

How renewable energy projects are revitalising rural towns

7.30 By Lucy Carter

Posted Thu 5 Sep 2019, 6:15pm



PHOTO: Sun rises over the Numurkah solar farm. (ABC News)

Like many country towns, Numurkah near Shepparton in Victoria's Goulburn Valley, was struggling with drought, closing businesses and losing the younger generations to jobs in bigger cities.

"We can't rely on the dairy industry as much as we probably have over the years, we need to find alternative investment," Moira Shire Councillor John Beitzel told 7.30.

So when energy company Neoen proposed to build a solar farm near the town, they jumped at the chance.

"These are opportunities that are coming to us," Mr Beitzel said.

"We need to embrace them."

'I would have had to go elsewhere for work'

RELATED STORY: Victorian Government approves plans for three controversial solar farms

RELATED STORY: The tiny Victorian town that's powering all of Melbourne's trams

RELATED STORY: Work starts on NT's largest solar farm in race to 50pc renewables by 2030

Key points:

- Numurkah Solar Farm is helping provide employment in the region
 - It provides enough power to supply 48,000 homes
 - The Victorian government has committed to more than a dozen new renewable projects
-



PHOTO: Paul O'Bryan would probably have had to look for work elsewhere if the solar farm hadn't been built. (ABC News)

Paul O'Bryan is the Numurkah Solar Farm's site manager, responsible for harvesting the sun's energy from almost 400,000 solar panels spread across 515 hectares of land.

It is now producing enough solar energy for the grid to power 48,000 homes.

"It's providing jobs, it's providing stability, and it's providing low-cost efficient green energy to the grid," Mr O'Bryan told 7.30.

The solar farm is the only reason he is still living and working in the region.

"I probably would have had to go elsewhere for work, there's not a hell of a lot in that respect in the Goulburn Valley," he said.

"I may have had to pick up sticks and go back to Geelong, or maybe even fly-in, fly-out work over in WA."

Not everyone convinced



PHOTO: Sheep now graze among the panels of the solar farm. (ABC News)

Not everyone in the community supports the solar farm.

One criticism is that it is an eyesore which has only created six full-time positions, despite there being more than 300 short-term jobs during construction.

Mr O'Bryan rejects that analysis.

"Those construction jobs wouldn't have been possible, unless we constructed this," he said.

"So the benefits to the community in terms of hospitality, increased wages, accommodation, all those knock-on effects, has been a real godsend for the local area."

Another complaint has been that the solar farm takes up productive land.



PHOTO: Eddie Rovers was initially a sceptic but eventually sold some paddocks which are now part of the solar farm. (ABC News)

Eddie Rovers used to own some of the paddocks now occupied by the solar farm.

"People have always got negatives about everything," he told 7.30.

"People need to look outside the square like we have."

He sold the land but did a deal to graze 750 of his sheep among the solar panels.

"We thought when they come and approached us, 'Oh, we don't want solar panels all over the land'," Mr Rovers said.

"You know, I love the land. I like to farm the land. Then we talked about it and thought we could work with this.

"The grass should grow fantastic underneath the panels cause it's not getting hot sun. When the dew is on the panels and the panels turn, the grass'll get irrigated."

Falling costs make projects viable

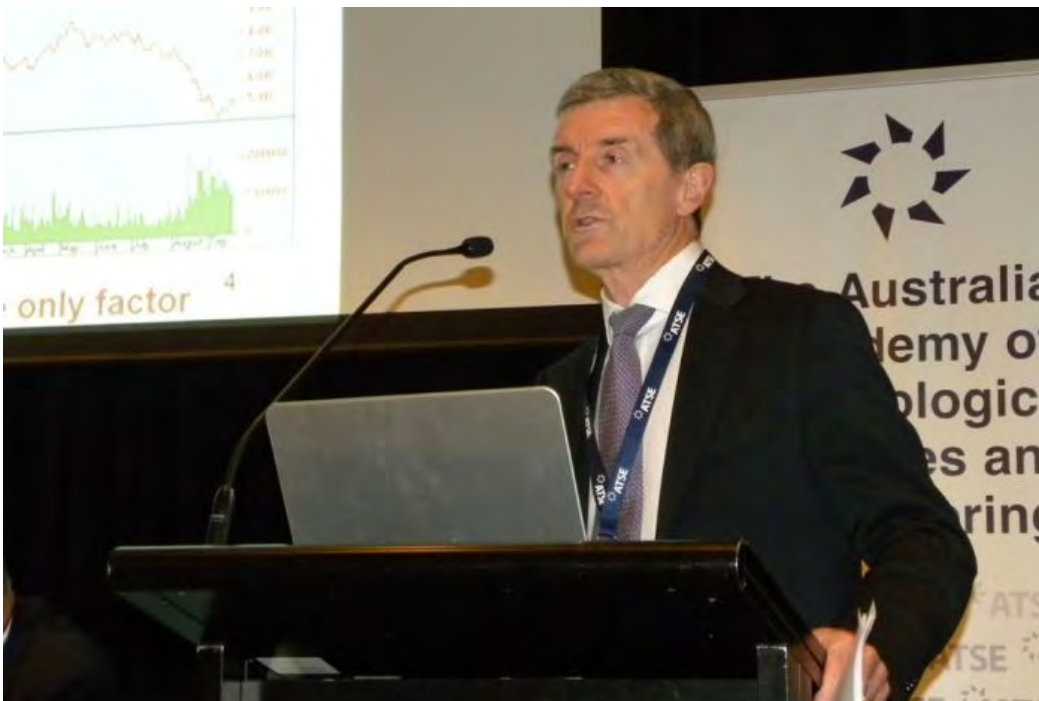


PHOTO: Tony Wood says renewable energy project are adding to local rural economies. (David Claughton)

The Victorian government has committed to generating half of its energy from renewable sources by 2030.

That means that more projects like Numurkah will be pitched to communities across the state.

The state currently has 14 large-scale renewable energy projects under construction, with a further 46 large-scale wind and solar projects in the planning stages.

Numurkah is one of two renewable energy projects now offsetting the entire Melbourne tram network.

"What's made them viable, and seriously viable, is the dramatic reduction in costs," Tony Wood, Energy Program Director at the Grattan Institute, told 7.30.

"As we've seen larger and larger solar farms being built, the cost of manufacturing those panels, particularly in China, has come down dramatically.

"[It] all adds to the economics of the local community, and we all know communities in rural Australia need just about everything they can get."

Some critics accuse solar farms of being a fair-weather power source.

"Every technology we know about, and Australia has a wealth of energy technologies, someone can find something wrong with every one of them that they don't like," Mr Wood said.

"In the case of solar, the sun, they don't produce power when the sun's not shining.

"Well, that's not a problem because other things will back that up.

"In some cases it will be batteries. In some other cases it will be pumped hydro."

'It's win-win for us'



PHOTO: The Numurkah solar farm has boosted the local economy. (ABC News)

There are now at least three other local renewable energy projects in the planning stage in the Moira Shire.

And for most in Numurkah, that can only be a good thing.

"The towns are suffering bad and just need something,' Mr Rovers said.

"To have something like this come into the area and give a few more opportunities, a bit of employment and all that stuff — it's probably not a bad idea."

And for solar farmer Mr O'Bryan, there are no losers.

"I'm farming the sun and I've got sheep out in the back paddock," he said.

"It's win-win for us."