

Report

Talking Renewables with our Regions

Prepared by Essential
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Overview

The national effort to rapidly de-carbonise Australia's energy network is the greatest macroeconomic challenge of our generation.

Regional Australia will carry responsibility for anchoring this transition, hosting the major renewable infrastructure (wind, solar, batteries and hydro) and the grid upgrade required to distribute these new sources.

Social license for these developments is becoming contested, with a combination of factors undermining support including:

- lack of government engagement and coordination around the roadmap to a renewable-led energy system;
- low trust in government and energy companies;
- lived experience of poorly planned developments;
- a fragmented public discussion susceptible to misinformation; and
- legitimate concerns about the impact of major developments on nature.

This communications strategy aims to improve trust in regions for the shift to renewables through an active program of community education, engagement and empowerment.

It proposes a replicable, community-led process that seeks to not just secure consent for development but build long term trust in the switch to renewables that Australia needs to have.

Contents

Overview	2
About the project	4
About this report	4
Key insights	5
Specific nuances by region	10
Communications recommendations	11
Language and messaging recommendations	17

About the project

Essential was engaged to conduct research across regional communities to inform a narrative that can shift regional communities and national media from fear to opportunity.

Four specific questions were posed (spoilers in brackets).

- How much do people in Australia's regions transitioning to renewables understand the need for infrastructure - including transmission ? (SPOILER: very little)
- How do we explain the full scale of Australia's energy shift - i.e., large-scale infrastructure is needed as well as household electrification? (SPOILER: we show don't tell)
- How much is misinformation informing regional Australia's views on the clean energy shift? (SPOILER: yes, but it's not the primary problem)
- What language and storytelling examples are connecting with or alienating people? (Read on!)

To address these questions, we conducted four waves of fieldwork:

- Stakeholder interviews with respected community leaders
- 8 x online focus groups with 48 participants living in regional communities
- 3-day online overtime discussion group with 60 participants living in regional communities
- A quantitative survey of 2,000 regional respondents in NSW, VIC and QLD

About this report

This report is broken into three sections:

- Key insights
- Communications recommendations
- Language and messaging recommendations

It is designed to be read alongside the detailed research report that brings together the four waves of fieldwork.



Key insights



Key insights

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- **This transition is being done to us**

- **We support renewables, but ...**

- **It's a low-trust environment**

- **Lived experience matters**

- **National messages do not work as well in the regions**

- **A genuine care for nature**

- **Little things define the world**

- **Information comes from everywhere**

- **We need a reason to change**

Key insights



This transition is being done to us:

The unifying theme in all groups was that the developments were being done to communities not with them. There was a lack of agency and buy-in to the transition. At best people were being told to tolerate what they perceive to be a net negative. Consultation is transactional and bureaucratic. Critics of change often are the first messengers and are seen as being the voice of the community.



We support renewables, but...

While a clear majority (56 per cent) support the general idea of a transition to renewable energy, no-one feels well-informed about what the plan at either a regional or national level is. Because of this, each project is seen as a standalone development rather than part of something bigger. Many sceptics have rooftop solar and recognise the value but don't understand why the larger projects are required. Terms like 'megawatt hours' and technocratic acronyms confuse respondents.



It's a low-trust environment:

There is a tension across all regions between the recognition that a transition away from fossil fuels is required and a suspicion of all types of large-scale development in general. This is intensified by deep distrust of energy companies and the government. This means those who are driving the developments are not seen as good faith actors and that community information that is presented as a 'sell job' is rejected as self-serving.

Lived experience matters:

The key selling points of the energy transition - cheaper power, more jobs - are both contested, if not rejected. The regional jobs argument is at odds with experience that, after initial construction of solar and wind farms by FIFO workers, there are relatively few long-term maintenance jobs. Cheaper energy is counter intuitive when bills are going up while the switch to renewables is taking place. Messaging that leads with these promises is lost at 'hello'.

National messages do not as well in the regions:

Messaging around renewable targets, transition plans and carbon reduction which resonate with city voters do not work as well in areas where the renewable transition is actually happening. These communities are experiencing change and need to understand how their specific community will be affected and what protection will be put in place.

A genuine care for nature:

Participants in coastal communities, in particular, are genuine in their concern about the impact of developments on nature, sea life and bird life. Because they don't understand the broader importance of renewables in the long-term protection of marine life, they believe that in resisting coastal development they are standing up for nature. Information about marine life co-existing with offshore wind is well-received and allows for a discussion around the cost-benefit of climate impact on marine life.

Little things define world views:

The 'ten-year turbine that is then buried in landfill' was a recurring theme in nearly every group. So too the idea of 'prime agricultural land' being taken by renewables. These 'facts' undermine the arguments for the energy transition because they put doubt around some of the foundations of community interest - reduced emissions and new opportunities for farmers.



Information comes from everywhere:

While some people still consume traditional media, others actively avoid it. Information is served through multiple channels – media, digital, social and face-to-face. The closer someone is to the source, the higher the likelihood they will believe it. Friends and family are the most trusted sources of information, with local community groups, councils and government agencies (such as the CSIRO) much more trusted than traditional media or official sources like the Australian government.



We need a reason to change:

Finally, without the imperative to move to net zero emissions, the transition story doesn't quite make sense. We need to be clear about the urgency of the transition and the need to transition from fossil fuels to reach Net Zero by 2050. We need to make the case that the transition is well underway with 40 per cent of our electricity already coming from renewables. We need to establish the world is moving away from fossil fuels and Australia will lose out if it is left behind. This means we are not asking communities to lead the energy transition, just not to get left behind.



Specific nuances by region



Coal communities

- **What they are concerned about:** The jobs that will replace fossil fuels are lower-wage, less secure and there are less of them.
- **What they need to know:** The transition is part of a broader industrial plan that will see high-value industries with good jobs.



Coastal communities

- **What they are concerned about:** The impact of renewable infrastructure on nature – both onshore and off.
- **What they need to know:** Marine life can co-exist with offshore wind. The biggest threat to life in our oceans is the heating of those oceans. Offshore wind can deliver substantial amounts of power.



Farming communities

- **What they are concerned about:** The impact of renewables on 'prime agricultural land'
- **What they need to know:** Sun and wind can be harvested to make farms more sustainable, providing an ongoing economic base for their communities. Food and fibre production can co-exist with renewables.



Communities affected by grid upgrades

- **What they are concerned about:** The impact on their local amenity, visual and impact on nature.
- **What they need to know:** Dgrid infrastructure is essential to connecting the renewable projects that will bring economic benefits to communities. It's a 'green grid' that can co-exist with traditional farming. And it can't be buried.



Communications recommendations



Communications recommendations

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- Shift the perspective from them to us
- Build understanding of the energy transition
- Show don't tell
- Fight rumour with humour
- Nurture local champions
- Speak to lovers of nature
- Build a process we can control



Shift the perspective from *them* to *us*

The renewable transition is currently being communicated by politicians selling a bright future and energy companies complying with their technocratic community engagement requirements. Both are the voice of outsiders telling communities what is going to happen to them.

We followed this model by testing messages talking at communities – they were not convincing. Our research showed that any attempt to “sell” or “manage” regional communities is counterproductive.

Instead, we need to shift the communications point of view so we are talking for the community not at them. The most effective messaging in our work was when we flipped the perspective from those proposing change to the community.

Immediately participants brought into the ‘we’ narrative, giving them the sense that they were setting the terms of engagement rather than playing defence. We need to clearly articulate their concerns and build agency in sharing benefits.



Build understanding of the energy transition

We need to earn trust in the shift to renewables because, right now, very few people understand what the national plan looks like.

We need to explain the need for large developments in the context of the energy transition and outline the choices that have been made. Simply claiming ‘cheaper, cleaner, more jobs’ doesn’t cut it – we need to step out our arguments with clear proof points.

There is a parallel challenge to explain how and why renewable energy will be cheaper in the long run, again to be explained in simple terms.

Reinforcing previous research conducted by Essential, there is an urgent need for simple, non-technical information about how the projects work and the benefits they will bring.

We recommend creating road maps for each Renewable ENergy Zone - in relation to a broader national road map. These should be delivered as a simple infographic (actual road map iconography) that could be delivered to every household in a community. The baseline information is a critical entry point – otherwise we are just talking about another industrial development.



Show don't tell

We need to articulate and distribute information about the benefits and address concerns with clear and evidence-based information that is accessible and relatable.

Numerical targets, acronyms and megawatt hours do not resonate. Not only do they confuse but they feed the perception that this is a bad deal being imposed from those in power.

Practical examples of the energy transition in action, real projects, real communities, real people are the only credible sources of information. Don't talk about new projects, show them. Don't talk about new jobs, show them. Don't talk about community benefits, show them.

We need to build a bank of real life examples in a format that is easy to distribute and shows how renewable projects have delivered benefits to communities:

- profiles of renewable jobs from the perspective of the worker
- testimonies from farmers on how solar and wind farms make their business more financially sustainable
- showcasing real schemes that benefit the community – local discounts on energy bills, sponsorships, better internet access, housing stock.

A bank of these examples should be the entry point to more detailed communications about the Renewable Roadmap.



Fight rumour with humour

We know that attacking disinformation head-on is counterproductive, with people digging into their positions when called out for lying.

The 'ten year turbine' was a recurring theme in groups among those sceptical about the net benefit of large-scale renewables. It is powerful because it can be delivered in a simple soundbite and brings the idea that the transition won't address climate change, to live in a single image. Likewise the claims of dead whales and dolphins around offshore wind.

Let's take people to the counterfactual wrapped in a smile, for example.

- Whales Against Warming – a movement of sea life who don't want the oceans to heat. This would provide information to outline the threat to marine life of warmer oceans while also myth-busting
- Sheep for Shade – photos of cows and sheep co-existing with solar panels.
- Turbine Retirement Fund – embedding information about how turbines have a 30 year lifespan and have a net zero footprint.

We embed the facts in the creative – bringing people to us rather than bumping up against them at the first step. We should also encourage communities to come up with their own approaches and work to bring them to a wider audience.



Nurture local champions

The big shift in trusted communications is away from consumption and trust in both earned media and social media towards:

- content endorsed by trusted sources (these can be friends, families or social 'influencers' – people who hold trust at an individual and community level).
- content shared on the 'private internet' – group chats, private social media groups

This does not mean building stories for national and local media are not important, but it is the secondary use of the material where it is most valuable.

- News content shared with an endorsement or commentary from a trusted source (organisation)
- News content shared in a private network with personal endorsement.
- Kitchen table and BBQ conversations
- Personal discussions with friends and loved ones

Local champions are the most effective messengers, including:

- local community leaders – especially elected councillors and leaders of local sports and civic groups.
- local scientists – who can restate the need for change.
- local farmers – who can attest to how their farms are more sustainable and can still produce food.
- local First Nations leaders who can talk to the contribution these projects will make to their communities.

Inviting champions of the renewable transition to become active supporters by distributing content to their networks is an organising challenge.

At a local community level this may involve running local engagements where influential individuals are identified and where support commitments focus on these high-impact actions.

Just as we used to ask people to send a petition or letter to their MP, we might now ask them to make a brief text or video statement in support of the wider transition or a specific, local project.

Champions can help with the production of case studies – however, they are most effective in the amplification of their own personal involvement.



We need to speak to lovers of nature through climate

We need to specifically engage those with genuine concern with nature with the evidence-based impacts of climate change on their environment and the impact on both land and sea life, for example the shrinking glaciers, heating oceans, drought and extreme weather events.

We need to explain how large renewable projects will make a meaningful difference to carbon emissions, especially the capacity of offshore wind to produce energy akin to coal fired power stations - this needs to be explained in simple terms rather than technocratic (no megawatt hours!).

This information needs to be presented in clear, factual terms rather than seen as emotional blackmail, with people being invited to see the bigger picture to make an informed choice on the impact of climate inaction on the nature they love.



We need to build a process that we can control

One of the challenges of current renewable communications is that the 'moments' are being created by the proponents of development, providing moments for critics to organise around. We are stuck in a reactive position.

We need to take control of the point of engagement to manage community sentiment BEFORE a specific development is proposed, establishing the parameters for what good development looks like and creating

A separate Appendix fleshes this idea out, based around the notion of community-led Renewable Compacts that would articulate baseline community expectations for the way projects are approached and the way benefits are shared and distributed.

This active mode would provide a template for a series of community engagements, beginning with our basing, solidifying soft supporters and pushing out to persuadables.

A template of community events and engagements would provide the process that allows the community to regain control of the energy transition.



Language and messaging recommendations



Messaging

Our research has shown there is a disconnect between messaging that works well for audiences at a national level and those that resonate with people living in regional communities who are directly impacted by the development of large-scale renewables infrastructure.

National interest arguments are not seen as relevant or believable by this audience because they ignore their existing concerns and make people feel as though they are being sold to rather than listened to, which only reinforces a sense of distrust and cynicism in the proponents of renewables.

Key messaging challenges:

- Misinformation is widespread and opposition to renewable messages have significant traction
- Positive stories and examples are not cutting through
- Messages that don't acknowledge potential challenges or legitimate community concerns are seen as marketing spin
- Genuine community concerns need to be referenced and validated, without repeating opposition narratives

Therefore, messaging needs to operate on two levels:

1 BUILD TRUST through persuasive frames that are anchored in shared community values

2 BUILD BELIEF through information, evidence and stories that come from the community

'Build trust' - what the research tells us

FRAME 1 Leaning into the challenge to get the best economic outcomes for communities

FRAME 2 Demanding a more responsible transition that centres community interests and doesn't repeat the mistakes of the past

FRAME 3 Acknowledging the importance of environmental impact whilst proving that renewables are good for nature in the long-term

*See research report for full version of narratives

- All three of our final narrative frames are effective for our target 'soft supporters' target (56 per cent of total audience).
- These frames are less effective for 'soft opposition' audiences - however **Frame 2** resonates more strongly with this cohort than the others.

In summary:

We build trust in the process by:

- demanding government hold industry to higher standards and demand a fair distribution of benefits
- working as a community to negotiate what those standards are and how those benefits should be shared

We build belief that the transition can work by:

- showing real examples of shared benefit (jobs, community benefits)
- placing an expectation on proponents to meet these standards locally.



Most successful narrative for Soft Supporters:

The shift to renewable energy is happening. Nearly 40% of Australia's electricity is already generated from wind, solar and hydro today - and that will double over the next decade.

With unparalleled access to sun and wind, Australia's regions are uniquely positioned to lead the shift to an economy powered by renewable energy. This will create new jobs across communities like ours; provide a boom for green manufacturing and exports industries; and secure Australia's energy independence for the future.

We know this isn't going to be easy - change this big is hard - but if we work together with local businesses and governments we can get the best outcome for our community.



Most successful narrative for Soft Opponents

Regional communities across Australia will play a critical role in hosting the renewable infrastructure needed to power Australia's future clean energy demands. But most people haven't been given enough information to know what this will look like and what impacts it will have on their local areas.

The renewables transformation can't just deliver for big energy companies - it needs to happen with community interests front and centre. These communities need clear information about the plan and an opportunity to determine how these changes will shape their future and what benefits they will receive.

Governments must ensure that the projects they approve meet strong environmental standards and demonstrate that they are working with local communities to offer legitimate economic benefits.



Messages that Work

Do... speak to the progress that has already been made towards renewables targets

The shift to renewable energy is happening. Nearly 40% of Australia's energy is already generated from wind, solar and hydro today - and that will double over the next decade.

Do... speak to Australia's unique advantages

With unparalleled access to sun and wind, Australia's regions are uniquely positioned to lead the shift to an economy powered by renewable energy.

Do... acknowledge that the shift to renewables isn't going to be easy

We know this isn't going to be easy - change this big is hard.

Do... acknowledge that communities currently feel left out of the process

But most people haven't been given enough information to know what this will look like and what impacts it will have on their local areas. But giving communities a seat at the table can make sure impacts are managed and benefits are what regional people want to see.

Do... demand that the government holds renewable energy companies and developers to account

Governments must ensure that the projects they fund meet strong environmental standards and demonstrate that they are working with local communities to offer legitimate economic benefits

Do... face the inherent tension between short-term & long-term environmental impacts

But being 'less damaging than fossil fuels' is not enough - we need to ensure that the renewable rollout is good for nature by making sure our laws prevent poor development.

The environmental impacts of all kinds of large-scale development have gone unchecked for decades.



Messages to avoid - and how to avoid them

Don't...put the impetus on regional communities to negotiate better outcomes for themselves

Getting on the front foot early, to get the most out of the renewable energy projects that are already planned, will give us a better chance to create long-term opportunities.

A Better Approach ... show how a process might be community-driven

Communities that recognise the opportunities, organise themselves and engage early with developers, have been shown to secure better shared outcomes from developments.

Don't: reference projected numbers when talking about jobs

The Australian Government estimates that 213,000 jobs will be created across communities like ours over the next decade

A Better Approach: Localise the benefits and be specific about the types of jobs.

The transition in our region will create demand for electricians, construction and maintenance workers for the long term.

Don't... dramatise the sense of urgency

We know that we urgently need to shift from fossil fuels to renewables

A Better Approach: Focus on the fact that the transition is already underway to meet our Net Zero targets.

We have already begun the journey to Net Zero by 2050, with xx per cent of the electricity grid already renewable.

Don't...use environmental language or industry jargon

This will provide a boom for zero emissions manufacturing and exports industries; (also don't talk about Gigawatt hours or use acronyms)



Messages to avoid - and how to avoid them (CONTINUED)

A Better Approach: Talk about specific industries and tangible products.

As the world requires exports to be carbon neutral there will be new opportunities for renewable energy hubs to power new process to produce hydrogen and copper that can be exported as 'green'..

Don't...tell regions they should be proud to power the nation

Australia has always been defined by regions that have created wealth and prosperity for the nation

A Better Approach: Talk about the material benefits of housing renewable energy industries

The regions that have produced the nation's energy have built strong local communities based around these industries.

