# Hunter Bird Observers Club

*Affiliated with BirdLife Australia*

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HTP Public Exhibition Submission

Energy Corporation of NSW

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**Hunter Transmission Project**

We thank EnergyCo for the opportunity to provide feedback on this proposal and have provided some suggested inclusions, modifications and mitigation measures that protect biodiversity with particular emphasis on birds.

**The Broader Issues**

Whilst Hunter Bird Observers Club Inc. (HBOC) strongly supports the transition to renewable energy systems we have objections with what we see as haste and lack of planning in the potential growth and siting of proposed renewable energy zones both at State and Federal levels. This haphazard siting now requires around 2000Km of transmission lines to connect power stations and the proposed renewable energy sites across the state, significantly impacting on natural areas and hence biodiversity.

According to DCCEEW commercial parties have registered interest in 24 solar energy projects, 13 onshore and seven offshore wind energy projects, 35 large-scale batteries, and 8 pumped hydro projects in the Hunter REZ. Potentially the floor of the Hunter Valley plus both inshore and offshore zones could be littered with renewable energy developments including a profusion of solar farms, wind turbines and connecting transmission lines.

There should be a political imperative to embrace energy-saving options prior to opening up renewable energy zones to industry.

There is already a huge human footprint on this land with housing and cities that could be utilised to provide power. Why create further destructive footprints on the environment when the existing structures could be utilised more fully by adding solar panels and batteries to every house and commercial building plus mini wind generators?

Particularly so when 80% of the state's electricity is used by consumers in the major population centres of the Hunter, Sydney and Illawarra.

The delivery of “clean reliable and affordable energy to the households and businesses of NSW” may have been better served by this alternative option. Certainly this may have assisted with the cost of living difficulties currently being experienced by households in this state.

The HTP is a multi-billion dollar investment that will generate hundreds of jobs. How many houses could have been fitted with solar panels for that money utilising the huge human footprint already on the environment ? Giving householders autonomy over their power usage and reducing the household budget.

Why can't commercial buildings also have solar panels on the inside to utilise light coming in from windows (e.g. in corridors) and to reuse light from internal lighting ? Make solar banks and neighbourhood batteries mandatory for all new subdivisions.

But the first initiative should be in stopping the waste. The installation of sensor lighting and timers in commercial buildings should be mandatory. Timers should be installed on advertising hoardings switching them off at a set time or making them illegal unless power self-sufficient. A campaign to encourage consumers to be energy efficient should also be initiated. Then look at providing for the shortfall, heavy industry and peak load requirements from large scale renewable energy facilities.

**HTP Corridor Options**

We are pleased that the preliminary HTP corridor runs mostly through land owned by power station and mining companies and that those environmentally sensitive or endangered vegetation areas and national parks may be avoided.

HBOC is however particularly concerned about the section of the alignment that is currently proposed to pass through the Singleton Training Area. HBOC assisted in establishing quarterly bird surveys on this land in 2012, which has now been taken over by BirdLife Australia. It should be known that these are some of the most intact remnant woodlands on the floor of the Hunter Valley and are a ‘sink’ for numerous threatened and declining woodland birds, including being one of the most regularly used sites by the critically endangered Swift Parrot and Regent Honeyeater. The HTP corridor must avoid these remnant woodlands.

The planned fragmentation of intact undisturbed ecosystems within the state forest system creating pathways for non-endemic and feral species and significantly increasing the “edge effect” is also concerning. Many species of birds will not tolerate human activity or disturbance within certain distances and will abandon territories. Unfortunately these tend to be the species most at risk. “*European and Australian birds with declining populations are less tolerant to an approaching human than birds with increasing populations”* Mikula et al April 2023.

Unfortunately it seems that HTP length and cost considerations have precluded further assessment of the Northern Corridor. “*Using the northern corridor would also involve building a much longer and more expensive transmission line.”* A question then remains whether a more environmentally friendly corridor was available.

We also question whether choice of corridor was influenced by *“The first transmission line (HTP) is urgent and must be operating by early 2028 to avoid potential breaches of the NSW Electricity Security Target. “*

**Underground Cabling**

We are disappointed that underground cabling has not been assessed within this project overview.

Existing corridors could have been utilised to minimise clearing, mitigate bushfire risk, limit environmental issues and limit bird strike. A decreased risk of carrying capacity reduction, overhead cable degradation and transmission tower damage likely with climate change hazards may have been achieved.

Was a combination of above and below ground lines considered as a compromise? Below ground lines being installed in state forest or SCA's to minimise the easement size, clearing and edge effect. As a compromise this option may have provided better environmental outcomes.

**Suggested Inclusions / Modifications/ Mitigation Measures**

We have several questions and suggestions regarding inclusions and mitigation measures.

- **Insulation :** Will these lines be adequately insulated to mitigate the risk of bushfire ignition particularly where traversing State Forest or remnant woodland ?

  With the forecast increasing intensity of severe weather events including temperature extremes the likelihood of line sag and short circuit increases. (Energy Networks Australia 2022)

- **Bird Deflectors:** The fitting of bird deflectors to the power lines should be mandatory especially wherever the transmission lines cross wetlands, waterways or dissect woodlands. Known species susceptible to transmission line strike or electrocution are raptors such as Wedge-tailed Eagle, White-bellied Sea Eagle; waterfowl such as Pelican, Black Swan and duck species; nocturnal species including owls and frogmouths.

  One species the Black-necked Stork is particularly vulnerable to powerline strike. *"The most commonly identified cause of death in the Black-necked Stork was collision with powerlines, with 34 birds known to have died from this cause since 1975 out of a total of 69 recorded deaths since 1839 (Clancy 2010b)."*

  Mitigation measures must therefore be robust and effective as the potential for bird strike down the Hunter Valley is considerable. Each year HBOC produces an Annual Bird Report which presents a summary of the status of bird species within the Hunter Region of NSW. Of the 298 woodland and wetland species recorded in the Hunter Region during 2019 the Annual Bird Report Number 27 (2019) shows 62 species with long term trends suggesting the population is in decline or potential decline. For almost 21% of species in the Hunter Region to be potentially declining shows our planning system is not effective and management of the environment is failing.

- **Reduced easement in state forests**: We would like to suggest consideration be given to reducing the easement size where the transmission lines traverse state forest or SCA's. Being only a single tower within the easement we do not understand the requirement for a 70 metre wide clearing.

- **Planting along easement:** Clearing of vegetation under the transmission lines reduces habitat and foraging areas for avian species. Planting in the easement of bird

attracting endemic native plant species such as banksia, native seed grasses or low growing fruit bearing shrubs may help compensate for loss of habitat.

- **Offsets:** "*Delivering strategic offsets to enhance biodiversity values of the Hunter"* and "*deliver strategic offsets that will improve biodiversity values in the Hunter"* are statements made within the project document.

  The "offsets" system in this state has been severely criticised by the NSW Auditor General and with the Parliamentary Inquiry into the Integrity of the NSW Biodiversity Offsets Scheme stating *"there are multiple problems with the scheme, including serious flaws in its design and operation that raise fundamental questions about whether it can achieve the stated goal of 'no net loss' of biodiversity".*

  We therefore have reservations about how and where offsets may be applied for this project. There is little remnant woodland left in the Hunter Valley to use as offsets let alone to enhance biodiversity values.

  HBOC has for some time advocated for the permanent reservation of part of the Tomalpin Woodlands in an area known as the 'Hunter Economic Zone' (HEZ) near Kurri Kurri. This area is a vitally important breeding site for the critically endangered Regent Honeyeater, is one of the most biodiverse areas of dry open forest in NSW and contains endangered vegetation communities. With the potential for considerable impacts by clearing of vegetation and fragmentation of state forests and state conservation areas we suggest that parts of the Tomalpin Woodlands that are owned by property developers should be considered as possible offsets, achieving a significant enhancement to protected biodiversity values of the Hunter. This has become even more urgent with recent catastrophic bushfires in the area and the likelihood of increased occurrence of such events in the Cessnock/Kurri Kurri woodlands.

**Conclusion /Summary**

As previously stated HBOC strongly supports the transition to renewable energy systems across the country.

This transition we believe should be focussing on energy-saving options and utilisation of the existing human footprint on the land by adding solar panels and batteries to every house and commercial building plus mini wind generators in lieu of further alienation of farmland and destruction of natural habitat with solar farms, wind generators and transmission lines.

HBOC believes that the environment and the residents of the Hunter Valley and NSW generally would be better served by a brief pause and review of the roll out of renewable energy to consider alternatives such as rooftop solar panels to supplement the energy supply prior to construction of solar farms, wind farms and pumped hydro.

Overall we see this rush to renewables including the necessary connecting power grid as counter to the need to stem the extinction crisis across Australia.

Submission prepared by T. Kendall for the Conservation Sub-Committee
Hunter Bird Observers Club Inc. 17 December 2023

**References**

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Bird tolerance to humans in open tropical ecosystems – Nature Communications December 2023 https://ris.cdu.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/75967811/s41467_023_37936_5.pdf

Integrity of the NSW Biodiversity Offsets Scheme –Legislative Council Report 16 November 2022

## About the Hunter Bird Observers Club

Hunter Bird Observers Club Inc. (HBOC) was established in 1976 and currently has a membership of 400 members. Although the Club is based in Newcastle NSW membership includes members from other areas in NSW and from interstate.

**Aims of HBOC**
*to encourage and further the study and conservation of Australian birds and their habitat; and*
*to encourage bird observing as a leisure-time activity.*

**Activities** include monthly regular outings, evening meetings, camps and field studies. HBOC promotes systematic field studies which include regular surveys by volunteers from the membership.

**All data** gathered from field studies are entered into the national bird record database administered by BirdLife Australia; Birdata https://birdata.birdlife.org.au/. Data are used to underpin conservation issues and HBOC promotes systematic surveys and data collection.

**HBOC** has a long history of working in collaboration with local councils, national parks and other state agencies, industry and schools.

For more information go to www.hboc.org.au