

## **Speech to the CEC Wind Industry Conference – Melbourne Convention Centre**

**Andrew Dyer – March 17 2016**

Thank you Kane – and thank you for the opportunity to address the meeting this morning.

The role of the National Wind Farm Commissioner was established by the Australian Government to help address the concerns of residents and community who live in proximity to wind turbine facilities.

Our key areas of focus are:

- facilitating the resolution of complaints received from concerned residents
- providing greater transparency to the community about wind farm activity in Australia
- drawing on the work of the Independent Scientific Committee on Wind Turbines
- promoting best practices related to the planning, development and operation of wind farms, including community engagement and community relations.

The role is independent, and I report directly to the Minister for the Environment. There are no formal powers associated with the role, and I do not displace the responsibilities of state jurisdictions. Rather, I operate based on the effectiveness of my relationships with a wide and diverse range of stakeholders from all levels of government, industry and the community.

My Office is supported by the Federal Department of the Environment, which provides the infrastructure and funding for our operations.

After commencing in November last year, the priorities during first few months of the role have included:

- Establishing the Office, recruiting staff and implementing the infrastructure;
- Engaging with the significant stakeholder community for this role;

- Spending time on the road visiting residents, community groups and wind farms to obtain a first-hand understanding of the issues as well as the opportunities for improvement, and;
- Handling a range of initial complaints from residents that have been lodged with our office.

Our office is now established and our small team is finally in place as of this week. We have implemented a complaint management system, a web-site, issued our policies for complaint and information handling, and have provided easy access to our Office via a toll-free telephone number, email and regular mail.

With regard to external engagement, I have now met with a substantial number of people from all aspects of the stakeholder map, including:

- Federal Government
- State and Local Government
- Industry Associations
- Community Associations
- Industry members
- Concerned and supportive residents
- Regulators
- Research organisations
- Experts
- Other Ombudsman schemes
- Media, and;
- Various wind farm sites, both operating and planned.

From my various discussions with stakeholders, a number of key themes are emerging – both in issues & concerns, along with improvement opportunities.

Some of the key concerns raised with me so far include:

- Noise and its effect on set-back distances, sleep disturbance and annoyance
- Amenity and impact on views and the visual environment
- Economic loss, including property value and business impacts

- Disruption and inconvenience during construction
- Size and spacing of modern turbines and effects on air turbulence
- Health conditions that may be attributed to the presence and operation of the wind farm
- Fairness and equality of commercial arrangements with landowners
- Transparency and understanding of how wind turbines operate and are managed
- Transparency of the planning process and community consultation
- Managing bush-fire fighting risks

I mention these concerns to this audience because, whether you agree, or disagree that these issues are real, they are very real to members of the community that you are likely to be engaging with as you carry out your work in those communities.

As such, being sensitive to these concerns may help you in considering your approach to working with community members – and may assist you in addressing concerns in your day to day interactions.

Regarding improvement opportunities, I have been privileged already to witness some great best practices by industry here in Australia.

I will mention a few of my observations:

- Community engagement – start this as early as you can in the development cycle and deploy staff to be active in the local community.
- Complaint handling – put in place an effective complaint handling process at commencement of development – and continue through construction and operations. Best practice is to have someone in the community to receive and manage complaints, with timely access to visit resident properties in response. Ensure your contact numbers and email are prominent on the wind farm web site.
- Further, recognise that your near neighbours may also be your best eyes and ears. Residents reporting noise issues, such as tonality noises and the like, may be doing you a huge favour if there is a mechanical issue with a turbine.

- Consult widely on your construction plan. Construction will be disruptive and annoying for a lot of people for a long time. The community will be far more tolerant if they are given an opportunity to have input and be consulted on the plan.
- Be transparent wherever possible about plans and designs for the wind farm. Even if you are not required to do so, publish planning and design documents on your website and encourage people to ask questions and raise concerns so you can address them up front.
- Use, wherever possible, plain English in communications, whether it is in a commercial agreement or trying to explain a noise testing report. Put yourself in the shoes of the recipient of the information.
- Engage with all community groups, be they supportive or concerned residents. Continue to provide opportunities for discussion and information sharing, even once the wind farm is built and operating. One wind farm I visited recently continues to hold regular information sessions for the community, even though the wind farm has been in operation for a number of years.
- Last, but not least, recognise that a wind farm is going to change both the visual and economic landscape in a community. Think about how best to address the impact of these changes, through the eyes of an affected resident, as you decide your approach to the project and community engagement.

These are not my ideas, rather what I have learned from many meetings with industry and the community. I hope you will consider some of these thoughts as you reflect on your current portfolio of projects.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you today. I wish you all the very best for the rest of the program and look forward to continued engagement with the industry.