10 September 2025

Committee Secretary
Select Committee on Information Integrity on Climate Change and Energy
Department of the Senate
Parliament House, Canberra ACT 2600

Via email: climateintegrity.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam,

Re: Select Committee on Information Integrity on Climate Change and Energy

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Select Committee on Information Integrity on Climate Change and Energy.

The Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner (AEIC) is an independent non-statutory role appointed by the Australian Government and supported by the Office of the AEIC.

We fulfill a national role and work collaboratively with all levels of government, industry, landholders, and community members to address local and systemic concerns, improve ongoing community engagement, and promote transparency and best practices throughout the life-cycle of renewable energy infrastructure and associated projects.

In simplest terms, the fundamental purpose of the AEIC is to help make the energy shift smoother and fairer.

As outlined in the Commissioner's Terms of Reference on our website (www.aeic.gov.au), our responsibilities include:

- Resolving enquiries and complaints from local community members regarding proposed and operational renewable energy projects (wind, solar and energy storage facilities), and new large-scale transmission projects.
- Promoting transparency and best practice engagement and information sharing about renewables, including for First Nations engagement.
- Leading and collaborating in implementing the recommendations of the Community Engagement Review (2023).

The energy transition involves significant disruption and uncertainty for host communities, and as such there are genuine issues and concerns that must be addressed and acknowledged. If these genuine issues and gaps in information are not adequately addressed in a timely manner, this provides fertile ground for mis and disinformation to take hold. This Select

Committee provides an important opportunity to assess the underlying drivers of mis and disinformation in Australia in relation to energy and climate change policy.

Through our work we are well placed to provide insights into broader community concerns and sentiments regarding information integrity and transparency, which also allows us to identify opportunities to improve transparency and knowledge sharing in the renewable energy industry. This will be crucial in ensuring social licence and long-term project and sector success. The AEIC can also provide an independent trusted source of truth to help progress constructive and informed discussions.

The AEIC's role in communicating the energy shift

The AEIC, formerly the National Wind Farm Commissioner, was established in 2015 in response to a Select Senate Committee inquiry into the wind farm industry and its impact on communities.

In March 2021, this role was expanded to incorporate large-scale solar farms, large-scale storage facilities, and new large-scale transmission infrastructure. Since this time, our Office has worked to promote best practice community engagement, project-level and sector-wide transparency, and ongoing evidence-based information-sharing.

In 2024, the AEIC received 152 new cases, making it our third busiest year. During this time, we also recorded our 1000th distinct case since the Commissioner's role was established in 2015. The three most common issues raised in cases in 2024 were community engagement (including in relation to government planning processes), human safety, and impacts on the natural environment.

In addition to community engagement concerns, our Office is increasingly hearing concerns voiced about safety across all life cycle stages of different renewable generation, storage and transmission infrastructures.[1] Such concerns commonly include (direct and indirect) fire risks, emissions from harmful materials, but also aviation and road safety, and how these projects may impact the ability of emergency services to respond to emergencies.

Such concerns can be exacerbated by a lack of understanding of, or trust in, complex or opaque regulatory processes, and could be at least partially alleviated by prompt regulatory follow up and greater transparency and information sharing. Community members and landholders frequently relay to our Office that they have difficulty in navigating planning frameworks.

The deployment of renewable infrastructure projects is often associated with concerns over impacts to animals and the natural environment, including endangered species, avian species, wetlands and areas of cultural significance. Again, these concerns and anxieties can be

[1] For a useful high-level overview of the life cycle stages of a renewable energy project, and the stakeholders/systems at each stage, see: https://www.dcceew.gov.au/initiatives/national-renewable-energy-development-pathway (Accessed 1 September 2025)

exacerbated by a lack of understanding (or trust) of regulatory and approvals processes where these potential impacts are assessed and monitored.

In addition to safety and environmental concerns, common concerns about (perceived or real) risks expressed to our Office include human health impacts, economic loss and land (de)valuation, decommissioning, insurance, taxation status of compensation and benefit payments, and cumulative impacts associated with multiple projects in each region.

Each of these issues has generated significant community concerns, which can be further fuelled by misinformation. These types of issues can be irritations and barriers to productive conversations about what challenges and opportunities might need to be considered – and where possible plain English factual can assist in improving confidence relating to these issues.

The need for accurate, trusted and reliable information

Misinformation is the unintentional spreading of inaccurate or false information, while disinformation involves deliberately or intentionally spreading false or inaccurate information. Mal-information, in contrast, is when true or accurate information is used outside of its initial context with the intention of manipulating or misleading.

There are already significant levels of distrust towards public institutions and developers. Research shows that disinformation resonates most strongly with those who already have high levels of distrust and anxiety towards a given individual or organisation. Much disinformation is difficult to fact check or verify in part due to a lack of existing accurate information. This is why it is crucial to have accurate information and trustworthy sources to help navigate these difficulties. The mainstream media also has a critical responsibility here, in not repeating (or amplifying) proven falsehoods or simplistic conflict-based narratives.

In addition to this, and as noted above, there are also genuine issues and concerns that arise from disruptive change and uncertainty associated with the energy transition. It is a difficult but necessary task to distinguish between genuine (perceived or realised) concerns on the one hand, and the unintentional or deliberate spreading of inaccurate information on the other.

Drawing on the University of Melbourne's Disinformation in the City Response Playbook, some useful guiding principles to counter mis and disinformation include:

- Building trust is central, with transparency and inclusivity also key parts of the trust building process (and trust can be further enhanced via clarity, accountability, and ongoing relationships)
- Be non-partisan (where possible)
- Addressing mis and disinformation (particularly the latter) must be an *ongoing* and *adaptive* process in the constantly changing information landscape
- Sharing knowledge and experiences will enhance outcomes
- It is difficult to address (mis/dis)information in isolation. Therefore, a multi-actor and multi-sector response system is required

- Need for real-time, targeted guidance and sharing information

Responding to disinformation requires pre-emptive work to ensure individuals are accurately and meaningfully informed. In addition to these 'pre-bunking' efforts, there is also a need to provide fact-based counter-information and counter-narratives as part of efforts to retroactively debunk existing disinformation.

Providing local communities with information about the reasons for the energy transition

The energy transition is underway, and it is crucial that local communities are meaningfully engaged with and informed throughout the transition process.[2] Effectively communicating the 'what', 'why' and 'how' of the energy transition in a way that is transparent, clear, and accessible will be an integral aspect of addressing mis and disinformation and ensuring social licence for the industry.

Empirical research, including by the CSIRO, demonstrates that although there is a relatively high level of support for the energy transition, there are also currently low levels of knowledge about renewable energy infrastructure and limited understanding of why the energy shift is occurring.

The Community Engagement Review (2023) provided nine recommendations to improve community engagement and participation in the energy transition. Recommendation six identified the need for the Commonwealth Government to provide a clear 'overarching narrative' for communities, articulating why the transition is necessary and why new renewable energy and transmission infrastructure will be deployed in rural and regional communities.

In addition to an overarching transition narrative at the national level, there is also a role for State, Territory and local governments to communicate more localised issues. The Community Engagement Review identified an important role for local government in communicating policies and projects to local communities. This will likely require better resourcing of local governments and local community groups. There are also important roles here for relevant state bodies (e.g. VicGrid in Victoria, EnergyCo in NSW, and Powerlink in Queensland), as well as the Australian Energy Market Operator, for example, in communicating its Integrated System Plan. In summary, there are a lot of communications initiatives taking place around the country, however they are not necessarily (or perhaps not effectively) reaching host communities.

Notwithstanding a number of policies and initiatives addressing recommendation six (see the Energy and Climate Change Ministerial Council's Schedule of Activities), there remains a strong need to effectively communicate the energy transition, as well as specific regional and project-level issues. The AEIC will continue to advocate for more extensive measures to be enacted to fully implement this recommendation. There should be no doubt of the importance and value of a comprehensive national program to continue to build the understanding and awareness

[2] Explored further at: https://www.aeic.gov.au/australian-energy-infrastructure-commissioner-opinion-article-0

of the energy transition and the respective roles stakeholders play. The more communities understand it, the more they can embrace it.

Communities can also benefit from hearing examples for where the delivery of renewable projects have been positively received and delivered tangible economic and social benefits to local communities and wider regions. More effective communication of these benefits could help counter the negativity associated with misinformation.

Misinformation thrives where anxiety and uncertainty are high. In many regional areas of Australia, communities are facing significant change after generations of relative stability. Change of this magnitude requires transparent approach that acknowledges the impacts associated with the energy shift while also communicates the benefits and opportunities for regional communities.

When it comes to an issue as complex and multifaceted as the energy transition, there is a challenge of 'knowledge fragmentation', where governments, the renewable energy industry, and other stakeholders must address mis and disinformation across multiple sectors of the economy (e.g. transport, electricity, agriculture, emergency services). This requires a multi-sector approach, and as such governments and the renewable energy industry will need to be more proactive and flexible in providing relevant and up-to-date information about the transition, and to share knowledge across sectors.

Feedback and queries our Office receive demonstrate the need for current and accurate information, both for the overarching transition and for localised projects. Some of this responsibility falls with the proponent. However, proponents will not necessarily be trusted as an independent source of information by communities, given their position. As noted above, community stakeholders have raised a number of concerns relating to the deployment of renewable energy infrastructure in host communities, including community engagement, safety, environmental, human health, economic loss, and cumulative impacts, among others. This indicates a need for both trusted local voices, and for clear regional governance in addition to national narratives. Initiatives such as Local Energy Hubs could provide important information and communications services for the local and regional context.

Dis and misinformation can be particularly difficult to dislodge when it contains elements of truth, not to mention in an environment where there are low levels of trust and such (mis)information is amplified by social media algorithms. Social media engagement is often driven by emotive language or narrative framing, which helps to entrench prevailing attitudes. It has also been empirically documented that misinformation spreads more quickly and more extensively online than accurate information.[3] Addressing these issues are difficult, but it is necessary to fill the information vacuum and honestly and transparently communicate these issues associated with the energy transition, explaining the benefits as well as acknowledging the perceived and real negative impacts on host communities.

Since the commencement of the Commissioner's role in 2015, community stakeholders have voiced concerns about the impact of wind farms on human health, for example, due to low

[3] Vosoughi, S, Roy, B and Aral, S (2018), 'The spread of true and false news online', *Science*, 359: 1146-1151.

frequency noise, infrasound, electromagnetic fields, or shadow flicker. The National Health and Medical Research Council has previously examined this issue, finding that there is no consistent evidence that wind farms directly cause adverse human health impacts. As this often-cited piece of research is around a decade old, it is the view of the AEIC that this is an apt time to provide updated information on the issue given greater experience of living near wind turbines and increases in turbine size, notwithstanding this is unlikely to generate new findings regarding direct impacts on human health.

Further remarks

Thank you again for the opportunity to make a submission to this Select Committee. We support any initiatives that seek to strengthen information integrity and transparency throughout the delivery of the energy transition.

If you have any further questions or wish to discuss this submission, please do not hesitate to contact us via email at aeic@aeic.gov.au or on 1800 656 395.

Sincerely,

TONY MAHAR
AUSTRALIAN ENERGY INFRASTRUCTURE COMMISSIONER