

A circuit breaker to give us clear air on heated wind debate

By Naomi Campbell

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The release last week of the [Energy Infrastructure Commissioner's \(EIC\) review](#) into community engagement on renewable energy projects is a timely circuit breaker, given current heated discussions about the role of offshore wind in Australia's energy transition.

Legitimate concerns have been expressed in some communities about poor quality consultation leading to the dissemination of misinformation and disinformation designed to distract and inflame.

Citing community concerns, the review recommends the government improve engagement by motivating developers to consistently deliver acceptable community engagement activities, and only select reputable developers who achieve these performance expectations for new projects. Energy Minister Chris Bowen has accepted the review's recommendations in principle.

The transition of Australia's energy system will simply not happen without diversified supply: PV on rooftops, electric vehicles, and large solar farms with battery storage are all required to ensure electricity is there when needed.

Offshore wind projects are an important component now available for our future energy system. They can supply large, stable electricity for major domestic energy consumers and regional employers, ensuring businesses stay and indeed, can grow, in existing centres. Offshore wind can harness the more consistent wind that blows offshore, and can be located along the coast near existing transmission in regional communities and demand centres.

Exploring the feasibility of offshore wind is a multi-faceted exercise. It's therefore not surprising that the government is allowing developers up to seven years to successfully navigate and complete the necessary raft of approvals - even before any construction and operations can begin.

This first stage - the feasibility phase - kicks off with the federal government granting a Feasibility Licence under the Offshore Electricity Infrastructure Act 2020. Developers must then plan and gain approval for the collection of site- and region-specific data.



Protesters at the 'reckless renewables' rally in Canberra this week. Picture by Sitthixay Ditthavong

In Australia, especially in the marine environment, much of the data has never been collected before so developers need to design comprehensive environmental, social, and economic surveys. The planning of these surveys uses local, national and where necessary, international scientific experts, and are informed by consultation. Consultation will involve not only the relevant regulators and their advisors but also First Nations, local community stakeholders, employers and industry groups including unions, as well as other sectors such as shipping, boating, and commercial and recreational fishing. As per the EIC's recommendations, developers will need to demonstrate best practice complaint handling which strives to achieve positive outcomes.

Some surveys could take two or more years especially for ecological work where seasonal and annual variations need to be considered. For example, the humpback whale migration occurs along Australia's east coast during specific times of the year; surveys must be planned to ensure that data is accurately captured with minimal disturbance to the whales.

Surveys aren't the only thing happening during these seven years. Developers need to gain approval to construct and operate their projects and also need a decommissioning plan including sufficient secured funds to cover that work. Planning and approvals work will be undertaken in tandem with preliminary engineering studies and procurement activities.

The offshore wind farm design will be subject to a design notification scheme demonstrating to the offshore infrastructure regulator that the project meets all relevant engineering and safety standards. This is especially important where emerging technology, such as floating foundations, are to be deployed in Australian waters.

The construction, operations and decommissioning activities will also be subject to the Work Health and Safety Act 2011 (as adopted under the OEI Act) and so close collaboration and planning with the relevant unions during the feasibility phase will be crucial.

Offshore wind projects will be subject to the highest level of Commonwealth environmental approvals, whilst any infrastructure or transmission components in state waters and territories will also require approval.

The most progressed offshore wind farm project in Australia to date, the [Star of the South](#), requires co-ordinated approvals across both federal and state legislation to assess potentially

significant environmental, social, economic, and planning aspects. In total, 25 technical and environmental studies are being prepared with the assessment [slated for release](#) for public review and submissions this year.

With so much to do in the seven-year timeframe, offshore wind developers will need to draw on Australian expertise, skills and knowledge for planning and approvals, project management, marine biology, sub-sea engineering and maritime operations, knowledge of Country, and community and stakeholder engagement.

As the EIC review outlines, a whole-of-community approach during the feasibility phase will improve understanding of both concerns and opportunities and ultimately lead to the delivery of a decarbonised energy supply, and a renewable energy future, for us all.

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<https://www.newcastleherald.com.au/story/8513980/offshore-wind-farm-development-in-australia/?cs=9676>

<https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/8513980/offshore-wind-farm-development-in-australia/?cs=14264>