



TRANSPORT AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Members present:

Mrs MF McMahon MP—Acting Chair
Mr LL Millar MP
Mr BW Head MP
Ms PE Pease MP
Mr LA Walker MP
Mr TJ Watts MP

Staff present:

Ms M Telford—Acting Committee Secretary

PUBLIC HEARING—INQUIRY INTO THE ENERGY (RENEWABLE TRANSFORMATION AND JOBS) BILL 2023

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

Wednesday, 31 January 2024

Mackay

WEDNESDAY, 31 JANUARY 2024

The committee met at 9.04 am.

ACTING CHAIR: Good morning. I declare open the Mackay public hearing for the committee's inquiry into the Energy (Renewable Transformation and Jobs) Bill 2023. My name is Melissa McMahon. I am the member for Macalister and the acting chair of the committee. I would like to respectfully acknowledge the traditional owners and custodians of the land on which we meet today and pay our respects to elders past and present. We are very fortunate to live in a country with two of the oldest continuing cultures in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, whose lands, winds and waters we all share. With me here today are: Lachlan Millar, the member for Gregory and the deputy chair; Bryson Head, the member for Callide; Joan Pease, the member for Lytton; Les Walker, the member for Mundingburra; and Trevor Watts, the member for Toowoomba North.

This hearing is a proceeding of the Queensland parliament and is subject to the parliament's standing rules and orders. Only the committee and invited witnesses may participate in the proceedings. Witnesses are not required to give evidence under oath or affirmation, but I do remind witnesses that intentionally misleading the committee is a serious offence. I also remind members of the public that they may be excluded from the hearing at the discretion of the committee. Media may be present and are subject to the committee's media rules and my direction at all times. You may be filmed or photographed during the proceedings and images may also appear on the parliament's website or social media pages. Please turn your mobile phones off or to silent.

WORTLEY, Mr James, Mackay Region Chamber of Commerce

ACTING CHAIR: James, we do not have a submission from you, but I invite you to make a short opening statement, after which committee members will have some questions for you.

Mr Wortley: The Mackay Region Chamber of Commerce represents 10,000 organisations across every industry in our region, from sole traders to multinationals based in Mackay. Our three pillars of strategy are to advocate for our members, educate and connect. The Mackay chamber supports the vision of this bill. Policy is probably not one of our strong points, so we would like to leave the specifics of the policy feedback to those who have the skills such as the Greater Whitsunday's three local councils and also industries.

ACTING CHAIR: Mr Wortley, could you give us an indication of your thoughts or comments on the bill that we are inquiring into?

Mr Wortley: Probably one of the big things that I looked at is the main purposes of the act, under part 1 and clause 3, which talks about increasing the amount of electricity generated in Queensland from renewable energy sources, facilitating and supporting the efficient augmentation of the national transmission grid and providing for support and advocacy for workers. The one thing that I did not see is a statement in there in relation to the reliability of electricity for all Queenslanders and consumers. I think that is probably one of the important points. We are talking about a renewables bill, but we are also talking about the energy grid. I think one of the main factors is making sure we have full reliability. It is not just a focus on the increase of renewable energy sources as part of the main purpose of the act. I think that is probably one of the ones that I would add there.

Clause 4 relates to how the main purposes are primarily achieved. I can talk about this on behalf of our local members. We would like to see some type of statement in relation to maximising local supply chain opportunities to deliver service for the grid. We have talked about the Pioneer-Burdekin Pumped Hydro project in our local region. It is important that we can make sure our members have full opportunity to support that project when it gets off the ground.

ACTING CHAIR: I want to acknowledge the local member for Mackay, who has joined us today. I understand that she has some work to do later this morning so cannot join us then but thank you, Julieanne, for joining us now.

Mr HEAD: James, you talk about the importance of reliability and that it should be key and a major aspect that is considered as part of this bill. How important is it for your members that electricity is not only reliable but also affordable and inexpensive in a historical context and from where we sit today?

Mr Wortley: It is critical for all of our businesses. Without electricity we do not have a business, do we? It is critical that we have that reliability of electricity, not only where it is at today but also to be able to grow that electricity going forward. It is all good to be able to increase renewables, but we need to make sure we are actually increasing the electricity opportunity generation for Queensland to be able to continue to grow. It is really critical.

Mr HEAD: How important is the cost of that supply for businesses as they are trying to compete?

Mr Wortley: We certainly have feedback from our members that the costs of power are going up and they have been struggling. We want to make sure that our businesses are profitable and that they can continue into the future. One of the key things we want to do is to make sure we can manage those costs in the best way possible. Obviously, electricity is an important ingredient for all businesses. We need electricity, so we want to make sure we try to keep prices as low as possible to make sure we are still around in five, 10 or 15 years.

Mr WATTS: I am interested in proposed projects and big construction and, from your members' point of view, satisfying a supply chain like that. I come from Toowoomba. We saw the gas ramp up during the construction period and then the drop-off. How are your members equipped to manage the boom and—hopefully not—bust cycle? How would they sustain that? I am interested in the local contribution being maximised, but you do not want to see people expand beyond a certain point that is unsustainable once construction winds back.

Mr Wortley: Especially in our region, where we have gone through the boom and bust. We saw that back in 2013-14 when coal prices reduced significantly and we saw property prices drop 20 to 40 per cent. It was really difficult because we lost a lot of people from Mackay. They all went to get jobs elsewhere; they went back to capital cities or other places. They pretty well deserted the regions.

With hindsight, we want to make sure we have absolute diversification in the industries that we have in Mackay so it is not just mining but we also have agriculture, which is really important. I refer to the work that the Resources Centre of Excellence has been doing in relation to innovation. What they are trying to do is get some of the other companies to diversify so it is not only about mining but they can take up this work or the opportunity of work on other construction projects. I think that is pretty critical as well.

Probably one of the key issues that we will have here is accommodation. We are probably seeing that throughout the world. Certainly here in Mackay, it is very hard to get accommodation for people to be able to move to Mackay. That is probably one of the critical issues that we are going to have going forward. If we have a massive project where we need 1,000 or 2,000 people, where are we going to house those people? We need to start doing that now and not in five or six years time.

Mr WATTS: Again, when trying to manage the boom and bust cycle that potentially could come out of this bill because of the construction phase, how do we manage accommodation? What would the chamber of commerce like to see in the management of that?

Mr Wortley: That is a hard one because the cost is the cost. When it comes to steel prices and everything else, it is about supply and demand. From a building perspective, you might have been able to build a house at \$1,500 or \$1,800 a square metre. Now we are talking about costs getting up to \$2,500 a square metre. What can we do about that? There is really not much we can do. Again, it is all supply and demand driven. Somehow we need to be able to see those prices come back—or do we just accept that that is going to be the reality of where prices are at today and we are going to have to be able to measure that with the way we run our businesses today? It is difficult.

Mackay is a services industry—we supply services to the mines. We are not digging up the coal here but we certainly have the services here. This is where I come back to that diversification. If it is not coal—if it is renewables—what other opportunities do we have? From a state point of view, where is our leadership there? What else do we need to do as a state to be able to diversify our income, whether it be gas or any other opportunities? Innovation is something we should be looking at as well. Then we have those skill sets that can diversify across so we are not going to see a big drop in employment here in our local region.

Ms PEASE: Thanks for the great work you do advocating on behalf of the local Mackay region businesses. Just to set the scene for me, what is your membership base in the chamber?

Mr Wortley: Our membership base—paid members—is around the 260 to 270 mark.

Ms PEASE: That is a good number.

Mr Wortley: We are looking to grow that to 300 by the end of the financial year.

Ms PEASE: What sorts of businesses do you represent?

Mr Wortley: They are very diverse—from mining to housing. We have a lot of professionals. It is very diversified across the Mackay region. Again, we have a pretty diverse base.

Ms PEASE: You represent farmers and mining. Would you say that you are fairly representative of the entire community?

Mr Wortley: Absolutely. The big opportunity we have is with diversification. We have a lot of professionals but those professionals might have cane farms as well. We have that diversity across our region.

Ms PEASE: I acknowledge the boom and bust times. You are going through some great times at the moment in Mackay—really successful. You talked about the concerns in reliability of the supply chain in the renewable space. I understand that there will be a lot of new opportunities for different types of industries that come with the renewable space. Have you as a chamber investigated those opportunities?

Mr Wortley: We have been talking about it, but what is that next step? Where do we get the information? What does it look like? That is where we are going to be reaching out to government to provide us with some of that information to say what the opportunities are, especially from a chamber of commerce point of view, all throughout the state. We need to have that guidance so we can see what the opportunities are so then we can start to talk to our members and see what we need to do and how to advocate, connect and support.

Ms PEASE: What about your local council? Have you been engaging with them to see what their role is and what their advice is, given that they manage a lot of those on the ground?

Mr Wortley: Yes. We have a very good relationship with the Mackay Regional Council. Our president is in conversation—even monthly conversations—with the council, just seeing where they are and what they can do to help us. They have provided a lot of support for us as well as a chamber to put on whether it be training and support for our local members.

Ms PEASE: There are a lot of opportunities. It is an exciting time, really. We have been to a lot of different places on our travels and spoken to new industries that are developing. You have the training schools and other things happening here in Mackay. There are great opportunities for your members to diversify. Have you had an opportunity to speak to any of those new businesses that potentially are coming to the area—to come along to the chamber as guest speakers, for example?

Mr Wortley: There are always opportunities there for them. The one thing that we do really well is networking. Part of that networking is giving the opportunity for all members to have a chat to other members. That is the strength of why we are a growing chamber of commerce compared to maybe some of the other chambers throughout the state. As part of networking on a fortnightly basis, we have coffees and things like that as well. There is also an opportunity for those people who want to put their businesses forward to show up there and they have an opportunity to present to all of those members as well.

Ms PEASE: I guess not for your existing members but there are opportunities to engage with those external providers who are looking to relocate and invest in Mackay. There are some pretty amazing opportunities for the area.

Mr Wortley: Absolutely.

Ms PEASE: There are opportunities there. Have you explored those opportunities of speaking to those external industries that are looking at coming here?

Mr Wortley: Certainly there are always opportunities there. Again, for us it is about how we do that. We are a grassroots organisation. When we talk about grassroots, we are about building our membership. The more success we have is by increasing our membership and then the memberships are supporting each other and networking. Then they make themselves more profitable and then we build. That is what we have found. As we start to see new businesses come in, one of our goals is to make sure we are talking to those businesses about joining the chamber because of the opportunities we can provide to them.

Mr HEAD: There is a lot of talk about sugar cane and biofuels and everything like that. I am curious about your input. Where do you think the sugar side of things fits in the energy future and how important would that be to this region?

Mr Wortley: I have had a couple of meetings personally with the biofuels and what they are looking to do with the development around the Mackay sugar mill. Obviously it is very important for us as a region. I think there is going to be more opportunity for the Resource Industry Network, or a Mackay

part of it, to focus on that. We deal with a lot of professionals as well. We are diverse but it is a very professional network. For us it is about making sure we still take advantage of those opportunities and talk to the right people to see where the benefits are for our members. That is the big thing for us. If there are opportunities to develop and diversify then our job is to make sure we are talking to those people. Then we can go back to our members and say, 'Let's network. Let's be able to connect these guys.' Connection is probably one of the big issues that we have with our chamber—making sure we can connect people with the right people who can make those decisions and hopefully benefit from that in their businesses.

Mr HEAD: As someone who has worked in the Bowen Basin in coalmining, I know that the Bowen Basin exports a lot of coal. Mackay is a bit more protected from the closure of thermal coal-fired power stations in the state and in the country. There is a lot of talk about new industries. You are talking about local supply chains and manufacturing et cetera. What will Mackay look like if we do not get the new industries right and we do see a significant decline in the jobs in existing industries?

Mr Wortley: It is critical. We have to make sure we have that balance, don't we? If we go too far to the side then we will have other issues there in terms of support or taking a lot of people away from where we make our money. Again, the majority of the mines around us that we support mine coking coal. I know that there is more thermal coal further out west, but we want to make sure we do not lose too much of those critical skills in our region. It is about making sure we have the right balance there.

Again, the potential for us is not only diversification but also how we bring more people to Mackay. For Mackay to continue to have the wealth and the growth that we have had, that is what we want to be able to do—bring those skill sets to Mackay so we can offload that. It is not just a matter of taking people from one industry and moving them to the new industry; it is diversifying and making sure we are really strong across all of those industries.

ACTING CHAIR: Later this afternoon we are going to visit the Pioneer-Burdekin proposed site. I was wondering what early engagement your organisation or representatives from Mackay may have had in relation to what the benefits are, not only in terms of the site and the construction but also in terms of the skilled workforce that is needed to maintain one of the biggest hydro projects the country has ever seen.

Mr Wortley: There is certainly opportunity. The construction and everything else is absolutely fantastic. The renewable energy that is going to come out of that project is absolutely fantastic as well. My other role is with the Rotary Club of Mackay. We had the guys come and talk to us last week in relation to the project. Probably the feedback that we are getting is that a lot of people still do not understand it. They can understand that this is what we are doing, but, in terms of how much water is going to be in both of those dams and what that will look like, I do not think people can picture that or understand that. We can see the benefit, but we are getting some feedback from our other members who are really worried about it as well from an environmental concern.

ACTING CHAIR: Could you outline what the worries are that have been articulated to you in relation to that?

Mr Wortley: There are environmental concerns. There are some springs there. Again, I do not know too much detail about it, but the people living there are worried about the engineering of that. Also, the people living there want to know what it is going to look like.

ACTING CHAIR: From your point of view and for the community more broadly, you would like to see more information about the scale of the project—something that is tangible such as a visual representation or something like that—that allows people to get an understanding of what is being proposed physically in the location?

Mr Wortley: It is. It comes back to the fact that the guys who are heading up this project need to get out to the community more. I know that they are trying to get out there, but it is pretty critical. They need to be able to get out there to give the mums and dads a real understanding of what the project is. We can always see the benefits. We have the fact sheets. It is pretty straightforward. When you are taking a mum and dad through this brochure, trying to picture what this looks like is pretty difficult.

ACTING CHAIR: That is understood.

Mr Wortley: Especially when it comes back to the water. I think there was an example when they were talking about Kinchant Dam. We know how vast Kinchant Dam is. They are talking about that water going into one of the reservoirs up there. What does that look like? How does that happen?

From a chamber of commerce point of view, we also look at the opportunity for our members. There is huge opportunity there. Again, with renewable energy, if we can bring the costs of electricity down there is a big benefit there. There is also opportunity on the construction side which should be fantastic for our members.

Mr WALKER: I am a big supporter of the chamber of commerce. I am from Townsville and the seat of Mundingburra. I am a former city councillor in Townsville. Now more than ever, it is critical as part of this process for the chamber of commerce to get information out to their members and the broader community about the excitement of jobs and the growth of an economy like Mackay. Mackay is getting back to being a very strong economy. The state member is going to make a very important announcement today with the Minister for Resources.

Do you get briefings quite regularly from the council about their land development moving forward—how much land is available for future growth and housing? They normally have a city plan. We have heard from AgForce and the Farmers' Federation that they do not support good farming land being used for other purposes. They want to protect it. In Mackay you have sugar cane in the industrial areas and around the airport. I want to know what those conflicts are. Do you get a briefing from council on what the city plan looks like moving forward?

Mr Wortley: Yes, we certainly do. It is probably not part of my role on the chamber of commerce. I think it is more the president and the leadership who are the ones having those conversations. I know that we have spoken about it at our committee meetings. They understand what they are looking to do.

From the point of view of our builders, there is still plenty of opportunity there where there is land to be able to develop at the moment. Above and beyond that, where is the next stage, especially with what is happening with the sugar mill? Where are the opportunities there from a development point of view? We have the Northern Beaches as well. The population is growing strongly out there. We still have issues there. Again, this is Mackay, where we love to be able to drive 10 minutes from work to home. People on the Northern Beaches, if they are working in town, are now talking about a 20-minute or a 30-minute drive, which we are not quite used to. We need to make sure we have infrastructure there that can cope with that as well.

Mr WALKER: The reason I am talking about land and housing is that this is one of the things that comes up about growth and the Energy and Jobs Plan. We have CopperString in Townsville which is a huge nation-building project and you have a big proposal planned for here. My major point as a former councillor is lifestyle. How do you attract those workers? Is there plenty of land and housing? Do you have state development industry breakfasts here? Do you have a quarterly industry breakfast talking about the vision for the region and the city? Is there anything like that?

Mr Wortley: I am not aware of that. There might be some opportunity that we get through chamber but I have not had the opportunity to get on those.

Mr HEAD: In relation to the Pioneer-Burdekin Pumped Hydro project, had the chamber been involved in any discussions about that proposal? Was it ever flagged in any capacity prior to the September 2022 announcement?

Mr Wortley: No.

Mr HEAD: For a project this big and with huge disruptions to a community, how much should the government be putting feelers out and starting that conversation prior to big, statewide announcements? I note there is a long way to go for not only this project but also what is in this energy bill into the future so I am curious on your thoughts.

Mr Wortley: I have been on the chamber for the last two years and I have run a business for well over 15 years, but I had never heard of the project before. I was surprised because I had no understanding of what that was. I think our members were as well. The feedback from our members was that it came out of the blue. No-one was really aware of that. Again, it might be in other circles that we are not associated with. There might have been some information there but there was not a lot of information until the announcement came through. I suppose from a chamber of commerce point of view, we were trying to get more information about this and I think that is where we are still. We have not made any proposals to be able to go in either direction of support or what that actually looks like. We are just trying to get the information from Queensland Hydro.

Mr HEAD: To date, what do you think has been done well? You said that information is the key thing, but do you want to add what we could be doing better in that?

ACTING CHAIR: I just note that the question from the member for Callide is asking for an opinion. Feel free to answer it, but I am assuming that is your personal opinion and not necessarily representative of the chamber of commerce.

Mr Wortley: What is that?

ACTING CHAIR: Can you rephrase the question?

Mr HEAD: Certainly. From the discussion with your members and as a chamber of commerce, what comments have they made specifically around what they have appreciated and what has been done well? You mentioned the lack of information is one key issue, but are there things that could be improved upon to help the Mackay region?

Mr Wortley: I think it is just continued community support and making sure they can get out to the community. That is really what it is all about. Once the announcement was made, everyone was saying, 'What do we need to be able to do?' It would have been good to have these fact sheets straightaway that said what had gone into it so we had a bit more information up-front to be able to understand how they came to this decision. From our point of view, the No. 1 thing is communication. That is how we actually have good businesses: making sure you have really good communication and understand what the facts are. If there was any feedback from the chamber back to Queensland Hydro, it would be to make sure we get more information to actually understand what that looks like. They are doing an okay job. I think there is definitely a lot of room for improvement.

ACTING CHAIR: Thank you for your time this morning. We did not have any questions on notice. Our next witness from the Greater Whitsunday Alliance is not present yet. We will take a short break and then adjust the program as required.

Proceedings suspended from 9.34 am to 9.49 am.

KENNEDY, Ms Donna, Coordinator, Mackay Conservation Group

ACTING CHAIR: I invite you to make a short opening statement, after which time the committee members may have some questions for you

Ms Kennedy: On behalf of the Mackay Conservation Group, thank you for the opportunity to speak today. We, alongside many other environmental groups and the Queensland Conservation Council, have been pushing for an urgent rollout of renewable energy to have a chance to limit climate change to 1.5 degrees. We should not need to underline the importance of reducing emissions any further as we live through another summer of catastrophic change really in the last two decades. We are looking at an increasing climate and heat and temperature. You are here in Mackay today. You actually got a good day, but the humidity is pretty bad.

ACTING CHAIR: We were here yesterday.

Ms Kennedy: The move to renewable energy is crucial to reduce emissions. The IPCC and the International Energy Agency have indicated that to reach a 1.5-degree future we cannot expand fossil fuel infrastructure in developed countries—a simple statement. Instead, we need to be developing renewable energy as quickly as possible. In Central Queensland, the heart of Queensland's coal industry, we need to be proactive to stop the opening of more mines and find ways to transition to renewable energy sources.

We were relieved that the Queensland Energy and Jobs Plan showed a way that we could end our reliance on a coal industry, on coal-fired power stations. Renewable energy backed by storage is the cheapest way to do this and will create stable, lower power prices for Queensland. The plan is also an important step in providing certainty for the industry and for the investment in renewables needed to create futureproof regional economies.

In general terms, we support the bill as it will set up the legal foundations for renewable energy zones and formalises the renewable energy targets. However, we extend concern that the bill does not go far enough—details, quite simply—while the government continues to approve the opening of new and expanding coalmines in the region. We urge the government to release a detailed road map for consultation before individual REZs are declared. This will allow Queenslanders to be involved in a conversation about the future for their region. The QREZ road map needs to plan development of renewable energy that will have the least biodiversity impact across the state through use of detailed biodiversity mapping to prioritise areas of high biodiversity for production. A similar process should be carried out for land use mapping to identify areas of high agricultural value and cultural heritage.

We are also concerned that the focus on storage rather than production indicates a slower transition to renewables. We worry that we cannot afford to sacrifice our joint future by slow or minimalist action. Finally, while Mackay Conservation Group is not a friend of big coal, it is supportive of the workers working in the industry. We hope that the government can bring pressure to large companies to invest widely in renewable energy sources and forward-plan to help workers transition into stable jobs with skills to work in renewable energy. Thank you for your time.

Mr WATTS: Thank you very much for being here. You spoke about the renewable energy zones. I am trying to tease out from that what kind of control we should have over a renewable energy zone and how things like biodiversity, prime agricultural land and cultural heritage feed into it and what should happen with rehabilitation and putting the land back as it was upon it being finished with as a generation source for renewable or any other energy. At the moment there is a disparity in what happens. I am trying to work out what your organisation would like to see in a REZ.

Ms Kennedy: I think in Queensland we have a history, in mining in particular, of leaving land worse than when they went in. There is a lot of legislation asking for rehabilitation, but there are a lot of loopholes—bigger mines selling out to smaller mines and not doing the clean-up at the end of their term. In many applications at the moment we see the words 'the final outcome for the land will involve large pits being left'. Firstly, it can be toxic when water fills them and, secondly, there is no replacement of species of plants that were there before mining. Rehabilitation is something that we see as very important, and legislation should be tightened to ensure this happens. We understand that some areas need to be used for production of energy. We are hoping that in these areas studies are quite large and that we understand the implications for biodiversity and that some decisions are influenced by the reality that if we do it there we lose something forever. When the outcome is going to be losing multiple species from the earth, that is something that should have impact on decisions on where we are producing energy.

Mr WATTS: You spoke about mines and rehabilitation. The process they have to go through now is that they have to put a bond in place and they have to make sure there is a financial capacity that the government holds. Do you think renewable projects should have the same type of bond in a REZ to make sure the land can be rehabilitated and we are not just left with what happened historically in the fifties where you are just left with a mess and someone has taken all the profit and run?

Ms Kennedy: Conclusively, we should not be leaving land in a mess. It should be a requirement; it should be legislated; it should be toughened. It exists now but it is not being followed. Yes, of course, everything should be stringently controlled so that if areas are used they can be rehabilitated, and that includes a diverse mapping of plant and animal species and a return of the original species, if possible.

Mr WATTS: That is something you would like to see addressed in the development of a REZ?

Ms Kennedy: Yes. Moving towards renewable energy is fabulous, but you do not want to sacrifice the environment on the road to renewable energy. These two things need to go hand in hand.

Mr WATTS: I agree.

ACTING CHAIR: Generally speaking, the committee has heard support for the transition to renewable energy and everyone understands the imperative to do so, but the renewable energy industry does require mining to support it. The minerals required for the batteries and the components to power these things means that Queensland's mining industry will continue, if not necessarily in the coal industry. I wanted to get your thoughts on how we balance what needs to be a sustained mining industry and potentially a thriving mining industry, albeit in other minerals and resources other than coal, and what the government needs to do to make sure that is far more environmentally sustainable.

Ms Kennedy: That is slightly out of my wheelhouse.

ACTING CHAIR: From a conservation point of view. Mining is going to continue.

Ms Kennedy: From a conservation point of view, we are mining extensively currently. There were six applications, I believe, across our table in the last week for extensions or new mines in the region. When we look at even the very basics—lack of environmental assessment reports, lack of rehabilitation measures, statements that 'at the end there will be six pits left', 'there will be three pits left'—they are upfront about it. There is no rehabilitation plan despite bonds, despite other things. Our issue at the moment is that obviously we have to speak to coal first in this area, because coal is everywhere and the communities rely on coal.

This is a problem also: so many people work within the industries. The easy answer is to just keep mining—the government gets royalties; the communities have jobs—but the issue is that we need to be transferring to other forms of energy. The people who have the money to do that are the companies that have the mines. They are the ones who could be investing in renewable energy sources—I am getting back to your question—retraining workers so that they can be employed in the renewable energy field, and if we have the necessity for certain mines—this is just an opinion; I have only been in the job a week, by the way.

ACTING CHAIR: You are doing well.

Ms Kennedy: We have the belief that certain mining may be necessary to facilitate clean energy but with stricter regulation and not this open-slasher opening of new mines. It seems to be just getting bigger and bigger, where the push internationally and locally should be to downscaling and investing in green energy.

ACTING CHAIR: We have spoken to a number of stakeholders who understand that the global requirement for industry is to put all their eggs into a renewable energy future—that is, global markets require export industries to have a reliable renewable energy base. Are you able to comment on the targets that are going to be legislated in this bill?

Ms Kennedy: The target listed is 80 per cent by 2035. To have targets is a great thing, so there is a simple statement. The proposal is a recent increase, so that is great. I am idealistic: I would like 100 per cent and sooner because that is where we should be looking—the actual setting of targets that seem realistic and that may be achievable, although I am not quite sure if we keep opening coalmines.

Mr WATTS: As a supplementary to my previous question, in a REZ zone and for a renewable project, do you think the same land-clearing laws should apply that apply to agriculture?

Ms Kennedy: It is interesting because there are different renewable energies, obviously. The most obvious is that solar power does involve clearing the entire area so that access to panels and maintenance is possible. That has the greatest impact. If it is long term then it has to be offset in another area with investment put into creating green space that offsets that.

I do not know if it should be the same because I am not entirely up to speed with agricultural requirements at the moment—I will be honest about that. I do know that there are many farm and agricultural areas that are still existing in an old-fashioned way, where basically the land is cleared completely. There are many farmers moving towards a more sustainable model with green strips for animals, for shade and to stop soil erosion. I think if agriculture keeps moving forward with more of an eco footprint, that is good for them and good for us all, then of course environmental zones should have fairly stringent environment restrictions.

Mr WALKER: My question is in relation to the mining part of the Queensland Energy and Jobs Plan. We need the vanadiums, the rare earths, to go into the new batteries. I am from Townsville and a former deputy mayor and councillor. In our neck of the woods, we are doing the vanadium processing for the new-age batteries. We witnessed yesterday the flow batteries which have a 95 to 99 per cent recyclable component. They have a very long life of 20 to 30 years and can be repurposed, but we still have to have mining for those minerals. There is a bit of confusion out there so I want to get your perspective on this. In relation to the coal being reduced back on the carbon footprint to make the environment a lot cleaner, we are still going to have mining. I want to get some clarity because you have mentioned mining. What is your organisation's position on mining in general for these new minerals going into the green energy space and the jobs of the future? They are transitioning away from the coal, but we need to go to processing these minerals and making products to make a sustainable energy future.

Ms Kennedy: As I said, I am not sure that we are moving away from coal, with the granting of many new licences. I will just throw that in there. I cannot actually speak for the group on this one because I have not had that discussion in the last week. I would say that there are some things that are necessary to become greener. If there is mining for a particular battery, for example, then I think we probably find a space with that as long as there is stringent control for the environment. Also, I think there is a reality where funding needs to go into seeing if there is another way to make this battery—if there is another way that it can happen. It has to be step by step. The biggest mining issue for this area that we do have a stance on is coal. Everything that we are producing with coal we can do in a much greener way and with less impact, as long as we have stringent requirements for how land is rehabilitated and used—and I mean 'we' as a group.

Mr WALKER: You talk about mines just leaving big holes in the ground, and I think you are more focused on the coalmines. There are some old agreements in place—correct me if I am wrong—that did not have any rehabilitation plans. All new mines today have conditions around environmental impacts and what they have to do in the event they shut down—like paying a bond for the rehabilitation. You talk about that process. Are there opportunities as we move forward to get groups like yours to be a part of that—growing the plant stock, being involved in cleaning the sites up—with first First Nations people to make sure we have other jobs and a cleaner environment from mining?

Ms Kennedy: There are two things. Firstly, there may be conditions in place but they are not being met. All you have to do is take a drive through Central Queensland and you will see the leftovers of mining—and they are not ancient mines; they are more modern mines. One of the biggest loopholes is that they are selling the mine to a smaller company so they are getting out of their rehabilitation of the final two pits. The smaller company is taking over, often going bankrupt and just moving, so obligations are not being met. That is the biggest loophole.

The second thing is that environmental groups and traditional custodians would love to be involved, but the question is who is paying the bill. We did not make the mess but we are happy to be involved with plans and to be overseers, if you like. At the moment we have First Nations people on camp outside mines. They have the knowledge and they know the area. It would be great to be consulted in rehabilitation plans and to be involved, but once again we are not making the mess so there should be someone footing the bill.

Mr HEAD: You have talked about detailed biodiversity mapping, land use mapping, that should be undertaken as part of the energy transition. You also said we should be developing renewables as quickly as possible. I would like you to elaborate on that.

Ms Kennedy: As quickly as possible without creating more damage. There has to be that leeway that you do not jump before you look. Renewable is a good idea. It may not be a good idea for that area but we need the information to make a good call rather than a bad one.

Mr HEAD: Is that doing all of that biodiversity and land use mapping and all of that? Even though the companies that are wanting to build those renewable projects should be fronting up and doing that work, it then takes a lot of resources to assess that and everything like that. What is Mackay Conservation Group's view on what the government should be doing in that space to ensure these projects are thoroughly assessed?

Ms Kennedy: The obvious one is either undertaking studies themselves with an impartial body or commissioning scientific research and assessments into the areas. Yes, that costs money, but I could make many statements about things that my taxes pay for that I wish they did not. There are many people like me who wish that a lot of our taxes would go to this type of project so that we can make good decisions for the future. It will take resources, but I think they have to do it. Otherwise we will be called to account.

ACTING CHAIR: Thank you for joining us this morning and thank you for being flexible with your timing. This is how we roll when we travel.

Ms Kennedy: We do apologise that we did not put in a written submission. I have just started the job and the previous coordinator was gone and on holiday, so it slipped through the cracks.

ACTING CHAIR: That is fine. The idea of our visits is that it gives everyone an opportunity, even those who do not regularly engage with committee processes. Thank you for coming in.

PORTER, Ms Kylie, Chief Executive Officer, Greater Whitsunday Alliance

ACTING CHAIR: Welcome. I invite you to make a short opening statement, after which committee members will have some questions for you.

Ms Porter: I apologise for the confusion this morning. The Greater Whitsunday Alliance, otherwise known as GW3—you probably hear us more referenced as GW3 than our full name—is the economic development organisation for the Mackay, Isaac and Whitsunday local government areas. We refer to this region as the Greater Whitsunday region. GW3 takes a future focused view of what our region and our economy can be in the next five, 10 and even 30 years time. Our research tells us that our economy is changing and it is changing rapidly.

The Greater Whitsunday region is truly one of Queensland's and Australia's powerhouse economies. Our region is home to 186,000 people. Mackay, Isaac and Whitsunday supports over 97,000 jobs and our economic output in 2023 increased to \$65.2 billion. That is up significantly from \$58 billion in 2022. Mining, and predominantly metallurgical coalmining, remains the largest contributor to our total economic profile, at 52.2 per cent in 2023. That is edging down from 52.6 per cent in previous years. We know that other sectors—including manufacturing, agriculture and construction—are growing. In response to the Energy (Renewable Transformation and Jobs) Bill 2023, I would like to offer the following feedback.

Place-based planning: Isaac Regional Council's submission references this in detail. In particular, we would like to reinforce the importance of enshrining the role of local governments and local communities during the green energy transformation. This is particularly relevant to the priority transmission investment framework. The framework fails to identify any avenues of local government or local community engagement prior to a project being declared a PTI. Existing resource communities have fought long and hard for this consideration with mining projects. Let us learn from that experience. I note that Banana, Central Highlands, Western Downs and the LGAQ also requested this consideration in their submissions.

Regional jobs: GW3 has consulted actively in the development of the Queensland jobs and energy workforce development plan. We know that our region has the right mix of skills and experience to adapt and transfer to the green energy transformation. Let's ensure all regions have the government investment to support the transfer of skills based on precise regional intelligence. One size does not fit all.

Local content: GW3 supports the recommendation of the Queensland Resources Council to expand the responsibility of the jobs advocate to include local content. Regional communities are experts in their patch. Give them the opportunity to develop place-based local content policy to really leave a meaningful, long-term, impactful legacy for Queensland communities as a result of green energy transformation. The world-class skills and expertise developed during the mining boom can be replicated through this opportunity. I am happy to take any specific questions.

Mr MILLAR: What are your thoughts with regard to renewable energy and the impact that might have on prime agricultural land? Is that something you have discussed?

Ms Porter: Absolutely. The sugar industry particularly has been in a period of reconsolidation. We would like to bring more prime agricultural land specifically for the purposes of sugar back into the market, into the milling patches to ensure the sustainability of that sector.

Mr MILLAR: Would you agree or disagree that the impact of renewable energy such as solar farms on places like the Mackay region and our cane regions is not only taking away possibly some A-grade agricultural land but also putting pressure on the sugarmilling operation? Mackay used to have four mills and is now down to three and there is already sustained pressure on those mills to continue.

Ms Porter: That is exactly right. I believe that the sugarmilling association in their submission talked about ensuring consideration is given to the quality of land in the approvals of these styles of projects. I know that the Mackay Regional Council has applied that thinking already when they have seen development applications come across their desk.

ACTING CHAIR: Locally within the area that GW3 looks after, are you able to advise the committee of whether there have been any renewable energy proposals that have been approved where it has had an impact on local agricultural or other businesses or where an application has been rejected because of the impact it would have locally in this area?

Ms Porter: There was a proposal from a solar farm development in the Mackay Regional Council area footprint. It was on prime agricultural land and also encroached very closely onto residential land. Through a normal consultation process there were some objections and council has absolutely taken that on board in not approving that proposal.

There is very large-scale solar farm activity, particularly in the Isaac region as well as in the north-western parts of the Whitsunday region around Collinsville. This would be on what we call very subprime agricultural land where it is variable. It is the ideal location. The beauty of having a region that is some 90,000 square kilometres in footprint means that not all of it is prime agricultural land. We can certainly make accommodations to do this transformation and find that balance.

ACTING CHAIR: Do you feel that the process council had was robust enough or should there be some further state government regulations to assist councils in going through this process?

Ms Porter: Yes, and that is quite clearly what councils like Isaac Regional Council are seeking. They are seeking perhaps some more guidance or inclusivity around the future of green energy projects as well as the approvals and how they are managed long term, their end-of-life style treatment. That is what local governments are absolutely seeking: more clarity in the bill to manage beyond this establishment phase. We have to look at the operational end of life, the phase that comes next. That is what councils are concerned about and they are looking for that clarity.

Mr WATTS: You may or may not have heard my questions around the renewable energy zones. One of the things I am trying to look at is what rules and regulations there should be around local councils and objectors. How should it work in those zones and who gets to make the decision? For example, using sugar as an example, if someone decides to take a chunk out of production, that affects everybody else because the mill is no longer necessarily viable. I am interested in the rules that apply to different uses of that land. If it be for agriculture, there are certain rules. If it be for mining, there are certain rules. If it is for renewable energy, there are certain rules. Do you think those rules should be closer and reflective of each other? What would be your organisation's advice to the committee around how to handle that disparity of regulations?

Ms Porter: There is absolutely some streamlining that could occur because it makes it very difficult for any of those industry sectors to clearly understand the pathway moving forward. There is a different set of rules and a different process involved if you are an energy proponent versus if you are a high-value crop producer. There are completely different rules and regulations.

It would be great to have a holistic approach to the structure of how we find this balance between a green energy transformation and the existence of our economies—of our legacy industry but also our future economy. We must feed people. We must employ people. We must be in a position where we educate and provide medical or health care. We have to find that balance and sometimes I think we have perhaps looked at some of the issues in silo without considering the broader impacts.

Mr WATTS: In relation to the end-of-life, bond initiation and long-term planning over that space, what would be your advice?

Ms Porter: Again, we cannot have one set of rules for one sector and a separate set of rules for another. At the moment there probably is not enough clarity around that end-of-life, bond, rehabilitation, rejuvenation—whatever you want to call it—with regard to green energy projects, yet it is very clear about the responsibility with regard to mining, for example. Having that clarity across all sectors really needs to be thought about and implemented. There is an opportunity in this bill to address that and I think it needs to be done more clearly.

Mr HEAD: I hear a lot about the need for reliable power for the sake of industries, so I want your comments on that. Also, how important in this region is affordable electricity that businesses and individuals access?

Ms Porter: It would be no surprise to the committee to hear that the availability and consistency of supply 15 years ago was probably less topical and less top of mind. I think the average bear would have found it very difficult to articulate how that could have potentially impacted them. Everybody is very clear today in 2024 about the cost of electricity.

From an industry perspective, as a region that has a heavy industry profile, having a pathway to green energy as a region is absolutely necessary, vital, pivotal to our future long-term success. We will be unable to attract proponents in new and future industry without a pathway to green energy. If we are genuinely committed to diversifying our economic base away from what we pull out of the ground and how we can add value to all other value streams, we need to absolutely commit to the investment around green energy.

The proponents we work with, particularly in the biomanufacturing space—our region produces one-third of Australia's sugar. We are very focused on how we convert that sugar into high-value alternative products, whether they be SAF—sustainable aviation fuel—or precision fermentation, where we make alternative proteins out of sugar. They are high-energy industries. We must be able to give them a green energy pathway; otherwise, they will look elsewhere.

Mr WALKER: Thank you for being here this morning. I liked what you said about adaptation versus the global economy. As we have found from talking to others at some of these hearings, there is an expectation in the global market that we are going into the green energy space. If we are not in that space, they do not buy from us. We have to have social licence and demonstrate that we have an environmentally clean sort of process moving forward. That is especially so in the Whitsundays, where we have beautiful islands and some of your members would love to make sure that is protected. I am sure you have some conflicts between some areas of mining and the Whitsundays, so it is a juggling act for you.

You represent the footprint of three local authorities. I asked a question earlier about town planning and how we can get those workforces for all of those different industries but more so the green energy space and how we get those workers and the lifestyle. You have a lot more to offer here for those people who come and live here permanently and have a lifestyle. I know that you have a lot of fly-in fly-out, even to the west, because they love the lifestyle in the Whitsundays. Have you had any discussions around what that looks like moving forward on land and housing and what the city plans are for each region?

Ms Porter: We have. To be brutally frank, growth is not our problem, which is disappointing. This should be a region that is growing out of control because of that economic data that I presented to you. We must reinvent ourselves as regional Queensland as being a place that you want to relocate to. I think regional Australia more broadly has done a very terrible job at the sell. Metropolitan regions tend to think that regional Australia is hot and dirty and you have to work on a farm or a mine and that is it. The nuances are very deep and we offer high-value, high-reward and well-paid jobs that are aspirational, but we do not sell that; we do not talk about that.

Do our local governments plan for growth? Absolutely. Is that reflected in the data? No. This region typically has an unemployment rate of half the state average. That is normal. Isaac, for example, will be less than one per cent unemployment at all times. I think at the moment they are at about 0.9 per cent. In Mackay, we are half the state's national average. It is not a case that there is not opportunity here; it is the case that we struggle to attract people to relocate and see the opportunity that is available in regional Queensland. I think a green energy pathway starts to connect into the aspirations particularly of young people, and we need to do a much better job at that sell.

Mr WALKER: Townsville went from 13 per cent unemployment to 2.3 per cent today. We are a victim of our own success across the state of Queensland, with tens of thousands of people moving to Queensland every year, and we are hearing that you are not getting a piece of that action.

Ms Porter: No.

Mr WALKER: You probably have a nice little corner of the world that you could sell quite easily. We have Townsville Enterprise Ltd in Townsville and you are equal in that space.

Ms Porter: We are a sister organisation, yes.

Mr WALKER: They do a lot of marketing wider because we have a lot of investors from interstate coming into Townsville. We are a very diverse economy. What do you think we could do, perhaps in partnership with you, to get that message out that we do not have an unemployment problem but we do have a worker shortage for this new age?

Ms Porter: Yes. We have what I call a 'pulses and heartbeats' problem; we just do not have enough of them in the region to be able to take advantage of the jobs. You could do a quick search right at this minute on Seek and across the region I would say that there is somewhere between 1,800 and 2,000-odd jobs available today across the three regions. What could government do? I think Townsville—respectfully—has done a really great job, but with Townsville's rebranding or marketing externally you have been anointed as a hydrogen hub and so through government you have been able to tap into all of those really aspirational careers and opportunities that lots of people identify with and will follow.

When you talk about our region, our region is one of the three that consistently gets focused on in terms of, 'Gee, we've got to help these people find their way forward out of mining.' It does nothing for us reputationally to attract people here. This region quite clearly economically punches well above its weight, and without that economic output Queensland and Australia are actually in a lot of trouble, so why are we not investing as a priority into redefining what these economies can be? We know that we have an enormous number of strengths, because of our history in mining, that we can translate and transfer into new and emerging industries, yet we are finding that the pipeline of investment from government to back us in and support us for that just is not quite as strong as, say, hydrogen or critical minerals.

Mr WALKER: I think where I am heading is that what you have is quite unique with the lifestyle. A lot of people are envious. Is there an opportunity to tap into other areas around, because the travel time is quite short from Townsville to here to the Whitsundays as a marketing package for those workers to come and do university, mining and research and development at the Australian Institute of Marine Science, which works closely with the Whitsundays?

Ms Porter: Absolutely.

Mr WALKER: How could we do that as a bigger package to get the workers into this energy space? Is there something more?

Ms Porter: Townsville Enterprise, Advance Cairns and I catch up monthly. The issues that we have are around reputation and profile. Why would you come to North Queensland? There are cyclones, it is hot, you have killed the reef, you only do mining, you have to fly-in fly-out to a job. We have really done ourselves as a state, given the way that we talk about these economic powerhouse economies, a disservice because we have dumbed it down to the worst possible common denominator rather than actually focus on the fact that without these three economies the future of our state looks pretty grim.

Mr WALKER: There are more positives than negatives.

Ms Porter: A hundred per cent.

Mr HEAD: Certainly from what you are talking about, I would love to sit here and ask you about 10 more questions on that line, but in the interests of time I am curious: in relation to a very big project that is being proposed on this doorstep, the Pioneer-Burdekin Pumped Hydro, was GW3 involved in discussions or had any involvement that you are able to disclose prior to the September 2022 announcement?

Ms Porter: No.

Mr HEAD: Further, could you comment on things that GW3 thinks the government has maybe done well in this process? Also, do you have any advice on what should be done better or should have been done better to date?

Ms Porter: Yes. To be clear, I sit on the stakeholder reference group for the Pioneer-Burdekin Pumped Hydro scheme, so I am involved regularly. Do I think the process around announcements should have been handled better? One hundred per cent. My background is corporate communications. It should have been better. However, I think I am pretty vocal directly with the government and with Queensland Hydro around areas for improvement and spaces where we can improve engagement and consultation, particularly with those communities, and I provide that on a pretty regular basis. I would suggest that if you were to ask some of the gentlemen sitting behind me they would sometimes prefer that I did not know their email addresses because I am very vocal and very pushy about how we do this better, because since that announcement certainly the pathway to green energy has become a whole lot clearer for potential proponents and it has changed the calibre of conversation that we are able to have with some of our big industry looking to relocate to this region.

ACTING CHAIR: Thank you very much, Ms Porter, for coming in this morning and for being flexible.

Ms Porter: That is okay.

ACTING CHAIR: Thank you very much for answering our questions.

Ms Porter: Excellent. Thank you very much.

ACTING CHAIR: That concludes this hearing. I want to thank everyone who has participated today and thank our Hansard reporter. A transcript of these proceedings will be available on the committee's webpage in due course. I declare this public hearing closed.

The committee adjourned at 10.35 am.