

Report Back - Regional Energy Accord Roundtable - Riverina + Murray

Where: Mawambul Training Centre, Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga

When: Thursday, 27 November 2025

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Introduction

The Riverina + Murray Regional Energy Accord Roundtable brought together community leaders, local councils, industry representatives, First Nations custodians and regional development organisations to explore one central question:

Could a Regional Energy Accord help reset the relationship between regional communities and the energy sector in the energy transition?

From the outset, participants named three truths:

- Regional communities feel like they deserve better.
- Renewable energy projects should be done with communities, not to them.
- Concern that the energy transition may face challenges without trust, fairness and genuine local leadership.

As one participant put it, the current experience feels like *“No choice, no voices, loss of relationships. Grief and loss.”*

The Roundtable was not about exploring individual projects. It was about testing whether a Regional Energy Accord: voluntary, bipartisan, region-first and designed to endure beyond political cycles, could set a shared baseline of commitments, expectations and principles to guide the energy transition for decades to come.

It is being built region by region, drawing on lived experience across Australia, not designed in capital cities and handed down. Participants were invited to ask:

- What could we agree on?
- What does “better” look like in practice?
- What specific commitments should sit inside a Regional Energy Accord?

A Welcome to Country from Aunty Cheryl Penrith grounded the day in Wiradjuri Country, *“a place of big celebration and dance,”* and in Wiradjuri values of respect: for self, for others and for Country. She spoke of changing weather, hotter futures, droughts and floods and of the rivers as *“the blood of our Country”*, reminding the room that any conversation about energy must also be a conversation about land, water and the legacy left for children and grandchildren.

The Energy Charter, alongside RDA Murray and RDA Riverina, set out why they are backing this process. The Energy Charter is a coalition of energy CEOs who recognise that while engineering solutions are advancing, the “engineering of humans”, relationships, trust, fairness and participation is not where it needs to be. A Regional Energy Accord is not a silver bullet, but a way of agreeing on high-level principles and baseline commitments so that every community does not have to negotiate from scratch. It is also about acknowledging the good work that is being led in the community and lifting it up for the benefit of other regions.

RDA leaders underscored that their lens is regional development, not just energy: the transition must work for regional people, regional economies and regional futures, not only in monetary terms, but in quality of life, opportunity and social cohesion.

Participants were reminded that they wear multiple hats: as workers, landholders, parents, club volunteers, councillors, local government, business owners and community members. The task for the day was to “bring your truth”, stay open to different perspectives and move beyond sentiment into practical commitments that could be named, tested and refined.

What we heard about the energy transition

A shared diagnosis emerged quickly: “*What’s happening now isn’t good enough.*”

Participants described a Riverina and Murray regions as experiencing a transition that feels imposed, fragmented and overwhelming:

- Large projects can feel “*opportunistic and clunky*,” arriving without meaningful or early engagement.
- Communities feel “*pushed over by overlapping developments*”: renewables, transmission infrastructure and major civil works, with little coordination across agencies or proponents.
- Consultation is fragmented: “*communities are divided, consultation is not coordinated, access to benefits is limited and different between communities.*”
- The pace feels like “*everything happening everywhere all at once*”, with fast-paced development and limited community knowledge.
- The Riverina and Murray are seen as “*the heart of the energy transition at present*”, but many feel there is no social licence for renewables outside REZ zones.
- Local Councils are under pressure, with “*a lack of understanding when it comes to council resources*” due to the complexity of overlapping projects.

A participant shared this anecdote to illustrate the level of social tension: a farmer’s rams were castrated in the middle of the night by neighbours because he said “yes” to wind farms. Participants named this for what it is: a breakdown in the social fabric under the pressure of poor processes, poor communication and unmet expectations.

And yet, a consistent message followed: “**It’s not too late.**” Across the room, participants named clear opportunities to reset the approach:

- Respect and elevate local intelligence, especially on land management, agriculture, biodiversity and community dynamics.
- Slow down where needed to coordinate, plan and build genuine social licence.
- Pursue long-term legacy outcomes, not short-term transactions.
- Build systems that are fair, strategic, predictable and community-led.
- Ensure the energy transition reflects all voices, not just industry or government and delivers generational benefits.

The Southern Star vision (The Big Why)

Across the day, a unifying aspiration became clear, a guiding Southern Star for the Riverina and Murray regions and for regional Australia more broadly:

The energy transition could leave regional communities stronger: socially, economically, environmentally and generationally.

Participants described a future where the energy transition delivers lasting regional advantage, not short-term disruption. Key elements of that vision included:

- **Long-term community investment vehicles:** trusts, local foundations or benefit-sharing structures that keep value in-region and support future generations.
- **Improved natural capital:** projects designed and operated with regenerative land management, biodiversity protection and whole-of-lifecycle thinking.
- **Local talent first:** apprenticeships, training pipelines, graduate programs and long-term workforce strategies that allow young people to build careers locally.
- **Community ownership or equity models:** enabling residents to be genuine partners in projects, not passive recipients of compensation payments.
- **Clear, consistent rules across regions:** so fairness does not depend on postcode and developers cannot “shop around” for the lowest expectations.

As one participant reflected, *“It would be great if the Regional Energy Accord catalysed a long-term community reinvestment pathway, embedded in local community foundations or trusts.”*

Four themes dominated every conversation:

Across ten headline themes drawn from the Regional Energy Accord Roundtables in Victoria, patterns became unmistakable. Four themes dominated every conversation:

1. **Accountability and transparency**
2. **Tangible, shared local benefits**
3. **Hyper-local participation**
4. **Regional leadership**

Two additional pillars were strongly endorsed:

5. **Trust first, then investment**
6. **Meaningful engagement (beyond consultation)**

And two more offered essential framing for how the Regional Energy Accord could function:

7. **Shared story and clear ‘why’ of the energy transition**
8. **From division to dialogue**

Dominant Priority 1: Accountability and transparency

This was the most powerful and consistent theme. People want systems they can rely on, not promises that disappear at the next election or shift depending on the renewable energy developer.

“These developments tie us up for generations. The commitments can’t just last for one term of government.”

“A commitment register is great, but what are the KPIs? How do we measure success and know it actually worked?”

“Post-build, what does community look like? What’s left after the developers have gone?”

Participants described a future where:

- Legislation and policy settings last beyond a single political cycle, giving communities stability and developers clarity.
- A public commitments register tracks KPIs, community benefits, environmental and social outcomes, local procurement and legacy infrastructure.
- REZ and non-REZ communities are treated fairly, ending the confusion and inequity created by inconsistent rules.
- Independent verification replaces self-assessment and marketing claims.
- Shared information databases allow councils and communities to understand cumulative impacts and opportunities.

This is not about more reporting. It is about restoring confidence through visibility, consistency and truth-telling.

Dominant Priority 2: Tangible, shared local benefits

Participants were clear: the current benefit model is not working. Too often, it feels transactional, uneven or insufficient for the scale of impact on communities.

“The benefits shouldn’t just be economic. Think housing, young people, arts, heritage, what makes regional communities great places to live.”

“If you want communities on side, structure a deal that delivers enduring, long-term benefits and puts community skin in the game.”

“In Denmark, every energy project has to have a 20% community share. In Germany, there are more than a thousand energy entities with community ownership. Why not here?”

The call was for benefits that are meaningful, long-term and spread across the whole community, including:

- Community equity or ownership models.
- Diverse benefit streams, housing, childcare, youth programs, arts, environment, heritage and local services.
- End-of-life and circular-economy planning as opportunities for regional hubs.

Participants described a desire to move from compensation-based models toward approaches they view as contributing to shared prosperity.

Dominant Priority 3: Hyper-local participation

People were clear: participation could be real, not symbolic. Information sessions and letterbox drops do not qualify.

“A letterbox drop is not an engagement.”

“We talk a lot about uplift, but the businesses that have already invested are getting overlooked.”

“Let’s actually look at who’s got capability here already and build on that.”

Regional communities want power and agency through:

- Clear definitions of ‘local’ and ‘impacted region’, removing ambiguity and inconsistency.
- Capability and skills mapping to highlight what already exists and what is currently overlooked.
- Community-controlled plans, endorsed locally and co-designed, not driven by developer timelines.
- Funded roles and resources for coordination, engagement and capacity building within the region.

This is participation as shared decision-making, not information provision.

Dominant Priority 4: Regional leadership

Participants returned to this point again and again:

A Regional Energy Accord must be led by regional people.

Not designed in Canberra or Sydney. Not negotiated by corporate offices. Not interpreted through metropolitan assumptions.

“People on the ground know their land. You can’t replace that knowledge.”

“Every region needs to have a different approach, and that needs to be respected.”

“We can’t have a top-down approach. This has to be led from the grassroots up.”

Key elements included:

- Resourcing regional leadership, so the burden does not fall on volunteers or overstretched councils.
- Using existing regional structures, rather than creating new layers that duplicate or dilute local authority.
- A genuinely place-based approach, recognising that every region is different and would ideally tailor solutions accordingly.
- Aligning authority and responsibility, so local decision-makers have the mandate, and resources, to act.

Prioritised top 10 commitments

These commitments reflect the strongest consensus, highest urgency and most repeated calls from participants at the Roundtable.

1. Create a Public Commitments Register with KPIs, timelines and independent oversight.

“A commitment register is great, but what are the KPIs? How do we measure success and know it actually worked?”

2. Long-term, bipartisan rules that survive election cycles.

“These developments tie us up for generations. The commitments can’t just last for one term of government.”

3. Apply consistent standards across REZ and non-REZ communities.

“This REZ versus non-REZ idea is completely and utterly idiotic. It creates the wrong perception about where renewable development will go and who carries the impact.”

4. Guarantee tangible, shared benefits, equity, ownership and community reinvestment.

“If you want communities on side, structure a deal that delivers enduring, long-term benefits and puts community skin in the game.”

5. Embed “local workforce and procurement first” as standard practice.

“Make it ‘local young people first’ for apprenticeships and graduate programs, so the skills stay in the community.”

6. Resource regional leadership and community-led planning.

“Fund and resource people locally, because that’s where the real leadership is.”

7. Mandate early, place-based engagement before project design.

“Before project scoping, there needs to be a legislative framework for mandatory, prior local engagement.”

8. Publish a transparent regional project pipeline with cumulative impact information.

“If we create confusion, we are not allowing trust to happen.”

9. Introduce a retention/performance fund to deter poor-quality proposals.

“Ensuring poor-quality or speculative projects do not leave communities carrying the cost of engagement.”

10. Invest in hyper-local participation infrastructure, coordination, capability mapping and local governance.

“Let’s actually look at who’s got capability here already and build on that.”

An important point for the process to consider as it moves forward is that participation in the Regional Energy Accord does not replace statutory processes, regulatory frameworks or individual project assessments. It proposes shared expectations, not enforceable obligations.

Conclusion

The Riverina and Murray Roundtable confirmed what is becoming clear across Australia: the energy transition is not only an engineering challenge; it is a community challenge. Participants spoke of grief, division, exhaustion, but also of resolve, perspective and possibility.

As one person put it, *“It is not too late to mitigate some concerns.”* With the right commitments in place, the transition can shift from something being done to regions to something being built with and for them.

The Regional Energy Accord is emerging as a powerful vehicle to reset expectations, build consistency and anchor the transition in transparency, fairness, shared benefit and genuine local leadership. The top commitments identified in this Roundtable provide a clear blueprint for what may sit at the heart of a national Regional Energy Accord: accountable rules, visible benefits, hyper-local participation and regional leadership with real authority.

What happens next

The Regional Energy Accord is being built region by region, and the next round of workshops continues this community-led design process:

- Mudgee (Central West Orana): February 9-10
- Muswellbrook (Upper Hunter): February 11-12
- Armidale (New England): March 2-3

In 2026, our focus turns to scaling and strengthening the work done so far. We will:

- Test the draft commitments across 20+ regions
- Draft the National Regional Energy Accord
- Work closely with Community Champions, the CEO Council, the Community Outcomes Group and the Industry Impact Group.
- Build a region-led framework that can guide the transition across Australia for decades.

You will continue to receive **updates and invitations** as the Regional Energy Accord develops into 2026. Keep connected by following our website and joining our mailing list: <https://www.regionalenergyaccord.org.au/>