

Renewable energy zone for New England to challenge output of coal-fired power stations

ABC News ABC New England 10 July 2020

The New South Wales Government says a \$79 million renewable energy zone (REZ) announced for the New England region has the potential to produce as much energy as the state's coal-fired power stations combined.

Energy Minister Matt Kean said an extra 8,000 megawatts of electricity would be supplied to the market by renewable sources, providing cleaner and cheaper energy to consumers.

"We're building a modern-day power station," he said.

"The REZ that we're announcing for New England will be the equivalent size of all the state's coal-fired power stations that we currently rely on for our electricity."

The Minister also moved to allay landowners' concerns about potential impacts on farmland.

"The reason that we're coordinating the build of this new generation and transmission is so that we can ensure that the infrastructure is going where it's accepted," he said.

"That means not on prime agricultural land but on land where the social licence is there and the community wants this infrastructure."

New England's REZ is the second of three to be announced after the pilot was launched in the Central West last month.

"The New England REZ will be able to power 3.5 million homes and, when coupled with Central West Orana REZ, sets the state up to become the number one destination across Australia for renewable energy investment," Mr Kean said.

He said the investment would attract other new industries and employment to the region while also offering the landholders involved additional income.

"There will be another source of revenue for those landowners that want to have these new electricity-generation facilities on their properties, whether it be solar or wind."

Boost for drought and bushfire-hit areas

The REZ footprint includes the Tenterfield, Inverell, Glen Innes, Guyra, Armidale, Uralla and Walcha council areas, where the impacts of drought and bushfires in recent years continue to be felt.

The project is expected to create employment for 2,000 people during construction and 1,300 ongoing jobs.

New England is home to the state's two largest windfarms, and Northern Tablelands MP Adam Marshall said benefits from the new investment would flow into smaller communities.

"It's set to take us from a region that has always, throughout our whole history, been a net importer of energy to one that is not only going to be a net exporter of energy, but we're going to be helping to power NSW for decades to come," Mr Marshall said.

"It's going to set this region up economically for generations to come."

Mr Marshall said it was "incredibly exciting" and with the state controlling the zone, he said he hoped that would "reduce community angst".

"It means we get to control where they go, the size of them and what they look like and the mix of energy generation in our region, and that's something that we've never been able to control before."

'Get on the front foot'

Andrew Bray, the national coordinator of the Australian Wind Alliance, said the region presented excellent wind and solar opportunities and believed the zone could provide additional income to agricultural producers.

He said \$50 million was being paid to farmers in lease payments from wind farms.

"I would encourage local community and business leaders to really get on the front foot and be ready to get the most out of this opportunity."

He said community funds across individual projects could be pooled to deliver dividend projects and make New England a better place to live.

"Now's the time, really, to be thinking about how the New England community can leverage those kind of strengths to build their economy."