

NSW's coal heartland to host state's newest renewable energy zone

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The Hunter Valley is to become the home of NSW's fourth renewable energy zone after a last-minute change to the state government's new energy roadmap.

Michael Johnsen, the Nationals MP for the Upper Hunter, will propose an amendment to the [electricity infrastructure investment bill](#) as soon as Tuesday as the government seeks to pass several new laws through Parliament in what could be the final sitting week of 2020.

Mr Johnsen said the move was all about "setting the Hunter up to capture even more of the economic benefits offered" by the booming solar and wind farm sector and emerging storage technologies.

"The Hunter benefits from some of the strongest energy resources anywhere in the world, including coal, solar, wind and pumped hydro," he said. "[It] already has substantial transmission infrastructure given it has powered the state for the past 50 years and more and, we have an opportunity to increase that."

NSW has already established three zones where the government hopes streamlined approval processes combined with some technical support will lure some \$32 billion in new investment in renewable energy.

The existing hotspots are in the central west, around Dubbo, the Riverina and New England.

The plan to accelerate renewable energy sources in NSW's main coal mining and coal-fired generation base comes as internal battles over climate policy have broken out within federal Labor after its local MP Joel Fitzgibbon [last week quit the opposition cabinet over his party's low-emissions policies](#).

NSW Labor, though, has thrown its support behind the state's plans for a special renewables region for the Hunter and the Central Coast, saying Mr Johnsen was "just playing catch-up" to the realities of the transition under way.

Labor's energy spokesman Adam Searle noted the energy bill had been approved by the joint Liberals-Nationals partyroom without the inclusion of the Hunter, indicating the amendment was hurried and followed similar changes to the bill put forward by Labor.

"The bill has nothing for local jobs, for local businesses or for local procurement," Mr Searle said, adding that his party would seek amendments to require a component of NSW-sourced work from the renewables expansion.

Energy Minister Matt Kean said the Hunter was "a prime location for a renewable energy zone given its strong renewable resources and transmission links".

"We are happy to work with any community in the state that wants to host new energy infrastructure and unlock the roadmap's economic benefits for generations to come," he said.

However Martin Rush, the mayor of Muswellbrook whose region takes in AGL's two remaining coal-fired power plants of Liddell and Bayswater and many of the big thermal coal mines in the Hunter, said it was "nonsense" to not have a renewable zone for his area.

"The Upper Hunter is going to be home to half the renewable generation and storage - excluding the Snowy 2.0 pumped hydro project - whether the government has a policy for that or not," said Mr Rush, who was a Labor candidate for Mr Johnsen's seat prior to the state elections in 2019 before pulling out.

Among the biggest projects are the \$1.2 billion Liverpool Range windfarm of 1000 megawatts, expected to be completed by 2022-23 and a 500 megawatt lithium-ion battery array set to be operational by 2021-22, he said.

The Hunter's emerging energy eco-system

