

Chair: opening statement
Ag Energy Social Licence Roundtable
Wednesday 27 March 2024

Welcome everyone to this Roundtable meeting. I'm coming to you from the Canberra region and the beautiful Southern Tablelands - and acknowledge the traditional owners of the Ngunnawal country and of elders past and present.

I particularly welcome those who join the Roundtable for the first time; I hope you find value in the sessions today and the discussion emerging from the sessions.

Before we begin, I want to take a moment to pay tribute to Jon Elder and Karin Stark. Karin – is a well known and recognised leader in the agriculture and clean energy space. Karin has worked to bring the adoption of on-farm renewables as a way of reducing costs for farmers at the same time, reducing emissions and building resilience.

Karin has been a participant of this Roundtable and was instrumental in developing the Renewables in Agriculture conference, now held annually in a regional centre.

Karin's husband Jon, tragically lost his life a couple of months ago in a farm accident on their property at Narromine, northern NSW. I was privileged to visit Jon and Karin's property some years ago to view the solar pumping system Jon installed as part of his irrigation operation. It was a 500-kilowatt system and designed to replace the annual \$500,000 diesel bill.

Jon was in some ways typical of today's modern Australian farmer – committed to using technologies available, to learn and to find new ways of doing agriculture that would derive benefit for the family's farming operation while at the same time, produce environmental outcomes.

Today, I just want to register and acknowledge Karin and Jon's contribution as two fine Australians - to their efforts to advance and share initiatives and knowledge in agriculture with a strong commitment and focus on environmental outcomes.

Today I welcome a good contingent of representatives from the national and state farming peak bodies: NFF, Qld Farmers, NSW Farmers, Victorian Farmers, Cotton Australia, Canegrowers, Farmers for Climate Action, Dairy Australia, AgForce Qld and several irrigation companies,

And I welcome representatives from the Australian Energy Market Operator, the Australian Energy Regulator – and all Energy Charter members.
And especially today - representatives of the renewables sector – those representing solar & wind developers.

If you're joining the Roundtable for the first time – I do want to provide a brief background on WHY and HOW the concept of the Roundtable came about.

For most of us operating in the agriculture and energy sectors - we had become accustomed to staying in our lane and doing what we do best. Australia's energy transition however - has presented us all with a whole set of new challenges – for the ag and rural sector and energy businesses, including AER, AEMO, the AEMC and other national energy entities.

There was recognition that if energy infrastructure was to be built – a relationship with the rural sector was paramount. It's fair to acknowledge that many in the ag sector would there was a lack of recognition about the role of agriculture businesses, farmers and communities – their relationship to agriculture land to grow food and fibre and for the operation of an ag business. Much of the land sought for infrastructure is highly productive, supporting and sustaining regional communities, and critical to Australia's food and fibre production.

The Roundtable was formed some 18 months ago in recognition that greater collaboration between the two sectors was necessary – to bring together different entities, to learn, and to lay bare the challenges faced and to find opportunities to do things better.

We've had the Energy Infrastructure Commissioner's report on his Community Engagement Review - delivered just a few weeks ago – which provided a series of recommendations, accepted in principle by the Australian Government.

The Energy and Climate Ministerial Council meeting held on 1 March saw C'wealth, state and territory Governments committing to work together, along with industry and councils to respond to the Commissioner's report recommendations as part of a broader community engagement strategy. Let's keep a close watch on what emerges here in due course.

The Ag Energy Taskforce – represented by agriculture peak organisations – highlighted in the submission to the Commissioner's Community Engagement Review – the cultural differences and power imbalance between those seeking to build new energy infrastructure - and the communities and landholders destined to

host much of the new infrastructure. *We'll focus more on the Community Engagement Review later in today's Agenda.*

It's important to recognise the broad range of issues we're all dealing with across the energy transition landscape – these are broadly jurisdictional relating to infrastructure projects region by region, and state by state – some forming part of AEMO's Integrated System Plan – and some not.

As transition occurs, the Roundtable is working to facilitate relationships, foster collaboration and build knowledge and understanding to achieve better outcomes for landholders and regional communities.

The Roundtable continue to identify opportunities for ag peak organisations and often individual landholders - to work with the energy sector to find better ways of doing things. We can only do this if we're willing to go the extra mile to examine those issues where the two sectors can work together.

We know that media coverage around the infrastructure build has often been negative – due mostly to poor or ill-informed engagement practices with landholders and communities. The Infrastructure Commissioner's report on Community Engagement laid bare these issues. We have all learnt that social licence is a critical piece of the energy transition puzzle. Securing social licence involves many things – and getting community engagement right is a good start.

The Energy Charter has developed the Better Practice Social Licence Guideline, launched in May 2023. This followed collaboration between a Community Outcomes Group (COG), made up of landholder and community representatives and a group of transmission businesses.

The Group included representation from the Energy Infrastructure Commissioner, Bundaberg Regional Irrigators' Group, National Farmers' Federation, National Irrigators' Council, RE-Alliance, Tasmanian Farmers, Queensland Farmers' and Victorian Farmers Federation. The Energy Charter Industry Collaborators included Energy Charter Full Signatories Transgrid (NSW, ACT) Powerlink Queensland (QLD) and TasNetworks (TAS) + #BetterTogether Collaborators AusNet (VIC) and ElectraNet (SA).

Since the launch of the Better Practice Guideline – the AER has also sought stakeholder input on how they might best approach social licence for transmission businesses. A concern of ag businesses and consumers more broadly would be – how the work involved to secure social licence is built into the energy businesses'

pricing paths submitted to the AER for approval. Any further resultant increase in retails costs as a result, would be of concern to all consumers.

We suggest a System Thinking approach to social licence should also acknowledge that renewable developers, system planners and transmission businesses all obviously have a role to play here. A greater effort is needed to align renewable energy developers with transmission businesses to meet customer and community expectations.

AEMO, as part of the Draft Integrated System Plan 2024 – released a couple of months ago - has included a section on Social Licence. AEMO acknowledges that social licence is an area of continued learning and development.

AEMO has received input from its Advisory Council on Social Licence. As a member of the Council, I have had an opportunity to provide feedback on practical ways that improved and coordinated engagement can be done when entering a community and/or region.

The Infrastructure Commissioner pointed to the lack of coordination occurring in community engagement – Recommendations broadly focused on improving engagement through better coordination of opportunities for local benefits and economic development.

The Commissioner also emphasised the need for improved coordination between the Commonwealth and state jurisdictions. *We will talk more about the Community Engagement Review in Session 2 today.*

Sabiene and Amy will update us on the Landholder Engagement Training, developed by the Energy Charter – a great initiative! The training provides a forum to hear directly from landholders on what's going well and where things can be improved – as well as how innovative partnerships are creating shared benefit.

Thanks everyone – I look forward to your participation in the program.