UPC\AC Renewables AUSTRALIA

March 2020

Project facts: The New England Solar Farm

UPC\AC Renewables Australia is constructing the New England Solar Farm - a 720-megawatt (MW) capacity project split across two solar fields near Uralla in the New England region of NSW.

Rows of solar photovoltaic (PV) panels will be installed on a single axis tracking system that follows the path of the sun, while also allowing adequate space for sheep to continue grazing on the land in-between and underneath the panels.

Depending on the final installed capacity, the solar farm would produce around 1,800,000 megawatt hours (MWh) of electricity each year – enough to power more than 250,000 typical NSW homes.

UPC is also proposing to include a Battery Energy Storage System (BESS) capable of dispatching energy to the grid at times of high energy demand. Under the proposal, the BESS could be constructed in stages, up to a maximum size of 400MWh.

The solar farm project will help reduce greenhouse gas emissions by up to 1.5million tonnes of $C0_2$ each year - equivalent to the taking 330,000 cars off the road. Construction is expected to begin towards the middle of the year and take about three years to complete in full.

The solar farm site

The New England Solar Farm is proposed to be built on a site that spans up to 2,000 hectares of mostly cleared grazing land across the two solar fields.

The New England region has been identified by the Australian Energy Market Operator, the NSW Government and electricity network operator TransGrid as a priority area for renewable energy development.

The solar farm site is about 1,000 metres above sea level and has high solar irradiance. The combination of elevation, favourable solar resource and the cooler New England temperatures make the site highly productive from an electricity generation point of view. The site is traversed by an existing 330 kV power line owned and operated by TransGrid.

Community benefits

As part of its proposal, UPC will support community projects by providing funding of $250 for every megawatt (AC) of power generating capacity installed at the New England Solar Farm, or $180,000 a year over the 25-year working life of the solar farm, assuming full capacity of the facility is operating.

A Community Reference Group was established in August 2018 to investigate the concept, known as the Community Benefit Sharing Initiative. The Community Reference Group recommended community projects that could be funded under the program such as a zero-interest loan scheme for energy efficiency measures and rooftop PV, funding for education scholarships and schools as well as a community grants program.

A second CRG will be established over the next couple of months to create the legal structure and administer the funds. UPC is currently seeking nominations of local community members for this group, with the nominations period closing on 30th March.

Economic benefits

The project is expected to be constructed in two stages over 36 months.

It will generate up to 500 jobs during peak construction and up to an additional 200 jobs if the battery system is installed. It will also generate 10 - 15 fulltime-equivalent ongoing jobs.

There will be opportunities for local suppliers and businesses as well as employment opportunities for workers, in particular PV module installers, as well as sub-contracting opportunities for tradespeople such as electricians, maintenance workers, fencing contractors, plumbers and other workers.

Economic modelling conducted as part of the EIS also suggests there would be substantial flow on effects to the local economy from the project. The money spent by workers in the region during construction will boost household incomes in the region, continuing over the life of the solar farm from activities related to operations and maintenance.

Community consultation

Community consultation on the project started around two years ago - in early 2018. It has included six public community information sessions, briefings with community and political leaders and over seventy one-on-one meetings with local residents and other community groups.

Changes to the solar farm proposal

An area comprising 4,200 hectares was originally identified for investigation by UPC and was reduced to 2,000 hectares, following environmental studies and consultation with local residents.

The central and northern array land areas were reduced by 20 to 30 percent. The southern array was removed from the existing application to allow further discussions with local landowners to take place. A new application may be submitted for the southern array in the future.

The construction of a temporary workers accommodation village is no longer required for the project. High priority areas of Blakely's Red Gum and Yellow Box grassy woodland and known significant Aboriginal and European heritage sites have also been avoided.

A Bushfire Risk Assessment was undertaken as part of project application to ensure it reduces any potential fire risk or hazard. A fire management plan will be developed for the construction.

Planning approval

The Department of Planning, Industry and Environment released its Assessment Report on the project's Development Application and Environmental Impact Statement on 20 December 2019. The application was approved by NSW Independent Planning Commission in March 2020.

More information

For more information about the New England Solar Farm project: www.newenglandsolarfarm.com.au