

Proposed Ballalaba solar array

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There is a proposal to build a solar array and battery system near Wallaces Gap Road, Ballalaba.

It's purpose is to maintain Braidwood's electricity supply in the event that the main power line from Captains Flat is cut, by storm, fire or whatever. This would be of obvious benefit to the whole community, especially in the case of an extended interruption.

An extended interruption of supply nearly came to pass during the Black Summer fires, and the town of Cobargo did lose its supply for an extended period. The proposed Ballalaba array is supported by a bushfire resilience grant, specifically to address this risk.

The anonymous Sane Solar Power Group (SSPG) has chosen to oppose the project. In a mail-out flier and a petition they give a quite unbalanced account of the project's benefits and raise a range of potential problems many of which are quite unlikely or even fanciful.

I write as a co-founder of the local group Braidwood Clean Energy. It was BCE's initiatives that have led, ultimately, to the proposed Ballalaba array, though it is well short of our earlier aspirations.

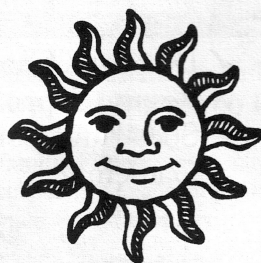
We (BCE and others) agree with SSPG that a locally-owned and controlled solar farm that supplied the district with clean renewable electricity all the time would be a good thing. In fact it is what we have worked for, for over a decade.

The fact that the proposed array would directly supply the district only during interruptions to the grid supply from Captains Flat is taken by SSPG as grounds for objection. However SSPG skates over the main benefit (a resilient power supply) and misconstrues the reasons for this more limited arrangement. It is not because of greedy developers but because of antiquated and inflexible rules on electricity pricing and land leasing – the culprits are Essential Energy and the NSW government.

Other potential problems raised by SSPG are unlikely or fanciful. SSPG implies that the array could cause water pollution and soil erosion, and threaten nearby forests, biodiversity, native pastures, and

wildlife such as the scarlet robin and the wedge-tailed eagle. SSPG offers no reasons to expect these harms, and they are highly unlikely.

The array would sit in the paddock unmoving. Solar panels and sheep are mutually beneficial. The sheep keep the grass down and reduce fire risk, and the panels provide shade and shelter for the pastures and the sheep. It is documented that sheep are more productive with solar panels, suitably spaced.



Not mentioned as environmental concerns by SSPG are the multiple effects of using fossil fuels to generate electricity, including scarred landscapes, harmful air pollution spreading for hundreds of kilometres, and promoting global warming, which is already having dramatic impacts through droughts, fires and floods. The proposed array would eliminate those harmful effects from the electricity it supplies.

SSPG is concerned about increased risk of fires but they don't explain why. I have never heard of fires started by a solar array, whereas fires are frequently started by sparking power lines. Perhaps a local source of electricity would reduce fire risk.

This project would not open the way for the countryside to be dotted with industrial projects, as claimed by SSPG. The Development Application states that it is proposed as primary production (of electricity), not as an industrial development. The developing firm, EDPR, has a track record with solar arrays, so presumably it knows what it is doing. The evaluation of the DA would certainly address any such concerns.

SSPG says we don't know who will pay for remediation should the array pass its use-by date. The De-

velopment Application submitted by EDPR specifically states that remediation would be undertaken as part of the project, which implies that it would be paid for by the owners. This concern seems to have no basis.

One might note that miners, on whom our electricity supply currently depends, are notorious for walking away from their messes, as witnessed by the many old gold mine shafts dotted around our district, not to mention the scarred Hunter Valley and other places.

As to ownership, the detailed proposal for the array has been developed by the Canberra company EDP Renewables Australia, formerly ITP Development. It is part of an international network of such companies, but it is not an 'overseas group'. EDPR has experience building and operating several community-scale solar farms around NSW.

Once built, the array would be operated by a public company. Ownership would depend on who owns shares in the operating company. (This is also true of Essential Energy, to which a large amount of Braidwood wealth already flows.) EDPR stated clearly at its information sessions in March that Braidwood residents could invest in the project, like anyone else. There is nothing stopping local residents from forming a syndicate and taking some ownership, which many of us would welcome.

SSPG raises issues of concern for neighbouring properties, again including unlikely environmental harms, but also 'depressed land values' and 'totally inadequate' shrubbery to screen the array. It offers no evidence that neighbouring land values would be depressed. If harmful environmental impacts are minimal or non-existent then neighbouring land values are unlikely to be affected.

SSPG claims there has been inadequate consultation with the community. BCE has run many public meetings and information sessions over some years. We would have welcomed more interest and constructive participation. If people chose not to come to those, or to the information sessions with EDPR in March, that was their choice.

BCE is an open organisation. You can find out who its members are, what are the sources of occasional grants and where it derives its information from.

SSPG might enhance its credi-

bility if its members had the courage to reveal themselves, along with who has funded the campaign, including a rather expensive mail out, and from where it has derived its list of concerns. We know there are organised and well-funded campaigns by interested parties to disparage clean energy projects across the country.

In summary, most of the time the array would have little effect on most local residents. Electricity would come from the grid and charges would be as they are now. The owners and operators of the array would derive profit from buying low and selling high, but this would be little different from now, when profit is taken by retailers and by Essential Energy.

The only issue that seems to emerge clearly from SSPG's objections is that some people do not want to be able to see the array. SSPG describes a screening fence of three-metre high shrubbery as 'totally inadequate' and refers to the local 'beautiful landscape unmarred by a shiny power plant'. That would depend on the eye of the beholder. Anyway, instead of just complaining SSPG could simply request taller screening by trees.

Is visibility really what's behind this campaign? Or might there be other, unstated agendas?

SSPG claims to be not against solar farms, but the provocative tone of its claims and its raising of some unlikely grounds for objection would seem to belie that claim. Unless of course the solar farm was in someone else's backyard.

It has been true for some years that electricity from photovoltaic (solar) panels and wind turbines are the cheapest forms of new electricity generation. They also do far less harm to local environments and to the planet than other sources. Those who benefit from present arrangements are running a huge, global campaign to discredit clean energy, but they are losing, as is demonstrated every time someone installs a solar panel on their roof. They might be losing the war, but they are still seriously delaying our transition to a cleaner, safer society.

Braidwood has the chance to host and thus promote cleaner electricity generation. Legitimate local concerns certainly need to be addressed. A scare campaign is not the way to do that, it only divides our community.