



Submission to the Offshore Wind Industry consultation

Australian Senate 2024, August 30th

The Gippsland Climate Change Network is a not for profit, community-based organisation servicing the Gippsland community. This submission reflects our experiences and perspectives on the development of the offshore wind industry in our region. As a community that is deeply engaged with and affected by these developments, our insights are drawn from direct involvement in the consultation processes, ongoing community engagement, and the significant efforts of local stakeholders to balance economic growth with environmental stewardship. GCCN has been on the community consultative committee for the Southerly Ten (formally Star of the South) proposal for the past 5 years and has organised the Gippsland New Energy Conference for the past 3 years and auspice the Gippsland New Energy Website which provides the community with updates of local renewable projects.

(a) The efficacy of community engagement and benefit in planning, developing, and operating the offshore wind industry

The consultation process for the offshore wind industry has been generally clear and transparent. Our submission supported the development of the industry, recognizing its potential benefits for the community and the broader region. Locally, there was some commentary on the importance of implementing proper environmental controls, which, while acknowledged, was recognized as a matter to be addressed in the future stages of development.

Community engagement has been effective to an extent, but there is still significant work to be done within local communities in articulating their specific needs. Ensuring that there is a robust local workforce, clear community benefit schemes and supply chain to support the industry is crucial and can begin now that the extent of the offshore wind zone has been determined.

Importantly, the Government demonstrated a willingness to listen to community concerns, particularly regarding the protection of sensitive environmental areas. The decision to safeguard the immediate area near Wilsons Promontory and to adjust the offshore wind zone to 10 kilometres from the shore to mitigate visual amenity impacts is a testament to that. These adjustments reflect a balanced approach that takes into account both the need for renewable energy development and the preservation of local environmental and community values. We look forward to future opportunities to be able to guide the development of this pathway to a successful transition from fossil fuels.

(b) Community engagement within the existing Australian Government offshore wind industry regulatory and legislative frameworks

There is currently some confusion regarding these industry regulatory and legislative frameworks relationship between State and Federal Governments in the context of offshore wind development. This confusion is exacerbated in Gippsland by the competing interests of 12 proposed wind farms, presented by ten different proponents. Such complexity underscores the need to consolidate the process and provide a streamlined approach that minimizes the risk of community fatigue. Encouragement needs to be given to Industry to consolidate its community consultation process.

As the process moves forward, there is now a valuable opportunity to deepen community engagement. However, it is critical that local communities are afforded fair opportunities to comment on developments. These communities often lack the technical expertise and time necessary to compile thorough responses, which can lead to their voices being inadequately represented in the decision-making process.

To address this, a mechanism for community benefit sharing should be implemented immediately. By ensuring that funds are available to support local communities, we can foster the creation of more robust and meaningful responses. This approach will help ensure that the process is inclusive and that the benefits of offshore wind development are distributed equitably across the affected regions. One potential solution could be the establishment of Community Power Hubs, which would address deeper energy issues within regional communities and directly link offshore wind projects to tangible benefits for townships throughout the broader region.

(c) The adherence to the principles of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent from Traditional Owners of the affected Sea Country by the Australian Government and offshore wind industry

The involvement of Traditional Owner groups by proponents of offshore wind projects in Gippsland has been both real and considerable. This marks a significant and positive shift in how these groups are engaged in the development process, leading to a new paradigm in their involvement.

We have observed that proponents are increasingly responsive to the needs and concerns of local Indigenous communities. This proactive and respectful engagement is a promising development and should be strongly encouraged. It not only aligns with the principles of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent but also sets a strong foundation for genuine collaboration and partnership with Traditional Owners.

Encouraging and supporting this level of involvement will help ensure that the development of offshore wind projects respects the rights and aspirations of Traditional Owners, contributing to more sustainable and equitable outcomes.

(d) The impact of the offshore wind industry on marine life and marine environments in Australian waters, including strategies for impact minimization and management

Climate change will have a major impact on marine life, significantly altering the existing marine environment due to increasing water temperatures and acidity and change the current ecology and biodiversity of our local marine environments. However, it is important that impacts and management strategies to minimise impacts of the offshore wind industry on the marine environment are assessed. It is also important that potential benefits of these offshore structures on marine life and ecology are also investigated.

It should be noted that experience from offshore wind projects around the world indicates that in some circumstances the structures have had a positive impact on marine life by creating artificial reefs offering shelter to various species. This is not dissimilar to offshore oil and gas structures that have been prevalent in our waters.

Local Wind company, Southerly 10 (formally Star of the South) has been actively engaged with local fishermen and fishing groups for over five years, demonstrating a strong commitment to understanding and addressing the concerns of those who rely on the marine environment. Additionally, they have initiated extensive considerations for the marine ecosystem as part of their project planning.

We are confident that these efforts are leading to the development of appropriate environmental safeguards for the marine environment. As the project progresses, we look forward to future opportunities to guide and support their continued focus on minimizing and managing the impact on marine life and habitats.

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