



FRIDAY 3 MAY 2024

Electricity and
Energy Sector Plan
Discussion Paper

WESTERN DOWNS REGIONAL
COUNCIL SUBMISSION

Friday 3 May 2024

Electricity and Energy Sector Plan Taskforce
Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water

Sent via email: EnergyandElectricitySectorPlan@dcceew.gov.au

Dear Electricity & Energy Sector Plan Taskforce Members,

RE: Electricity and Energy Sector Plan Discussion Paper

The Western Downs Region is located in regional Queensland with an area of 37,937 square kilometres and a population of close to 35,000 persons.

We are known as the 'Energy Capital of Queensland' and fast becoming the 'Energy Capital of Australia'. We have:

- approvals for 23 solar farms - 10 are operating or under construction;
- two operational wind farms, one under construction and many more proposed for the region;
- a renewable-based hydrogen plant currently under construction;
- the largest battery plant in Queensland with several more proposed;
- coal mines;
- gas and coal powered power plants; and
- a strong and growing gas resources sector.

Attached is Council's submission on the Electricity and Energy Sector Plan Discussion Paper, which is of strong interest to our Council and our residents.

Should you wish to discuss the content of our Council's submission further, please do not hesitate to contact either myself via mobile on 0407961496 or Council's Economic Development Manager, Lidewij Koene-Sloss via email lidewij.koene-sloss@wdrc.qld.gov.au or phone (07) 4679 4526.

Yours sincerely,

Jodie Taylor
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

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About the Western Downs Regional Council

The Western Downs is located on the Darling Downs, approximately 207 kilometres north-west of Brisbane and 83 kilometres north-west of Toowoomba. The region encompasses the centres of Dalby, Chinchilla, Jandowae, Miles, Tara, and Wandoan, covering nearly 38,000 square kilometres. Combining country lifestyle with modern living, excellent retail offerings and conveniences, the area is home to a population of around 35,000 people and has a large working age population of 60.9% aged 15-64 years.

Built on agriculture and thriving in the intensive agriculture, energy and manufacturing industries, Western Downs Regional Council is focused on making our region a great place to live, work, visit and invest and to ensure our future generation have the opportunity to do what they love whilst enjoying a regional lifestyle and continue the strong economic growth of the region.

Council manages Australia's second largest road network of over 10,000 km with highways leading into the region including the Bunya, Leichhardt, Warrego & Moonie highways, an extensive water, gas, and sewage network, and one of Australia's largest cattle saleyards. Located in the heart of the resource rich Surat Basin, the Western Downs has a diversified energy portfolio with five pillars of energy generation: Coal, Gas, Hydrogen, Wind and Solar cementing our reputation as the Energy Capital of Queensland. This contributes to the region's strong economic growth, investment, and consistently high employment with a GRP of \$3.68 Billion with 15% growth over the past 5 years.

Council's five-year [Economic Development Strategy](#) (2023 to 2028) addresses critical issues and clearly articulates a strategic pathway for the Western Downs to diversify and grow its economy, building on the region's competitive advantage and further attracting business and investment in value-adding opportunities and emerging markets. The Economic Development Strategy focuses on five key pillars:

- **Jobs & Skills** - The Western Downs workforce is growing, optimised and fit for the future.
- **Liveability & Infrastructure** - The Western Downs is equipped with modern infrastructure and quality essential services across the region to enable liveability and wellbeing, whilst sustaining population growth.
- **Population** - The Western Downs demonstrates population growth to meet workforce demands.
- **Productivity & Innovation** - The Western Downs is a recognised leader in agribusiness, energy and manufacturing, and local productivity continues to increase.
- **Sustainability & Resilience** - The Western Downs is future-proofed for a changing climate and transitioning economies, and circular economy principles are stimulated.

This strategy aligns closely with the Council's [Corporate Plan](#) and supports one of Queensland's most progressive [Planning Schemes](#) which is committed to attracting and enabling development and ensure the Western Downs is a diverse region at the forefront of the changing world.

Executive Summary

The Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water released the Electricity and Energy Sector Plan Discussion Paper on 14 March, 2024. Given that the Western Downs Regional Council is well positioned as the Energy Capital of Australia, we are pleased to take the opportunity to respond with the following submission.

Council recognises the economic opportunities provided by the renewables sector and actively attracts renewables investment in the region. Over the past 15 years, strong investment in transmission infrastructure in the Western Downs has placed the region favourably for the development of renewables investment.

Western Downs Regional Council has approved 24 solar farms since 2016, 10 of which are either operational or under construction. The Coopers Gap Wind Farm and Dulacca Wind Farm are operational, and the Wambo Wind Farm is currently under construction. The region will soon be home to a renewables-based hydrogen demonstration plant and has a number of Battery Energy Storage Systems (BESS) installed.

Council believes that this plan will set out a credible pathway to reach reduced emissions in Australia's electricity and energy sector, and ensuring reliable, secure, and affordable energy supply, however, wishes to address the six (6) key topics that may impact the rollout:

- Mobilising Investment to Transform Energy
- Enabling Electrification for a Smooth Transition
- Growing Alternative Low Carbon Fuels
- Building Australia's Clean Energy Workforce
- Maximising Outcomes for People and Businesses

While the department is asking for feedback surrounding a multitude of different topics including reliability, affordability and any other challenges that may arise through the implementation of net zero by 2050; through this submission, Council wants to acknowledge the ongoing impact on existing regional communities, workers and the environment.

It is deeply important for WDRC that regional communities be at the forefront of the planning process when actioning this plan. Due diligence should be undertaken to ensure all potential risks are mitigated in collaboration with impacted Local Governments, and plans are put into place to protect communities and regional economies. Prior to enacting the plan, Council urges the Australian Government to ensure there are adequate pathways to support industry changes, for both people and assets, while minimising environmental impacts.

Recommendations

Western Downs Regional Council supports the transition towards Renewable Energy, recognising its substantial benefits for both the Western Downs Region, the broader State and the nation. While Council supports the ambitious targets set forth by the Federal Government—aiming to achieve 43% below 2005's emissions by 2030 and ultimately net zero carbon emissions by 2050—it is imperative to acknowledge that this significant transformation entails an array of intricate challenges and community concerns.

The Western Downs Regional Council recommends to the Department:

- **Recommendation 1:** Strengthening a coordinated approach to private investment attraction and Foreign Direct Investment.

Considering the multiple tiers of Government that international and domestic investors interface with, a more coordinated approach to investment attraction between all levels of Government, Austrade, TIQ, transmission network providers and other stakeholders would strengthen investment attraction by reducing time for investors and developers. This includes alignment of Government policies and initiatives with targeted goals and priorities to facilitate coordinated efforts in attracting private capital to support the energy transformation.

- **Recommendation 2:** Supporting industry to achieve transformation goals.

Council believes the focus of energy transformation should incorporate practical solutions to support industry in achieving the transformation. Government investment and support for R&D, as well as the provision of financial support and funding incentives will make electrical technologies more widely available and accessible.

- **Recommendation 3:** Leveraging supply chain and workforce capability in regional areas to enable development of low-carbon industry precincts.

There is a significant opportunity for regional areas with already large resources industries to transition and become prime precincts for new clean and low-carbon industries. For the Western Downs, considering that 42% of the national feedlot occupancy is within a 200km radius of Dalby, there is an opportunity for the Government to invest in R&D to leverage animal waste feedstocks and other agricultural feedstocks and enable new industry developments.

- **Recommendation 4:** Government investment in key economic infrastructure, such as connectivity, transport and water.

Australia's Net Zero Plan and the ambitious industry transformation required will significantly increase the national freight task. Regional freight routes play an essential role in many of the large industries within the Western Downs and require significant funding to renew and maintain road assets to support these industries and the Australian economy.

The proposed 680km long Gladstone to Goondiwindi rail link will link the Port of Gladstone to Inland Rail at Goondiwindi and from there to the rest of Australia. It will create Australia's first world class freight supply chain, moving containers directly between the world's largest and most efficient container vessels and locations throughout Australia's eastern states by high-

speed, high-volume rail through central Queensland, New South Wales, and to the west via the main transcontinental line.

In addition to transport networks, a reliable and long-term water supply is of vital importance to improve and sustain the liveability of regional communities and to meet growing industry and population requirements. The Nathan Dam and Pipelines Project is currently the only potential infrastructure solution that will transfer bulk water into the Southern and Darling Downs region. Council is seeking State and Federal Support to undertake a renewed feasibility study of this project in order to align with the Queensland Energy and Jobs Plan, unlocking significant energy opportunities, including hydrogen.

- **Recommendation 5:** Maintaining the understanding of concerns faced in regional communities.

Council holds legitimate concerns that the communities within our region may face adverse cumulative impacts if the requisite supporting infrastructure, including housing, social infrastructure, and other critical services are not adequately addressed in tandem with this transition. While we support the government's targets, it is recommended that a simultaneous approach be adopted to address these concerns to ensure a smooth and equitable transition for all communities and stakeholders involved.

- **Recommendation 6:** Emphasis on mitigation measures for impacted industries and regional communities.

Council finds it imperative that mitigation measures to reduce impacts on affected traditional energy industries be developed. It is recommended that such measures address transition planning, safeguards, processes, and policies to assist those regional communities, businesses and workforce affected through the transition to renewable energy.

Submission

Mobilising Investment to Transform Energy

Q1: What actions are needed to attract the required large scale private capital and household investment in the energy transformation, with or without government intervention?

The Western Downs is centrally located in the heart of Queensland's Southern Renewable Energy Zone and is in the first phase of REZ development. Western Downs Regional Council (Council) supports the transition towards Renewable Energy, recognising its substantial benefits for both the Western Downs Region, the State and nation.

Council's Investment Attraction Approach

Western Downs Regional Council aggressively attracts business and investment opportunities to the region, and this is reflected by the \$7.5 billion dollar in the projects pipeline sector according to the recently released Western Downs Development Status Report.

Council takes a pro-active approach to investment attraction, based on three pillars:

- Progressive and responsive Council
 - Being a fast and responsive local government, whilst meeting due diligence
 - Actively seeking and fostering strategic partnerships
 - Enabling frequent and regular meetings with developers and investors
 - Enabling one point of contact for investors and developers through Council's Economic Development team
- Contemporary and calibrated planning scheme
 - Enabling a pragmatic approach to development assessments (indicated by development applications assessed on average within 13 business days)
 - Assessing developments consistent with a zone on a code assessable base reducing risk for submissions and other complications
 - Offering early guidance on impact assessments and mitigation plans
 - Attending referral meetings together with developers to offer support
- Enabling community connections
 - Introducing developers and investors to key stakeholders
 - Supporting strong business capability via Chambers of Commerce and Toowoomba Surat Basin Enterprise (TSBE)
 - Assisting community engagement across stages of development
 - Offering support and promotion for community engagement exercises

Further attraction of significant Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), private capital and household investment in the energy transformation requires a coordinated and targeted approach to investment attraction, enabled by strategic and multi-agency partnerships and a place-based framework.

Council has already established strong partnerships with regional economic development agencies like Toowoomba and Surat Basin Enterprise (TSBE), Regional Development

Australia (RDA) Darling Downs and South-West, the Department of State Development, Infrastructure, Local Government and Planning (DSDILGP), Trade and Investment Queensland (TIQ).

Promotion of investment collateral and leveraging partnerships and engaging with stakeholders to promote the region as a destination for investment, council amplifies its efforts to attract private capital and showcase investment opportunities. This enhances transparency, facilitates informed decision-making for investors and builds trust and confidence among potential investors.

In addition to this, Council works with Regional Australia Institute (RAI) and TSBE to promote regional investment opportunities and lifestyle through national platforms and initiatives, highlighting success stories of regional investment and workforce attraction to the Western Downs.

By leveraging partnerships and engaging with stakeholders to promote the region as a destination for investment, Council amplifies its efforts to attract private capital and showcases investment opportunities. This enhances transparency, facilitates informed decision-making for investors and builds trust and confidence among potential investors.

Strengthening Coordinated Approach to Private Investment Attraction

A more coordinated approach to investment attraction between all levels of Government, Austrade, TIQ, transmission network providers and other stakeholders would strengthen investment attraction by reducing time for investors and developers. This includes alignment of Government policies and initiatives with targeted goals and priorities to facilitate coordinated efforts in attracting private capital to support the energy transformation. This will also strengthen visibility of the multitude of proposed developments, supporting coordinated network connections and insight into potential cumulative impacts on regional communities.

In addition to the attraction of FDI and private capital investment, investment of the Australian and Queensland Government in projects that will unlock opportunities for investors in clean energy and other low carbon technologies is of significant importance to meet the Government's ambitious goals.

Government Investment

Western Downs Regional Council supports the Federal Government's ambition to become a Renewable Energy Superpower. Western Downs Regional Council is already trademarked the Energy Capital of Queensland and is soon becoming the Energy Capital of Australia based on the diversity of energy generation in the region.

The Queensland Energy and Jobs Plan identifies the Western Downs region as a central location in the Southern Renewable Energy Zone, leading the first phase of development and the state's energy transformation. Many of the new energy technologies, as well as value-adding industries, have a significant water demand.

A reliable and long-term water supply is of vital importance to improve and sustain the liveability of regional communities and to meet growing industry and population requirements. The Western Downs' water supply is currently fully allocated and at risk, yet demand for water

in the region continues to rise as industry and population growth is forecast to increase. The single limiting factor for rapid industry development in the Western Downs is a long-term reliable water source.

Expanding the current national development assessment framework would give opportunity for large, long-term projects to be conducted to result in long-term water supply solutions. The Nathan Dam and Pipelines Project is currently the only potential infrastructure solution that will transfer bulk water into the Western Downs region. Council is seeking State and Federal Support to undertake a renewed feasibility study of this project in order to align with the Queensland Energy and Jobs Plan, unlocking significant energy opportunities, including hydrogen.

Other Support Measures

Other support measures of the Australian and State Governments can consider creating economies of scale through investment in required infrastructure and supply chain capability. Council would like to recommend the Government to prioritise investment in regional areas in Australia that already have a strong resources and energy sector due to the existing capability.

The Western Downs has a strong and diverse energy sector, supported by coal, gas, hydrogen, solar and wind. Whilst the coal industry may consider end-of-life strategies, natural gas is a significant transition fuel to support the transmission grid's equity, reliability and security in the medium to long-term.

The Western Downs Regional Council has significant supply chain and workforce capability supporting the broader energy sector, combined with a pro-active Council seeking investment opportunities and ample land available for development. As a result, the Western Downs region is ideally located to establish new low-carbon and clean energy industries. Council strongly recommends a localised and targeted investment approach in infrastructure that supports new clean energy industries and to develop economies of scale.

Enabling Electrification for a Smooth Transition

Q2: What actions are required to ensure Australia's energy systems can enable increased electrification, while maintaining equity, reliability and security?

Increased Renewable Energy Generation

Western Downs is centrally located in the centre of a Renewable Energy Zone (REZ) classified by the Queensland Government and is in the first phase of development, supporting significant developments supporting the transition to Net Zero.

The region currently has a significant export of traditional energy sources (coal, LNG) and suggests that increased renewable energy generation within the region may provide an opportunity for 'new' export opportunities; such as hydrogen or other clean / low carbon-based fuels from the region. This will result in increased exportation from the region increasing jobs and produce better economic output for the region.

A focus should be placed on ensuring accurate and thorough information and data is sought and compiled on the outlook and future of demand with reference to exporting and the forecasted increase in demand on the system. This will allow for proper planning of future demand and enable investment to accommodate and support this.

Council strongly advocates for ongoing coordination between the Federal, State Government, Local Government Authorities, and community stakeholders to ensure this transition does not create unnecessary disruption to regional communities, that the nation continues to have a reliable energy supply and that the necessary infrastructure is in place to support the transition as it occurs.

Australia's Net-Zero Plan is ambitious in nature and requires significant infrastructure developments. To enable this transmission network, support is required from all levels of government, as well as legislative supports to affected workers. Council urges a flexible approach to accommodate unforeseen challenges during the transition to renewable energy and to develop a strong storage system to support demand peaks.

Council urges the Federal Government to not only look at mitigating impacts of climate change, but also working with relevant other Government agencies and stakeholders to limit unforeseen cumulative impacts of developments in regional areas, and support strengthening regional communities for future generations. Council strongly recommends that this plan is coupled with ongoing, regional stakeholder engagement to ensure that the proposed changes are achievable. Council believes the Federal Government should focus on practical solutions to support industries in achieving the transformation and ensure industries are also committed to achieving the energy capacity and efficient improvement goals.

Availability and Accessibility of Electrification Technology

Increasing electrification will require significant expansion of Australia's renewable electricity capacity, further supporting domestic energy affordability and reliability and Australia's Renewable Energy Superpower ambitions.

Western Downs Regional Council is currently undertaking a benchmark study of carbon emissions of Council as an organisation, as well as the Western Downs as a region. Whilst these reports are yet to be finalised and considered by Council for adoption, a number of recommendations are made that inform abatement opportunities for Council as local government, as well as for key industry sectors.

Despite the increasing availability of electrification technologies, a number of technologies is not yet available on a commercial scale or at a competitive price to fuel-based alternatives. Council recommends the Government to support and invest in R&D, as well as provide financial support and funding incentives to make electrical technologies more widely available and accessible.

Supporting Electric Vehicle Adoption

Western Downs Regional Council agrees that demand flexibility is an important and valuable support in enabling increased electrification. A focus of importance must be placed on smart

technologies that can support this demand such as digital control systems and electric vehicles chargers being readily available.

One area of priority in the Western Downs is increased availability of electric vehicles (EV) charging infrastructure due to the region's vast distances between town centres. Currently there are only two (2) EV charges on public roads, with another four (4) EV chargers at business premises. To support EV adoption as well as regional accessibility, an increased importance should be placed upon the need for these chargers.

Q3: What insights do you have on the pace, scale and location of electrification, and how to embed this in system planning?

Considering Place-Based Needs

Council supports the pace and ambitious targets of the Australian Government to reach Net Zero by 2050, however wishes to emphasise the potential barriers to electrification. Council suggests that this is an area for place-based planning and consultation to be undertaken as each region's areas and therefore needs are different due to population, economy, transport and infrastructure.

For example, when considering a region such as the Western Downs, which is a region that covers almost 38,000 square kilometres, the need for electronic vehicle charges would be less than a metropolitan area based on the number of users however, a focus of importance needs to be placed on this infrastructure due to the vast size of the region.

Ensuring support of regional communities is critical to the Government's ambitious targets towards net-zero. It is imperative that substantial public and stakeholder engagement and education is delivered during the electrification process in an effort to bring communities along on the journey and understand potential impacts.

Enabling Industry Investment and Support

Another barrier would be the limitations to commercially available electric technologies, and their reduced competitiveness based on price. The level of commercially available and accessible technology may impact the pace of the plan. The need for new and updated equipment that supports the electrification process is significant, and coupled with supply chain issues may inflate the costs.

Council suggests strong support be given to the advancement of technologies that could support electrification where appropriate. In addition, the Government should consider potential 'premiums' for low carbon and clean technologies and consider measures to mitigate inflation and supply chain issues where possible.

Consideration should be given to sourcing local equipment as this will enable reduced costs, support local economies, particularly those that are at the centre of Renewable Energy Zones classified by the Queensland Government, such as the Western Downs. Sourcing locally would also assist in reducing the carbon footprint of electrification itself as it would significantly reduce the need for lengthy transportation and use of fossil fuelled transport, especially if the equipment is manufactured locally.

Q4: How can electrification efforts be sequenced to align with expansion of electricity generation and network capacity?

Council suggests a targeted and coordinated approach to expand the electricity generation and network capacity. This will enable new renewables developments to connect to the grid in a coordinated and timely manner. A coordinated approach will avoid grid overload and that services can be delivered in line with demand. Infrastructure needed for electrification also needs to be built and delivered in a timely manner that supports the process. To deliver a staged process that aligns with both demand and network capacity, Council suggests a need for significant and accurate data to be secured that show clear figures for future demand, this will allow for a plan to be produced that enables a staged process that is capable of supporting need while aligning with current network capacity.

Infrastructure needs to be built at a pace the grid can withstand without affecting consumer supply and/or demand. When planning this, thought also needs to be given to localised economic impact and ensure negative cumulative impacts are mitigated. It is also imperative that substantial public and stakeholder engagement and education is delivered during the expansion of electricity generation and network.

Council supports the infrastructure pathway to transform and decarbonise Queensland's and the nation's electricity system along with the current Blueprint indication and plans for Western Downs Region Kogan Creek Power Station to become Queensland's First Energy Hub. Council would also like to see the Federal and State Government ensure the costs of the construction of the SuperGrid are recovered to reduce the financial impact on consumers.

Council understands the New SuperGrid will impact land held privately and suggests the Federal government to work alongside with the State Government to ensure that time frames incorporate sufficient time required for strong landholder liaison and to ensure that agreements are developed in a collaborative and respectful manner.

Council supports the development of renewables within the Western Downs region and trusts that this plan will further enable confidence and financing for new renewables developments. Council, however, urges that strong and respectful consultation should be in place with landholders in relation to both investigation and proposals of new developments.

Growing Alternative Low Carbon Fuels

Q5: What policy settings and certainty are required to support a fair, equitable and orderly transition for the decarbonisation of both natural gas and liquid fuels?

Unlocking Transition to Clean Industries

Western Downs Region has multiple major industries that greatly contribute to the economy via their financial output and generating employment opportunities for residents of the region. Should the major industries be subject to stringent emissions reduction disrupting production and export opportunities, support programs should be available to ensure security for individuals subject to significant employment impacts.

Western Downs region's biggest economic contributors include construction (\$719.1M), mining (\$645.9M) and agriculture, forestry, and fishing (\$618.2M). Australia's highest carbon emitters include agriculture, mining and the energy sector shown through the National inventory by economic sector: annual emissions. The nature of these sectors provides a challenge to abate carbon emissions. Considering that these three sectors make up 31.7%, it is important to provide adequate pathways and policies for people and assets within the community.

The introduction of the medium to long-term Future Gas Strategy needs to be developed with through strong engagement with local government agencies and other local stakeholders, to ensure that all possible regional impacts are understood, and to develop place-based strategies to mitigate impacts and to provide alternative employment pathways.

There is a significant opportunity for regional areas with already large resources industries to transition and become prime precincts for new clean and low-carbon industries. Considering that 42% of the national feedlot occupancy is within a 200km radius of Dalby, there is an opportunity for the Government to invest in R&D to leverage animal waste feedstocks and other agricultural feedstocks and enable new industry developments.

Carbon Capture Storage

Whilst Council understands the Government's interest to explore Carbon Capture Storage (CCS), it takes a strong position against CCS projects proposed in locations in areas with other vital resources, such as water. An example of this is the proposed CCS project in Moonie, as this is proposed to be located in the heart of the Great Artesian Basin (GAB) upon which a significant of agricultural properties and communities rely. Water is our most precious resource.

Workforce Support

Introduction of funding to support the training of workers and businesses from the chosen sectors as seen and mentioned in Western Downs submission for the Energy (Renewable Transformation and Jobs) Bill 2023 to the Queensland government will ensure that regional areas have job/ employment security if there are drastic changes in their current sector and gives the Council assurance that there will be no disruption to our population attraction or growth.

Many of the major sectors of the Western Downs will be greatly impacted by the decrease of carbon emissions such as the agriculture and mining sectors. Introducing something like the Job Security Fund as proposed in the Queensland Government Energy Bill 2023 would allow for any heavily impacted sectors to have a sense of security knowing there are pathways available for them to explore. The fund would not necessarily need to promote new sectors, however, look at providing training on how current sectors are able to improve their carbon footprint.

Regional communities should therefore be at the forefront of the planning process. Due diligence should be undertaken to ensure all potential risks are mitigated in collaboration with impacted Local Governments, and plans are put into place to protect communities and regional economies.

Council advocates for the inclusion of support programs for industries that are fossil-fuel reliant or major contributors to greenhouse gas emissions. While the transition to reduced emissions is always challenging for industry, the financial burden that could be attracted to such changes, for development of innovative technology or the likes, could be detrimental to business operations.

Q6: What actions are required to establish low carbon fuel industries in Australia, including enabling supply and demand, and what are the most prospective production pathways?

Regional Manufacturing Capability

Council suggests to establish low carbon fuel industries in Australia would enable the advancement and use of low emission technologies. Low carbon emission technologies produce less pollution than the traditional energy equipment, which will allow the Western Downs region to further decrease their net emissions. Council suggests further clarification is provided on how the Australian Government will work with Local Governments on the implementation of said technologies and opportunity to value-add local manufacturing capability. The Western Downs Region features a multitude of manufacturing businesses which can be leveraged for industry diversification and value-add opportunities in the supply chain.

Council also suggests options be explored to utilise having equipment manufactured and supplied locally within the region as this reduces the need for fossil fuel transportation, which further decreases the carbon footprint of the region and aligns with the process of electrification. Producing equipment and components locally is also more cost efficient and supports the economic diversification and growth of the Western Downs, which is a key priority when mitigating impacts of the transition away from fuel-based industries.

Council suggests the most prospective production pathway must be fit for purpose, have a common goal of net zero emissions and be available for every industry. This would be achieved by having a collaborative approach through all industries and sectors who will be affected. This is the most effective pathway for this to be implemented throughout the region while catering towards every industry's individual needs and aligning with the pace of industry demand.

Investment in Road and Rail Infrastructure

The Western Downs region has the second largest network of local roads in Australia, while also maintaining significant sections of state-controlled roads.

The strong and diverse economy of the Western Downs requires high volumes of commodities and freight to be transported. This high freight task is compounded by the three highways (Warrego, Leichhardt, and Moonie), supporting north-south and east-west freight contributing largely to Australia's economy.

Regional freight routes play an essential role in many of the largest industries within the Western Downs and require significant funding to renew and maintain road assets to support these industries and the Australian economy.

Considering Australia's growing freight task, the development of Inland Rail will bring widespread and long-term benefits to Australia and further supports the decarbonisation of transportation. Incorporation of the proposed extension of the rail link to the Port of Gladstone will provide further benefits and provide a significant positive impact to the Western Downs and the national economy.

Both road and rail investments will support the growing freight tasks that will come with the decarbonisation of the grid, as well as the supply of waste feedstocks to new low-carbon industry precincts.

Q7: Are the proposed policy focus areas for managing the liquid fuels transition (outlined in Section 4 of the discussion paper) the correct areas to focus on, and what is missing?

Council supports these four areas proposed for managing the liquid fuels transition, however strongly advocates for significant work to be done to reduce the potential costs impact that will be on regional and remote communities that rely on carbon fuel transportation. The Western Downs Region has significant Mining and Agriculture industries both of which will feel the impacts of the shift to low carbon fuels given the volume of liquid fossil fuels currently used and needed to support both sectors. Both regional and rural communities such as the Western Downs currently heavily depend on these fuels to support their daily activities and core essential business activities so viable and fit for purpose alternatives must be sought that do not create financial ramifications for these communities.

The approach to adopting the shift to low carbon fuels must involve key industry stakeholders from all sectors with consideration given to the differing communities to ensure the best outcome for all. A supportive and collaborative environment must be fostered to ensure sustainability. Council suggests that linking in with social license requirements, there needs to be an approach that supports progress for every sector, educating all in how the shift to low carbon fuels is beneficial not only from an environmental perspective, but also on an economical basis. Again, serious consideration should be given to local approaches that assist in stimulating those economies that will be significantly affected by the fuel shift.

Western Downs Regional Council suggests consideration be given to the land use required to accommodate the shift to low carbon fuels, particularly with respect to food production as well as water consumption. In a large agriculture region such as the Western Downs, there is a significant opportunity for agricultural feedstock and animal waste feedstock for low carbon industries to leverage. Sustainable land uses practises and policies should be adopted to ensure the production of biofuels value-adds rather than compete with food production within the region.

Consideration should also be given to water security and the earlier referred Nathan Dam and Pipelines Project to support the growing water needs for industry investment and population growth.

Building Australia's Clean Energy Workforce

Q8: What actions are required to ensure workforce requirements for the energy transformation are met, while supporting equitable outcomes?

Western Downs Regional Council urges the importance of preserving and supporting impacted workforce and further, key special skills that are significant to the process delivery.

The Western Downs, there are currently 234 persons directly employed in coal mining, 229 in exploration and other mining support services, and 627 in electricity supply (of which the latter includes gas-fired power stations and renewables). This workforce makes a strong contribution to the Western Downs economy and these employees and employers need to be assured that there are options in place for them to transition into new careers close to their place of residence. This should assist in mitigating the mental stress these changes could place on workers and regional communities.

Council advocates for a strong Jobs Security Guarantee Fund with the provision and guarantees to support both regional and rural individuals and communities that currently rely on coal-fired power stations. Western Downs Regional Council suggests an important focus be placed on supporting employment outcomes and on developing place-based employment transition solutions, particularly through the Local Jobs Program funded by the Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and executed by Regional Development Australia Darling Downs and Southwest.

To support the recruitment and retention of staff, Council suggests that the Jobs Advocate proposed in Queensland Government's Energy (Renewable Transformation and Jobs) Bill 2023 or similar program should be considered by the Federal government. The Job Advocate will have experience in employment, industry, and training, extensive stakeholder engagement experience in Renewable Energy, Knowledge and expertise within the sector, experience in attracting investment and business resilience coaching, and strong organisational transformation experience to support businesses and community in energy transformation and to support equitable outcomes.

Training and upskilling opportunities should be provided locally to ensure that our workforce has the opportunity to further upskill and transition into new careers in place, supported by strong local industry connections. This will further strengthen the skills that exist within the region to support the energy transition.

Maximising Outcomes for People and Businesses

Q9: What actions are required to ensure better energy outcomes for people and businesses, and maximise their benefit from the energy transformation?

Council suggests that the energy transition benefits all residents, by being affordable and reliable for the end user. Council requests more investment in energy storage systems as this will mean that there is a larger supply available during peak times. Having a surplus of stored energy will allow for a further decrease in energy prices as the price will not be determined by

the demand of the community. Storing energy will reduce energy wastage and can be better utilised throughout the entire 24-hour period which will remove a need for price hikes at peak times.

A different aspect of a positive outcome for people in regard to the energy transformation would be the locally led and offered training and upskilling of the current sector workforce as this would assist with the transition of these people into new careers in the renewed energy sector which would be supported by strong local industry connections. This will further strengthen the skills that exist within the region to support the energy transition but also ensure the workforce is not negatively impacted by the transition to net zero.

Q10: What social licence and circular economy aspects should be considered as part of the pathway for the energy transformation?

Strong Community Partnerships

Western Downs Regional Council strongly agrees with the need for ongoing work to improve community engagement on energy infrastructure including in Local Government Regions such as the Western Downs, which is in the centre of a Renewable Energy Zone (REZ) classified by Queensland government, as it is critical to maintain the trust of the local community and stakeholders. It is vital that all community members are clear on and have access to; the transition to electrification and what it means to them and their communities while ensuring the benefits of the transition are felt by all of the community.

Council has recently released a new Communities Partnering Framework. A strong culture of Communities Partnering has already been established in the Western Downs over the past two decades. This has enabled partnering relationships between the private sector, community organisations and Council, and delivers sustainable economic and social outcomes.

This Communities Partnering Framework will ensure economic, environmental, and social outcomes are protected, nurtured, and advanced for the benefit of future generations. We invite you to learn more about the Communities Partnering Framework [by visiting our website](#). Alongside to the new Communities Partnering Framework is a voluntary self-evaluation that we invite large scale businesses based and operating in the region to undertake.

The purpose of the Framework is for large projects or developments new to the region to understand the clear expectations on the notion of being a 'great neighbour'. This framework can then be used as a benchmark or for reference if and/or when there are instances of these expectations not being met. The framework has been developed to ensure accountability and our intent is to share the completed voluntary self-assessments on our website to celebrate the great initiatives already undertaken across the region, and to inspire others to achieve the same high standards. The key principles we would like developers to uphold to be great neighbours are the following:

- adhering to all legislative and regulatory requirements from all levels of government including
- Actively build, foster and maintain strong partnerships within the community
- Actively contribute and build a diverse, strong, and resilient economy

- Actively contribute to and participate in our communities
- Taking pride in our environment while mitigating adverse impacts
- Developing meaningful partnerships with our First Nations community
- Assessing their impact while celebrating their contributions to our communities

Low Carbon Manufacturing

Western Downs Regional Council suggests initiatives such as the use of low carbon materials for the production of electrification equipment and components be seriously considered as a pathway for the energy transformation as this will reduce emissions while also ensuring a strong social license by doing the right thing for the environment and in turn the community. While considering a low environmental impact, Council also suggests consideration of the lifespan of the components used in infrastructure equipment and manufacturing and urges the importance of ensuring the use of low environmentally impacting components. It could be taken one step further and have assured that the equipment and its components are recyclable, this would further strengthen the social licence position and also support a circular economy model with absolute minimum waste.

Other circular economy models that could be considered are the use of greenhouse gas for fuel to power the electricity system as this will utilise the gas that is already being produced by waste currently and while alternative ways are developed to reduce this, using it in a way that is productive would be another option for circular economy.

Q11: Are there are additional gaps in Australia's energy sector decarbonisation policy that are particularly relevant to the region?

While there may be national policies and incentives to promote renewable energy and encourage investors to invest in renewable energy across the nation, Western Downs would like to see specific programs and support tailored to regional areas like the Western Downs. This includes policies, regulatory frameworks, funding programs, or incentives at the state and federal levels that are targeted at supporting regional renewable energy development and addressing the specific needs of regional communities. Western Downs has a strong track record in attracting private investment in the renewable energy sector and would like to see support from the federal government for regional renewable energy development.

Councils requests the federal government to ensure that regional areas have the necessary infrastructure to support renewable energy development. This not only includes energy infrastructure like transmission lines and substations but also transportation, water, and telecommunications infrastructure to support the needs of renewable energy projects and their workforce. Council is open to working with government agencies and industry partners to identify and prioritise infrastructure projects that support renewable energy development in the region. Council strongly advocates for place-based solutions that support regional economic growth and have sufficient funding for infrastructure upgrades or expansion projects from both federal and state government that benefit renewable energy projects and the wider community.

Council believes decarbonising the energy sector requires a skilled workforce capable of planning, constructing, and maintaining renewable energy infrastructures. Western Downs

Regional Council supports place-based skilling and workforce development initiatives that allow residents to engage in skilling and training programs to support the growth of the renewable energy industry in regional areas. As mentioned on the above, Western Downs currently has a large workforce that works in the non-renewable sector.

While Council welcomes the federal and state governments' ambitious target on renewable transition, Council would like to see the federal government collaborate with industry stakeholders, research institutions, and the other levels of government, so that council can leverage resources and expertise to support renewable energy projects and initiatives. This could involve forming partnerships with industry bodies and Council to develop skills and training programs for example the Job Security fund, Jobs Advocate, or any relevant programs to attract further investment and support workforce development.

Conclusion

Western Downs Regional Council extends its appreciation for the opportunity to respond to the Electricity and Energy Sector Plan Discussion Paper

Council would like the opportunity to provide further insight to the Electricity and Energy Sector Plan Taskforce and to Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water throughout the development the Electricity and Energy Sector Plan and the Net Zero 2050 Plan.

Contact Details

Please do not hesitate to contact either Council's CEO, Jodie Taylor on mobile 0407961496 or email jodie.taylor@wdrc.qld.gov.au or Economic Development Manager, Lidewij Koene-Sloss, via email lidewij.koene-sloss@wdrc.qld.gov.au or phone (07) 4679 4526 should you wish to discuss any aspect of this submission.

Appendix

1. Western Downs Council, Economic Development Strategy 2023 – 2028, [economic-development-strategy-document-ver-22.02.23.pdf \(wdrc.qld.gov.au\)](https://www.wdrc.qld.gov.au/economic-development-strategy-document-ver-22.02.23.pdf)
2. Western Downs Regional Council, Corporate Plan 2021 – 2026, [Plans & Publications Western Downs Regional Council \(wdrc.qld.gov.au\)](https://www.wdrc.qld.gov.au/plans-publications)
3. Western Downs Communities Partnering Framework, [Communities Partnering Framework Western Downs Regional Council \(wdrc.qld.gov.au\)](https://www.wdrc.qld.gov.au/communities-partnering-framework)
4. Western Downs Development Status Report, April 2024, https://www.tsbe.com.au/sites/default/files/uploaded-content/website-content/western_downs_development_status_report_2024.pdf