand centers. Identify transmission corridors and infrastructure needed.

The REZ Readiness Assessment should also consider and develop strategies to manage any potential supply chain risk and disruption.

2. **Question Two:** How should Regional Energy Reference Groups be established and what role should they play in setting local investment priorities and shaping REZ outcomes?

RESPONSE: Western Downs Regional Council supports the development of Regional Energy Reference Groups which represent the diverse communities and industries affected by the development of the REZ. These groups should play a primary role in guiding local investment priorities and shaping REZ outcomes.

Meaningful and early engagement with local government, community and local leaders is encouraged during the REZ consultation period. The Western Downs Regional Council supports the Queensland Government's proposal that Regional Energy Reference Groups should capture the diversity of voices and

opinions that make up a local community. As proposed, in the Southern Queensland REZ, Regional Energy Reference Groups should be comprised of representatives from local communities, landholders, First Nations groups, industry and community stakeholders. Special care should be taken to ensure that smaller communities, where many renewable energy developments occur, are given fair representation in such reference groups. When possible, it is recommended projects join already existing networks / initiatives, further strengthening the local capability, such as connecting with the local Chamber of Commerce.

It is recommended the Regional Energy Reference Groups play a substantial role in setting local investment priorities and shaping REZ outcomes. Representatives from local communities and other affected stakeholders are well placed to identify potential opportunities and issues with the development of REZ projects and guide investment priorities and REZ outcomes.

3. **Question 3:** Should there be a coordinated scheme in place to invest in local priorities to leave a positive legacy for REZ communities and how should this operate?

RESPONSE: Western Downs Regional Council supports the coordination of community investment programs in the REZ to maximize benefits to local communities. However, care should be taken to ensure that any infrastructure projects or large legacy projects are developed in close consultation with local communities and are consistent with pre-existing local community and strategic plans.

The REZ Framework provides significant potential for the coordination of community investment programs. Where large infrastructure developments or legacy projects are proposed, care should be taken to ensure that these are developed in close consultation with local communities and are consistent with pre-existing local community and strategic plans. For example, in a number of Western Downs communities the local Chamber of Commerce has a 10-year plan for local and community development, and are already working on significant project proposals to meet identified community needs. If community investment programs were to partner with these, or like organizations, it would both build capacity of local communities and ensure that large projects are meeting genuine and identified community needs. Likewise, local government authorities have strategic priorities for their regions and community investment programs should be developed in consultation with these entities to ensure that projects are not counter-productive to, or competing with, long term strategic goals.

It is also suggested that funding for end-of-life activities and rehabilitation at the conclusion of projects be included in the planning of community investment programs. At a minimum, land used for renewable energy projects should be rehabilitated to the same condition as prior to development, if not enhanced.

4. **Question 4:** What else do we need to consider for REZ development in Queensland?

RESPONSE: The environmental impact and effect on reliable water supply for communities within the REZ should be included in the REZ Readiness Assessment. Where necessary, safeguards and baselines should be implemented to ensure that landscapes and communities within the REZ are not adversely affected by the development of the REZ.

Environmental Impact: Western Downs Regional Council urges the State Government to establish baselines for key environmental indicators as part of the REZ assessment and consultation process. Environmental indicators should capture the impact of activities associated with the construction, operation and decommissioning of proposed REZ renewable energy projects. How the impact on local landscapes, threatened species, habitats of threatened species and areas of high environmental value can be mitigated should be determined early in the consultation process.

Reliable Water Supply: Reliable, long-term water supply quality is of vital importance to the Western Downs region. Seven of eight towns in the Western Downs are reliant on surface water, which is already at risk due to climate conditions. The Western Downs Regional Council has also recently completed a number of major redevelopment projects of the regions lakes, lagoons and weirs as a part of its COVID-19 Recovery Package. These projects aimed to stimulate local economies during development and with ongoing tourism opportunities and to improve the region's liveability for community members. The long-term success of these redevelopments relies heavily on the maintenance of existing water quality for the region's surface water.

REZ Readiness Assessments should consider what safeguards should be implemented to ensure that water quality is not comprised by the construction and ongoing operations of renewable energy projects.

Landholder Support: It is strongly recommended that support for landholders is not limited to consultation through Energy Reference Groups. Landholders will need to be educated on their rights and roles to ensure they are able to maximise the opportunities presented by renewable energy developments on their properties, while managing risks and impacts of development. This will require individualized mentoring, support and training for landholders affected by development in the REZ. Training offered in large groups is often counter-productive, with only the loudest voices being heard. To ensure the ongoing and unique needs of individual landholders are met, funding should be provided to support one-to-one facilitation with mentors and educators. This could be achieved through the GasFields Commission Queensland, or similar entity, provided it was appropriately resourced to achieve its intended purpose.