



The Energy
Charter

Regional Energy Accord

Wimmera Southern Mallee

Wednesday, 20 August
& Thursday, 21 August 2025



In August 2025, the Wimmera Southern Mallee hosted three important conversations as part of the Regional Energy Accord process. Each built on the other, giving local voices a chance to reflect not just on the Regional Energy Accord, but on the journey of the energy transition in the region with the Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner, Tony Mahar. These conversations were made possible by the work of the Wimmera Southern Mallee Development (WSM), Chris Sounness and his team, who brought people together, ensured broad representation and grounded the discussion in the region's lived reality.

It began with a **Business Preparedness Workshop**, where local business leaders, organisations, and community members sat down with Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner, Tony Mahar. The focus was sharp: housing shortages, workforce retention, rising energy costs, and the need for hyperlocal procurement. Optimism and concern sat side by side, but the message was clear, the region must not be left behind.

The following morning we observed the **WSM Collab** in action, where collaborators came together. This award-winning model of genuine collaboration showed what alignment between industry and local leadership can look like in practice. Later the **Wimmera Southern Mallee Regional Partnerships Group** gathered at Longerenong Agricultural College. Their stocktake reminded us that the Accord will only succeed if it strengthens the work already underway, not duplicates it.

Finally, the **Roundtable** brought together a remarkable cross-section of the community: farmers, businesses, councils, industry and local leaders. The conversation was rich and complex, surfacing mistrust, division and concern, and also aspiration, opportunity and hope. With The Energy Charter and other partners in the room as observers, participants understood that their insights would shape how the proposed Accord evolves into a national framework.

This Report Back draws together the insights and aspirations shared across these four touchpoints. It reflects the voices of those who live and work in the Wimmera Southern Mallee: farmers, business leaders, local government, community advocates and regional organisations. Their contributions highlight the scale of the challenge but also the opportunity to set a gold standard for how the energy transition can strengthen regional communities.



What we heard - Business Preparedness Workshop

1. Confidence is the currency of investment

Trust, clarity, and visible wins are essential before businesses and farmers will commit. Participants stressed that return on trust must come before return on investment.

“Businesses will invest if opportunities are real. Businesses will not invest if opportunities aren’t yet real.”

“We need clarity and confidence in what’s happening before we can move forward.”

2. Housing and workforce bottlenecks threaten growth

The housing shortage and workforce retention issues are directly limiting business expansion and stability. Without addressing housing, workforce attraction and retention will remain fragile.

“We had someone lined up, but they couldn’t find a place to live, so they walked away.”

“Even when we find workers, they’re lured away by higher wages in mining or elsewhere.”

3. Hyperlocal procurement builds trust and lasting benefit

Participants called for a sharp definition of “local” that prioritises businesses within WSM boundaries. Hyperlocal procurement is seen as essential to ensuring renewable projects deliver real, lasting community benefit.

“Renewable projects need to put locals first.”

“We’re here for the long haul. Fly-in, fly-out contractors aren’t.”

4. Coordination, liveability, and equity are non-negotiable

Fragmentation risks eroding momentum. Participants emphasised the need for unified local leadership, investment in liveability (housing, childcare, health, culture) and equity across gender and First Nations participation.

“We’re hearing the same lines at every meeting, but we’re not hearing how they connect.”

“Wimmera is a great place to live.”

“Don’t come in with your mind made up. Co-design it with us or don’t bother.”

5. The transition is real, timing and co-design will decide success

Optimism was strong, but participants warned against rushing without solid foundations. A just, community-led transition requires genuine co-design, local ownership and benefits that are tangible and fairly shared.

“The energy transition is happening, that’s not in question. The question is whether we’re ready.”

“If we get this right, we can set the region up for decades. If we get it wrong, we’ll be picking up the pieces.”



What we heard - Regional Partnerships Workshop

1. Communities feel left behind

Local leaders described a sense of distance between the promise of energy projects and the lived reality on the ground.

“The community needs to be brought along on the whole transition; they feel left behind.”

The Regional Energy Accord can bridge this gap. A fair and just transition means not just building turbines or solar parks, but ensuring regional people see, feel and shape the benefits.

2. Tangible local benefits must be shown

Participants were clear: abstract promises of energy and climate gains mean little compared to the everyday needs of rural communities.

“No one cares about energy, environment. We do care about our hospitals and schools. Outcome and benefit in a tangible way, ‘ah-hah.’”

The Accord is an opportunity to anchor national principles in local outcomes: better services, jobs, and infrastructure that prove to communities they are not just hosts, but beneficiaries of the transition.

3. From early acceptance to fear and distrust

The Wimmera has lived both sides of the story: early projects like Murrawurra and Warracknabeal were widely accepted, but uncontrolled prospecting from renewable developers has eroded trust.

“So much prospecting has created uncertainty and fear. There has been no overarching vision, and the view in our Shire has become negative as a result.”

The Regional Energy Accord can provide that missing framework, setting boundaries, expectations, and a shared vision that balances opportunity with fairness.

4. Developers must front up

Industry participants acknowledged hard truths: too often, engagement has been transactional, rushed or insufficient.

“Developers need to own it, do meetings in person, not online. Just by turning up, we need to front up.”

The Accord can set cultural expectations for industry: honesty, presence, and long-term relationships must replace tick-a-box consultation.

5. A call for culture change

Many reflected that the last decade has squandered potential. A \$10 billion opportunity for the region has instead become a story of division and resistance.

“If we said ten years ago our region had a \$10 billion opportunity, no one would have argued. We’ve obviously done something very wrong.”

“The journey ahead for the Regional Energy Accord is all about culture change, not just strategy.”

This is perhaps the clearest mandate for the Regional Energy Accord: to reset the approach. Beyond strategy and plans, the Accord can cultivate a culture of respect, collaboration and honesty, where regional voices lead and all parties share the responsibility.



What we heard - Regional Energy Accord Roundtable

1. Trust is not a soft value, it is the hard currency of change. Without it, projects stall. With it, the region can embrace the transition and lead with pride.

Participants described how rushed consultation processes, poor communication, and broken promises have created a trust deficit that continues to divide their community. Many felt that engagement had been transactional rather than relational, leaving people sceptical about whether words will ever translate into meaningful outcomes. Trust, they emphasised, must be earned back through visible action, measurable outcomes and long-term presence. This means shifting from “tick-a-box” consultation to genuine partnership, where energy companies, government and community leaders are held accountable.

“Commitments without delivery are just noise. People need to see and feel the results.”

2. Once people understand why the transition is necessary, why it is happening here, and how it will improve lives, they can unite around a shared vision for the region’s future.

“No one has told the overall story or the why.”

The absence of this shared “why” has left space for misinformation, fear and division. People described being inundated with mixed messages: government promoting decarbonisation, developers talking about jobs, while residents still see inadequate local infrastructure and few visible benefits. The gap between rhetoric and reality fuels suspicion. Participants suggested that the Accord could help establish and amplify a shared narrative, carried by trusted local voices and reinforced by government and industry. This would require resourcing community organisations, local councils and leaders so they can communicate the same consistent story, in ways that are meaningful to their own communities.

3. Participants called for clear and quantifiable benefit-sharing frameworks that show exactly where the money is going, who it reaches and how it improves lives.

Many participants noted that hosting the infrastructure of the energy transition cannot leave them worse off. The burden is visible, but the benefits are often delayed, uneven or captured by a few. Equity means ensuring prosperity is shared across the region, not confined to individual landholders or energy companies.

“Areas hosting the energy and infrastructure must be better off for hosting them.”

“Money mustn’t be wasted on trinkets, it should drive lasting community benefit.”

4. Participants urged the Accord to model a different way of working: listening, respecting difference and finding common ground. Only then can the transition move from polarisation to shared purpose.

The energy transition has left deep divisions in the region, between neighbors, between farmers and between community and industry. Some described it as a “war” still ongoing. The Accord was seen as a chance to depolarise the debate, rebuild relationships and create spaces for constructive disagreement.

The principle of respectful difference was repeatedly emphasised. Disagreement is inevitable, but it should not be treated as hostility. Dialogue must replace division and the process must create room for communities to air their fears, frustrations and alternative perspectives safely.

“Respectful difference means I can disagree with you without it being disrespectful.”





Underlying theme - Hope, pride, and a positive legacy

While many conversations carried a sense of heaviness, frustration and fatigue, participants consistently returned to the idea of hope and pride. They want the transition to leave a positive legacy that strengthens their communities and future generations.

There was a strong aspiration for the Wimmera Southern Mallee to be recognised not only as a host of infrastructure but as a renewable energy hub to be proud of, just as it has long been proud of its agricultural role. This hope was also tied to ensuring young people are included in shaping and leading the transition, so that the benefits extend across generations.

“Change done well, good change, can improve people’s lives and outcomes.”

“I’d like the region to take pride in being a renewable energy hub, much like we are for agriculture.”

“Energy conversations like this are contagious, they build momentum.”

This aspiration for a positive legacy underscores why the Accord matters: **to turn heavy, contested conversations into a hopeful story of renewal, resilience and regional pride.**

A fair transition must honour human values, bring in young people and carry responsibility for future generations.

“We need young people in the conversation.”

“We need to remember how to be a human in all this: compassion, honesty, intergenerational responsibility.”

“This needs to give hope for the future, not just tick boxes.”





The emerging vision...

Participants envisioned a fair and just energy transition where host regions are better off, communities are trusted partners and the benefits are visible, shared and lasting.

The Accord can turn “change” into “good change,” strengthening local economies, services, and pride and encourage ongoing better standards for how communities, industry and government work together.

- **Trust restored, communities empowered:** The Accord could be the framework that restores trust between community, industry and government by committing to honesty, follow-through and visible results. Trust becomes the currency of change, earned through action not words.
- **A clear why for a shared future:** The Accord could enable a consistent narrative that explains why the transition is happening, why here, and why now. It can ensure that all communities understand the purpose, opportunities and benefits, replacing confusion and misinformation with clarity and confidence.
- **Equity, fairness and tangible benefit:** The Accord will guarantee that regions hosting infrastructure are better off for doing so. Benefits will be real, measurable and fairly distributed, improving healthcare, jobs, energy reliability and community assets. No one will be left behind.
- **From division to dialogue:** The Accord can create safe spaces for disagreement, foster respectful difference and move communities from polarisation to shared problem-solving. It can model a new way of working: listening deeply, respecting difference and finding common ground.
- **A proud legacy for future generations:** The Accord can ensure that the energy transition strengthens communities, not fractures them. It can leave a legacy of resilience, pride and prosperity: a region recognised as both an agricultural powerhouse and a renewable energy hub.
- **Whole-of-government, whole-of-community:** The Accord can bring coherence where policy has been fragmented. It can align community, industry and government around continuous improvement, clearer responsibilities and enduring commitments that communities can count on.
- **A “golder” standard for doing business in the regions:** The Accord could define what “better” looks like: engagement that is genuine, benefits that are shared and outcomes that can be seen and measured. It can encourage better and ongoing continuous improvement in how industry partners with regional Australia.





Emerging principles

1. Equity: Hosting communities must be better off

Hosting regions shoulder the burden of transmission lines, turbines, solar arrays and battery technology. They must be measurably better off, not just promised benefits but tangible improvements in healthcare, housing, schools, jobs and local energy security.

“Areas hosting the energy and infrastructure must be better off for hosting them.”

“Money mustn’t be wasted on trinkets, it should drive lasting community benefit.”

Hyperlocal procurement, within WSM boundaries first, must be the baseline, not “local” defined as anywhere in Australia or New Zealand.

2. A commitments register publicly tracking promises and follow-through

Decades of poor starts and broken promises mean trust is at rock bottom. The Accord can prove itself through delivery, not rhetoric. A Commitments Register would provide clear accountability between government, industry, and community.

Co-design with community is non-negotiable.

“Don’t come in with your mind made up. Co-design it with us or don’t bother.”

“Return on trust comes before return on investment.”

3. Local leadership: decisions must be human and place-based

Transition decisions must be shaped by the people who live there, not “cookie-cutter” consultation from outside. Local trusted voices should lead, backed with resources to engage meaningfully. Local government needs tools and authority to negotiate on behalf of communities.

Respect place-based differences: what works in Warracknabeal is not what works in Horsham.

“120 people on site, maybe 30 from here, that’s not a great story.”

4. Respectful difference: From division to dialogue

The Accord has the potential to turn division into dialogue, creating safe spaces where respectful disagreement can happen without hostility.

“Respectful difference means I can disagree with you without it being disrespect.”

Avoid “energy colonialism”, projects cannot displace agriculture without delivering uplift. Reconciliation is both with First Nations partners and with local communities who feel ignored or divided.

5. Legacy: leave communities stronger

The energy transition must not just manage risk but leave a proud, positive legacy. Affordable energy and reliable supply.

“The lights are still on and people can afford them.”

Stronger communities with stronger people: from family wellbeing to mental health to economic resilience.

“Change done well, good change, can improve people’s lives and outcomes.”

“I’d like the region to take pride in being a renewable energy hub, much like we are for agriculture.”



“The first thing you do has to be done well, because it sets the tone.”

“In the recent past we’ve missed the community piece. There hasn’t been the time or the investment in local capacity.”

“Don’t come in with your mind made up. Co-design it with us or don’t bother.”

“Information is really important. Outside of this room, people are not well informed.”

“The Accord can give hope for the future, not just practice, but culture.”

“By the end, this Accord will be used to steer business decisions.”



Closing note + thank you!

“Actions not words, we’re in a trust deficit and it’s damaging our community.”

This reflection, shared near the close of the Wimmera Southern Mallee Roundtable, captured both the weight of history and the urgency of this moment. Across two days of workshops, meetings and the roundtable, a consistent message was heard: **the energy transition must deliver real benefits, rebuild trust and be shaped with, not for, regional communities.** Participants spoke of the need for hyperlocal procurement, investment in housing and liveability, whole-of-government coordination and a fair distribution of benefits. They reminded us that without clarity on why the transition is happening here, misinformation and community division will continue to spread.

People acknowledged broken trust, poor starts and the deep divisions that have scarred the region. Yet there was also a powerful current of hope and determination. Leaders spoke of the chance to take pride in becoming a renewable energy hub much like the region has been for agriculture. Business owners voiced a readiness to invest if confidence and clarity are delivered. Communities called for safe spaces for respectful difference, for young people and First Nations voices to be included and for a legacy of fairness, prosperity and stronger, resilient communities.

The Regional Energy Accord is still in its listening phase, by design and necessity. It will not be written in isolation, but built step by step through real conversations in real places. Wimmera Southern Mallee has made clear that if outcomes from the Accord are to be meaningful, they must:

- Prove benefits are real and measurable
- Give local people a seat at the table, not just a place on the margins
- Demonstrate fairness and equity across the whole community
- Create safe spaces where difference can be voiced without division
- Leave a legacy that strengthens communities for generations to come.

As one participant put it: **“The Wimmera is fully charged.”**

The challenge now is to turn that charge into momentum, to build an Accord that is trusted, lived, and meaningful.

Follow our journey at www.regionalenergyaccord.org.au.





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