

Chinchilla News and Marilla Advertiser

put our farms first Fears of solar impact

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Landholder calls for more community consultation

"IT'S deja vu of the CSG industry."

That's how Chinchilla cotton grower Brian Bender has described the current influx of solar energy projects in the region.

"I believe this solar industry, it's a carbon copy of the gas industry at the moment."

Last month, Mr Bender received a letter from juwi Renewable Energy, a German energy company, informing him of a potential solar farm site near his property in Chances Plains.

He said he was disappointed by the letter which did not state which block the company was interested in developing.

The letter advised Mr Bender to attend a community forum discussing solar farm development in Queensland, held last month by the State Government in Dalby, to learn more about the solar industry.

The session sought feedback on draft Queensland solar power guidelines which will be finalised later this year.

But Mr Bender said he did not feel reassured about the future of the solar power industry, and how it might impact on his business, after the session.

"It just reminds me so much of the gas industry," he said.

"The companies are getting in before there's any real legislation really to go by. The legislation that's going to come out, it's going to have no teeth.

"It's all going to be open to interpretation."

While juwi Renewable Energy is yet to lodge a development application with the Western Downs Regional Council, a spokeswoman said the company was four to six weeks away from doing so.

Mayor Paul McVeigh said he was "pleased to hear this energy company is talking to the community".

Cr McVeigh said the council was "happy to have those communications" with concerned residents regarding potential energy projects and said the council had previously been involved with renegotiations to amend project plans.

"As a council we have to do our due diligence to approve or disapprove projects," he said.

He also stressed the relationship between landholders and solar companies "was about being good neighbours".

Cr McVeigh said the council had not allowed solar farms to be built on top-quality agricultural land, but said solar farms could benefit the region more than traditional agriculture.

"The return of the solar farms will be more than the returns of cropping land," Cr McVeigh said.

For Mr Bender, there needs to be more open and transparent communication between the council and residents about potential projects in the region to protect farming families and their land.

"I want to protect farming land, agricultural farming land," he said.

"I just think they (council) just need to stop and think, 'hey, where do we want to place all these solar farms?'.

"You don't want bloody solar farms all over the place."

Though Mr Bender has no problem with solar power, he believes solar farms should not be built on land that has traditionally been used for agriculture.

Another concern of his is the potential devaluation of properties in the area of solar farms that could drive away families from the region.

"There's a lot of people out there that don't want to live beside a solar farm," Mr Bender said.

"So that means it's taking away from people who could potentially buy more property.

"If you put a solar farm on good country beside houses, you're taking good people away from the market."

University of Southern Queensland's School of Mechanical and Electrical Engineering senior lecturer Andreas Helwig said there needed to be better communication between residents, council and industry to support both the agricultural and energy industries.

"The challenge in any new entrepreneurial business where there's power generation like this is or protected agriculture, good neighbour policies is one of the things that we should do better in industry in Australia in general."

Mr Bender said agricultural land across the Downs should be protected for generations to come.

"Agriculture country, cotton country is getting scarce. We need to protect it as much as we can."

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