

## THE CONVERSATION

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# How can Aboriginal communities be part of the NSW renewable energy transition?

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The New South Wales government's roadmap to transition from coal-based electricity to renewable energy involves the creation of five "renewable energy zones" across the state.

These "modern-day power stations" will use solar, wind, batteries and new poles and wires to generate energy for the state. They're part of a broader plan to meet a legislated target of 12 gigawatts of renewable energy and 2 gigawatts of storage by 2030.



## NSW Renewable Energy Zones

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These renewable energy zones include measures to deliver regional benefits such as engagement, jobs and benefit-sharing with local Aboriginal communities. This is a first for an Australian renewable energy program of this scale.

However, two things are needed to maximise this opportunity for Aboriginal people.

First, Aboriginal land councils need greater support and resources to participate effectively in delivery of the renewable energy zones.

Second, there should be a program to facilitate the development of renewable energy projects on Aboriginal-owned land.

Through these actions, the government can help develop partnerships that can deliver revenue and jobs for Aboriginal communities as the state transitions to clean energy.

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### **Maximising opportunities for First Nations communities**

There are some cases of renewable energy projects delivering for Aboriginal communities, such as solar farms engaging unemployed Aboriginal workers. But overall the benefits have been limited to date.

However, legislation requires the NSW government bodies and renewables projects in the renewable energy zones to comply with “First Nations Guidelines” currently under development.

The guidelines will require:

- regional reference groups
- an engagement framework for renewable energy projects, and
- a document reflecting community interests developed with the input of local Aboriginal organisations (land councils and Traditional Owners under Native Title) in each renewable energy zone.

Projects bidding for a “long-term energy supply agreement” from the NSW government - which will guarantee a minimum price for their output - have to comply with the Indigenous Procurement Policy. This includes ensuring a minimum 1.5% Aboriginal workforce and 1.5% of contract value to Aboriginal businesses.

These First Nations guidelines will form part of the tender evaluation, creating incentives for projects to increase benefits for First Nations communities.

The inclusion of these First Nations guidelines in the renewable energy projects is a first for Australian renewable energy. It's likely to significantly improve economic outcomes for Aboriginal communities.

So far, so good.

However, there are also some missed opportunities.

First, if renewable energy projects and the First Nations guidelines are to work well, greater resourcing and capacity-building is needed for local Aboriginal land councils so they can participate effectively.

In addition, the NSW government should develop an Aboriginal-led local and regional level clean energy strategy so communities can identify what they want from this momentous change.

A study by the Indigenous Land and Justice Research Group, based at the University of Technology Sydney, revealed local Aboriginal land councils are eager for renewable energy. This would improve opportunities to live and work locally, boost energy security, lower costs, enable care of Country and create wealth.

However, the study found these communities had little or no knowledge about renewable energy options or how they could benefit.

Only one Local Aboriginal Land Council in the pilot renewable energy zone had prior dealings with renewable energy operators. All were uncertain about how their land assets could be mobilised.

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## More opportunities needed for Aboriginal-owned land in NSW

There are currently no measures to encourage and facilitate renewable energy projects on Aboriginal-owned land in NSW.

Work by Indigenous Energy Australia and the Institute for Sustainable Futures found the best outcomes often occur from “mid-sized” renewable energy projects on Indigenous-owned land.

Examples include:

- the Ramahyuck Solar Farm (Longford, Victoria), which is wholly owned and operated by the Ramahyuck District Aboriginal Corporation. Following government funding, debt financing was secured for construction. The profit generated from the development will be redirected to Aboriginal education and health programs
- the Tuaropaki Geothermal Power Station in New Zealand, which is 75% owned by the Māori, Tuaropaki Trust and 25% by Mercury Energy (a large energy company). The Tuaropaki Trust was developed through financial partnerships and government support. These developments produced long-term income for community programs and other commercial ventures
- the Atlin Hydro Project in Canada, a 100% Indigenous owned and operated project. Government support was critical in establishing the project. Once established, revenues were distributed based on joint clan meetings for health programs and a land guardian program.

Developing projects on Aboriginal-owned land would take more time to identify a workable model, ensure there is support within the land council and local community and develop local capacity. But done well, it can deliver greater benefits for Aboriginal communities.

A government program developed in parallel with the roll out of the renewable energy zones could develop opportunities for renewable energy developments in partnership with local Aboriginal land councils.

Support for meaningful, Aboriginal-led renewable energy projects on Aboriginal land has the potential to make real progress towards the long hoped for benefits of land restitution for First Peoples in NSW.

The time for action is now.