

A short history of the debate over the Wallaces Gap Solar Farm debacle

Since the mid-March announcement of this proposal to put an A1 (industrial) solar development in a RU1 (Agricultural) area (currently prohibited under the existing LEP) we've learnt a lot.

BCE (like Pontius Pilot) say they left site selection to EDPR (the experts). It was the developers who chose the site without any discussion or consultation those neighbouring the site it chose. I don't know why EDPR selected 873 Wallaces Gap Rd, but I've hazarded a guess below. If wrong I'm happy to be corrected.

Why a Solar Farm? The reason for wanting a solar farm is to provide Majors Creek and Braidwood with power should the existing grid line between Captains Flat and Majors Creek fail. It is, at core, a proposal for a back up plant.

A tertiary benefit is the plant would supply 100% renewable energy to Braidwood/Majors Creek when the main grid is down (around 1% to 2% of the time). The rest of the time the plant's output would be sold and feed into the existing grid where it would be mixed in with coal and gas generated power for everyday supply.

Site selection. The best all round solution would be build the solar farm at Majors Creek where it would DIRECTLY 'plug in' to the Majors Creek/Braidwood power loop. That would be the most secure place to build the farm because there'd be no need for long connecting lines (running through high bush fire areas) to connect the solar plant to Majors Creek. The plant and connect point would be virtually alongside. What's more sealed road access from Braidwood to Majors Creek is far superior to that provided by the narrow and unsealed road that services Wallaces Gap. A RFS station is in Majors Creek - and there's a potential industrial site (the Dargues Mine site) available. I don't know why this far superior site wasn't chosen, but it wasn't. Ask those involved why (if you can find out who was involved in that decision making process). Maybe EDPR would know?

The developer. From a developer's point of view the advantages of the Wallaces Gap site are,

- (1) It is remote, out of sight location, so the backlash from larger population areas (the NIMBY effect) would be minimised, if not avoided.
- (2) A site lease cost at somewhere around \$600 a week is cheap. That's about what the landowner gets. The owner/operator of the plant doesn't have to fork out a million \$ or two to buy the land, nor are they - in the final analysis - responsible for the very expensive bill that comes with site remediation. This cost falls on the landowner who is unlikely to have the money to pay for it.
- (3) By building their plant near - underneath the existing input line from Captains Flat, EDPR will not have to bear the cost of putting in any transmission lines of their own.
- (4) Scrutiny about such matters as site remediation, worries about fire and water pollution risks/damage are likely to be less intense/visible because most town people, naturally enough, aren't interested in studying details about a 'microgrid' (in reality a 10,000+ solar panel plus BESS lithium-ion battery plant) located out in the 'remote' bush.

Site flaws. From the broader community's viewpoint this site has many drawbacks.

Principally,

- (5) If the plant is built at Wallaces Gap there is still about 7 kms of exposed line in from the Wallaces Gap solar farm site to Majors Creek. This line passes through high-risk bushfire areas.

If that line between Wallaces Gap and Majors Creek goes down, then no power from the solar farm will get through to power Majors Creek/Braidwood. Zilch. The back up has gone.

(6) Siting the solar farm in an already high fire risk area raises the fire risk even higher for everybody in the near neighbourhood, not just those living adjacent to the plant. Lithium-ion battery water pollution risks (via the release of 'forever' chemicals into farm and drinking water/waterways) could ruin neighbouring farms. These are major, not frivolous, concerns.

The Wallaces Gap site is a poor one, a sub optimal one with many negatives. As one of our group members succinctly put it, Wallaces Gap is simply "the wrong place to put a solar farm".

Update. While writing this piece (May 31) Dr Geoff Davies (a founder of BCE) announced on Facebook that the plan is that EDPR will develop/build the plant and then hand it over (ie. sell it) in a way that will enable locals to buy shares in (and operate) the new company. That's good news. But details are vague as nothing concrete is yet in place.

I don't know how many of you were already aware of the fact that EDPR doesn't intend to hang around very long. In its advertising EDPR claims to be a community minded partner. That suggests a long-term relationship. EDPR's now revealed transient interest in our community may explain why the developer's DA has failed to commit to anything by way of compensation for any of the damage its plant might cause others or have a site remediation plan in place. They won't be around. The current DA has no such safety nets in place.

Will the new 'owner' put them in place? Why don't our very inaccessible MPs fight to make sure they are? All we hear from our political representatives is the sound of silence.

This new (to us) revelation goes a long way toward explaining why neither EDPR/BCE ever contacted (let alone consulted with) properties around the site about their proposal before it was lodged at Council. Their DA had already been lodged with QPRC before their first and only information sessions were held on March 19. The horse was up and running before the race was announced. That isn't community consultation.

The people of Ballalaba/Bendoura have had to prise information out of EDPR/BCE. Apparently we are expected to keep quiet and passively accept our fate as collateral damage in the pursuit of the common good as defined by BCE (and Minister Bowen). BCE is NOT an elected body. It is a lobby group in pursuit of its own, albeit laudable, goals. Yet when the people who are expected to live with this solar farm forever ask questions about issues that impact on THEIR lives, livelihoods, assets and lifestyles they are shouted down as being divisive, community wreckers and/or advocates for fossil fuels. Are they to be condemned for raising their very real reservations about this DA? Isn't that how democracy is meant to work?

In summary. The DA for the Wallaces Gap 10,800 solar panel + BESS is flawed. Many of the expert reports in the DA are 'tick-the-box' desk written submitted show no understanding of local conditions. Some of those reports contain errors. The so-called community consultation process referred to in the DA was also flawed - and rushed.

Two of the reasons for people getting heated and emotional are (a) that submissions to QPRC had long closed before the debate we've seen over the last couple of weeks had even started and (b) there was very little time to research this complex DA - and to see what it didn't cover as well as the soundness of what it did.

All up, the whole process has been more than a bit of a mess.

Politics. That our Federal government wants to quickly roll out clones of this DA all over regional NSW almost certainly means that this sorry and unnecessarily painful process is likely to be inflicted on many other rural communities. If we fight to get justice here in our community maybe, just maybe steps will be put in place to ensure the people who live near and are supplied by solar farms are treated fairly.