



FINAL REPORT

REGIONAL ENERGY ACCORD

Upper Hunter Roundtable

4 March 2026



1. About this Roundtable

As part of the national [Regional Energy Accord](#) Roundtables supported by [The Energy Charter](#), the Upper Hunter session explored how the region can shape the energy transition to strengthen long-term prosperity and community wellbeing.

The discussion brought together a cross-section of regional leadership from local government, business, agriculture, health, education, energy companies and State agencies. Convened with the support of local leader Kirsty O’Connell, the conversation focused on how the region can manage the next phase of industrial change while protecting what makes the Upper Hunter distinctive.

Participants reflected on the region’s long experience with major industries, particularly mining, and discussed how those lessons can inform the next chapter of economic development.

Throughout the discussion, there was a strong recognition that the energy transition presents both opportunity and responsibility. Participants expressed a willingness to engage constructively in shaping the region’s future, while emphasising the importance of transparency, accountability and respect for place.

Importantly, the conversation also reinforced that any Regional Energy Accord will ultimately need to be led and owned by the region itself. While national organisations can help convene discussions and share learnings between regions, participants noted that meaningful progress will depend on local leaders, institutions and communities choosing to work together to shape a shared regional approach.





2. Key Themes

2.1 First Nations recognition must sit at the foundation

“You can’t build the next chapter on top of unresolved history.”

The discussion opened with recognition that the region’s history, including dispossession and cultural harm, cannot be separated from decisions about the future.

It was emphasised that the Traditional Owners for the Upper Hunter, The Plains Clan of the Wonnarua People, must be meaningfully involved in shaping decisions about land, infrastructure and cultural heritage. Recognition must move beyond symbolic acknowledgement and become embedded in planning and engagement processes and genuine outcomes. It was also acknowledged that it is important and valid to engage with other First Nations people and organisations who are not Traditional Owners but who call the Upper Hunter home, particularly in relation to community benefit sharing and social value creation.

2.2 The region expects the energy transition to learn from the legacy of mining

“Mining brought jobs and identity, but the region also carries the costs.”

Mining has shaped the Upper Hunter’s economy and identity for generations and it strongly influenced how participants assessed the credibility of the renewable energy transition.

Participants acknowledged the jobs, investment and identity mining has brought to the region, while also noting unresolved legacy issues such as environmental impacts, rehabilitation and long-term accountability when projects end. In particular, participants emphasised that the Upper Hunter already faces serious challenges with air pollution and impacts to the quality and quantity of water throughout the Hunter River catchment. Avoiding further impacts was a key concern.

The discussion was not framed as opposition to renewable energy development, but as a call for the next phase of industrial change to learn from past experience.

2.3 Trust in planning processes is deeply eroded

“What is the master plan?”

A recurring theme throughout the discussion was the erosion of trust in planning and consultation processes.

Participants described a pattern where communities are often consulted late in the process, once projects are already well advanced, and where significant community opposition has failed to influence planning decisions. This has created a perception that consultation is procedural rather than genuinely influential.

Rebuilding trust will require earlier engagement, clearer information and visible changes to how projects are planned and communicated. In addition, there is an expectation that all new projects, both energy and other developments, should coordinate efforts to reduce and mitigate their cumulative impacts and maximise the collective value for the community.

2.4 The economic transition is already underway

“Transition isn’t a future problem... it’s happening now.”

Participants consistently emphasised that the energy transition is not a distant scenario.



Structural change in the Upper Hunter economy is already occurring as coal-fired power stations close and mining activity evolves. This will have implications not only for direct employment but also for supply chains, local businesses and regional services.

While participants broadly accepted that change is inevitable, there was frustration that planning for economic transition has not always kept pace.

2.5 Transition that protects the place and delivers real local benefit

“Energy has to fit alongside what is already here.”

Participants emphasised that the Upper Hunter is more than an energy region. It is also home to significant agricultural industries, the thoroughbred horse sector, tourism, viticulture and nationally significant landscapes.

There was a clear expectation that new energy development must coexist with these industries rather than displace them. In particular, participants expressed a strong view that areas already defined, such as the Critical Equine Cluster, the Critical Viticulture Cluster and BSAL land, should be protected from development.

Participants also emphasised that communities hosting infrastructure expect to see tangible and lasting benefits, including local employment pathways, stronger supply chains and infrastructure investment.

2.6 The Regional Energy Accord

“This feels like a first conversation. The question is how we keep the conversation going.”

A notable outcome of the Roundtable was cautious but genuine openness to the idea of a Regional Energy Accord.

Participants recognised that many of the issues discussed, including planning coordination, community benefit and transition planning, extend beyond individual projects and require a more coordinated regional approach.

At the same time, there was strong recognition that a Regional Energy Accord cannot be delivered by external organisations alone. For an Accord to have credibility, it must be shaped and owned by the region itself, with local leaders, institutions and communities working together to define shared priorities and commitments.





2. Priorities and commitments

Priority Area	Commitment Proposed	What the Room Was Asking For
Accountability + Transparency	Clear visibility of renewable energy projects and regional planning	A central platform showing all projects across the region, impacts and the benefits they deliver, so communities can clearly see what is happening and how the region is affected.
	Spatial mapping of land use and projects	Open, easy-to-understand information showing land use across agriculture, renewables, cultural heritage and other industries to help proponents avoid potential impacts from the earliest stages of concept planning.
	Clear appeals and dispute resolution pathway	A transparent process for raising concerns about renewable energy development such as membership of the NSW Energy and Water Ombudsman.
Managing Impacts	A Regional Energy Accord framework that prioritises community values	Clear communication about renewable energy projects, early authentic engagement with communities and stronger alignment between development and local priorities.
	Protection of productive agricultural land	Protection of high-value farmland and environmentally sensitive land from inappropriate development.
	Community views are visibly considered in project decisions	Evidence that consultation influences outcomes through documented engagement, follow-up communication and independent oversight.
	Shared regional values and cultural heritage framework	Clear articulation of Upper Hunter values and cultural heritage that guide how projects operate in the region.



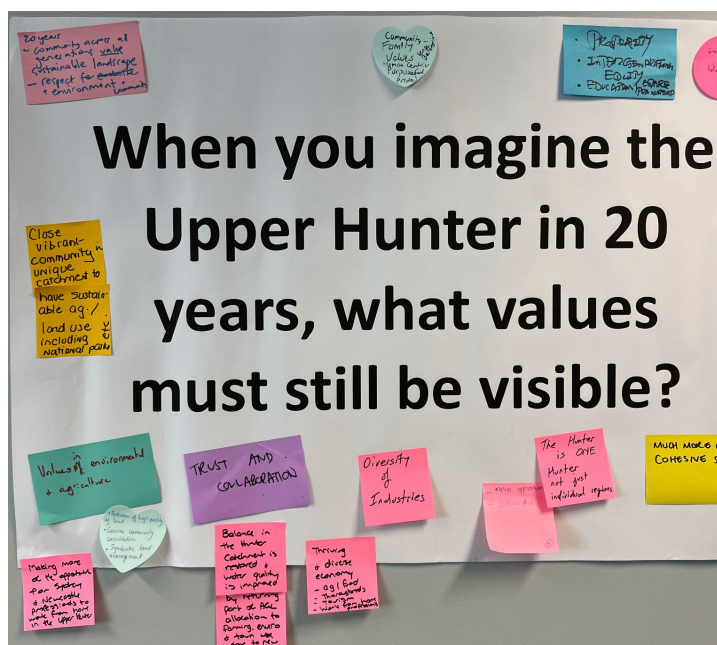
Meaningful Engagement	Ongoing forum between proponents and the community	Regular structured dialogue between industry, community and government to share information and address impacts early.
	Early and respectful engagement with Traditional Owners	Active collaboration with the Plains Clan of the Wonnarua People in project planning and decision-making.
Tangible, Legacy Benefits	Needs-based model for community benefits	Community benefits allocated according to local needs, priorities and aspirations rather than ad-hoc grants.
	Coordinated regional approach to infrastructure and investment	Greater alignment between government, industry and regional development priorities.
	Transparent long-term funding model	A clear investment structure that delivers lasting regional benefits beyond individual projects. Additionally, infrastructure that travels through a community must deliver commensurate benefits within that host community, not only at the source of generation.

3. Values that define the Upper Hunter

Participants described the Upper Hunter as a region defined by strong community ties, pride in land and agriculture, resilience and self-reliance, and a deep expectation of honesty and trust. While acknowledging the region is not homogeneous, there was strong agreement that the future of the



region should continue to reflect these values while building a more diverse and unified regional economy.



Value Theme	What We Heard
<p>Strong community and identity</p>	<p>The Upper Hunter is a close-knit region where people know and support each other. Participants emphasised pride in place, strong local identity, a history of volunteering and self-reliance, and communities that put people first.</p>
<p>Trust, honesty and fairness</p>	<p>There is a strong expectation that institutions and companies should be transparent, keep their commitments and engage honestly with the community.</p>
<p>Respect for land, agriculture and environment</p>	<p>The region’s identity is closely connected to its landscape, agricultural heritage and natural environment. Protecting productive land and environmental assets remains central to the region’s future. Participants also emphasised the importance of maintaining the region’s rural character and quality of life.</p> <p>There was also a recognition that these environmental and natural assets can play a stronger role in supporting the region’s economic resilience. New forms of development can provide additional income streams. This can help future-proof communities, particularly during periods of drought and economic uncertainty.</p>



Resilience and adaptability	The Upper Hunter sees itself as resilient and capable of navigating change. Participants spoke about the region’s ability to adapt and build new opportunities while maintaining community strength.
Opportunity and prosperity for future generations	Participants want the region to continue creating opportunities for families and young people through a diverse economy and strong regional collaboration.

4. What this means for a Regional Energy Accord

The Upper Hunter discussion suggests that a Regional Energy Accord can only gain credibility if it supports regions to organise themselves around shared priorities and practical collaboration.

Several implications emerged clearly.

5.1 The Accord must support locally led regional commitments

Participants were open to the idea of a national framework that provides coordination and shared principles. However, they emphasised that any meaningful commitments must ultimately be developed, negotiated and led within the region itself. Local leaders, institutions and community organisations will need to work together to shape the commitments and structures that make sense for the Upper Hunter.

5.2 Cultural heritage and First Nations recognition must be embedded

Respect for Country and meaningful involvement of Traditional Owners must form a core part of any regional approach.

5.3. The transition must learn from previous industrial cycles

Participants stressed that the region’s experience with mining provides important lessons for future development, particularly in relation to rehabilitation, accountability and long-term regional benefit.

5.4 Transparency and early engagement are essential

Clearer information, earlier engagement and visible accountability mechanisms will be critical to rebuilding trust between communities, industry and government.

5.5 Economic transition must be central to the conversation

Supporting economic diversification, employment pathways and local supply chains will be essential to ensuring that the transition strengthens rather than weakens regional prosperity.

5. What the Upper Hunter might do next

The Roundtable made clear that while national organisations can help convene conversations and share insights, the long-term success of a Regional Energy Accord will depend on leadership emerging from within the region itself.

Several possible next steps emerged from the discussion that could help the Upper Hunter continue shaping its approach to the transition.



6.1 Build a regional coalition around the transition

Local leaders from business, agriculture, local government, community organisations and industry could continue the conversation through a small regional coalition focused on the long-term future of the Upper Hunter. This could provide a consistent forum for collaboration as the transition unfolds.

6.2 Develop a shared regional vision for the transition

Participants suggested that the region could benefit from articulating a clear vision for how energy development, agriculture, environmental stewardship and other industries can coexist and strengthen the regional economy.

6.3 Improve regional transparency, coordination and information sharing

The region may wish to explore practical ways of making information about projects, land use and development easier to understand and access. Greater transparency could help communities, businesses and investors navigate the transition more confidently.

6.4 Improve place-based coordination among proponents

There may be value in exploring approaches that improve coordination among proponents. Greater collaboration could help minimise cumulative impacts and maximise community benefits. Models such as the Wimmera Southern Mallee approach may offer useful insights. This coordination could also extend beyond the energy sector to include other major developments, such as the Singleton and Muswellbrook Bypasses.

6.5 Identify priority regional benefit opportunities

Participants emphasised the importance of ensuring the transition delivers lasting local benefits. The region could work together to identify priority opportunities such as infrastructure investment, workforce development and economic diversification.

6.6 Continue the regional conversation

Perhaps most importantly, participants expressed a strong desire for the conversation to continue. Building a Regional Energy Accord will take time, and ongoing dialogue between communities, industry and government will be essential to shaping a transition that reflects the Upper Hunter's values and aspirations.

6. Next steps

This Upper Hunter Roundtable formed part of an ongoing national conversation about how regions can shape the energy transition in ways that reflect local priorities.

In the Upper Hunter, the discussion highlighted both the opportunities and the responsibilities facing the region. If a Regional Energy Accord is to emerge at a local level, it will require continued collaboration between local leaders, community organisations, industry and government.

The Energy Charter will continue to support the sharing of insights and connections between regions as the conversation develops nationally.

Stay connected

You will continue to receive **updates and invitations** as the Regional Energy Accord develops into 2026. You can also stay connected by:



- Following the [Regional Energy Accord website](#)
- Joining our mailing list
- Contacting The Energy Charter - director@theenergycharter.com.au

THANK YOU.

