RESPONSE TO: DRAFT - SOLAR ENERGY FACILITIES
Design and development Guidelines.
Published by the Department of Environment, Land, Water & Planning (DELWP) together with the Victorian State Government.

Response completed: February 2019 by

Opening Comments:

1. There is a need to clarify the definitions:
To begin my comments, I will commend the Draft Guidelines for correctly referring to a Solar Energy Facility as a ‘Solar facility’ and not as a ‘Solar farm.’ Under any definition, a large power generating facility is a ‘Power Station’ because it produces energy for the masses. Due to the anticipated size and scale of these proposed new solar facilities in Australia, I would also classify this type of power generation as ‘large scale industrial.’ Under no circumstances does a large power generator (which covers vast quantities of productive agricultural land) qualify as an agricultural product producer, which is the most usual definition of a ‘farm.’ Therefore, a large scale Solar Energy Facility should be identified in a similar manner to any other large scale electricity producing complex. It is a power station. An industrial sized solar power station should be acknowledged as such. This means that it should also have its own agreed planning zone. It should not simply be dumped into a Farming Zone. It bears no similar characteristics to a farm in terms of purpose or product.

2. There is a need to establish clear local Social Licence prior to application to build a solar facility.
This must be done by the applicant prior to submitting a Planning Application. The cost of doing the local research and consultation to determine local approval must be borne by the proponents of the solar energy facility. The applicants should have to engage independent consultants to survey the affected local community and gain written, statistical evidence of at least 80% approval rating for the project to go ahead. This would ensure smooth sailing with all of the other stages as well as identify potential problems at the earliest possible stage. This means that the applicants would bear the cost of proving that their project has approval.
At the moment, cash strapped, busy, locals who have been ‘ambushed by a very detailed ‘surprise’ application (which has been professionally compiled in secret over some years) suddenly have to find the time and money to do their own survey to prove that the project does NOT have the social licence to proceed. There is something fundamentally wrong with this system! Normally, one is assumed innocent until proven guilty. In this sort of situation it is assumed that people will accept a major project unless they can prove that the majority of people don’t want it! Aside from the unnecessary conflict, expense, stress and confusion this causes, it is simply wrong to work like this. The proponents, who expect to benefit from the project, should have to put up the money and do the hard work to prove that it is welcomed by the community. It should not be the job of the community to stop everything they are doing in order to prove that the project is not wanted! Proving social support for their project should be a required task to be met in the planning process by the applicant - in the same way as hydrology or overlay reports are required etc. This ensures that the ‘community engagement’ process is out genuinely discussing concerns with a view to completely eliminating them at the start, rather than preparing a shell-shocked community to accept the inevitable. A totally different process! If the community can have early input as to how a project can benefit neighbours and the local community (not just overseas investors and one large landholder) without major impact then it is more likely to be welcomed.

3. The current planning system has a bias against the local residents.
Unfortunately, the Draft Solar Energy Guidelines at the moment appear to favour the unchallenged onslaught of renewable energy across our vast rural landscapes. The document itself admits to giving... "proponents guidance on improving the quality of their development proposal.” (Pg 5.)
Rural residents, who suddenly find themselves confronted with the prospect of vast hectares of solar panels next door, have literally nowhere to turn for guidance or help. The State Government has every aspect tied up in its favour. So, let’s look at the existing process.

Firstly, according to the Victorian State Government planning scheme (which directs Local Government Planning schemes) a renewable energy facility can be plonked in the middle of productive farming zone even if it does not meet any of the criteria generally accepted for ‘farming!’ The Local Government Planners are currently forced to make decisions based on these inadequate (actually, non-existent State planning conditions) regarding solar facilities.

Currently, the Andrews Government in Victoria is giving justification and incentive for these projects by way of the 40% renewable energy policy. Huge government subsidies are available to finance renewable energy projects. The Victorian Renewable Energy Target (VRET) auction system, also guarantees ‘agreed prices’ (potentially subsidised) depending on the widely swinging energy market, for the next 15 years. The reality is that the greater the number of renewable energy generators that come on line, the lower the market price may be. This may appear to be good news for electricity bills, but it is not good news for the taxpayers who are committed by the State Government to subsidising the renewable energy companies up the agreed higher energy price for the next 15 years!

The Victorian Renewable Energy Target is being used as a justification for allowing projects to go ahead in spite of the fact that the National Energy Grid (NEG) covers all of the Eastern Australian States and is regulated by the Australian Energy Market Operator (AEMO). This means that the Morrison Federal Government Energy Policy should also (logically) be considered together with that of all the other Eastern States, but this not expressly stated in the current planning conditions. All governments should be listening to advice from AEMO regarding energy infrastructure and policy.

The current Victorian Government should firstly be focussing on how much it will cost to upgrade the Victorian Grid to handle all of this new renewable energy production - which is often being based in areas of weakest grid connections. Australia and Victoria need to listen to AEMO and strengthen the grid first. They should also direct the upgrade of transmission lines toward places best suited to large scale solar (and wind) and nothing much else. This would ensure that energy planning, security and affordability becomes less problematic within, and between states.

The Victorian State Government Planning Documents also enshrine the ‘need’ to reduce global emissions as justification for allowing these projects to proceed. No-one is arguing about that, once again, this is at loggerheads with the most current Federal Government position (released this week) which indicates that Australia is on track to do this. In addition to this, it is understood that in spite of huge investment into renewable energy, Germany (a leader in renewable energy installation) has yet to show a significant reduction in emissions. Currently, it also has an expensive power system that is unreliable to the point that it must occasionally seek nuclear energy back up from France as well as gas and oil from Russia to meet shortfalls until storage solutions have been implemented.

So … even though our Federal and State governments disagree over the consistent management of the National Energy Grid (NEG) through the body known as the Australian Energy Market Operator (AEMO), local government planners are expected to make a STATE based decision which is based on planning directives from the State government. Locals opposed to the siting of large solar (or wind) facilities within their precinct have little support from the State. The planning Minister to whom we can appeal (with all due respect) is a minister of the STATE. The Department of Environment, Land, Water, and PLANNING (DELWP) to whom we can appeal for help (with respect) are also employed by the STATE. The local government planners (also with due respect) may have reason to believe that approving such projects may enhance the local government finances and also enhance their job security due to the need to enforce the required planning conditions. So, they may not be seen as a force to support opponents of such schemes either. In addition to this, without very clear solar facility planning guidelines that insist on the proponents establishing a clear social licence to proceed with the project, the local planners possibly have no choice but to rule that the non-existent guidelines have been met! This seems like a very flawed and one sided process.
This leads me to request that a moratorium should be immediately placed on all large scale solar energy projects across the State until the new guidelines have been finalised. At the moment, local residents have only the ears of their councillors to help them stop unwanted and rushed projects because the current planning conditions are an inadequate guide for solar facilities. If affected residents seek advice, they find that approvals for various components of the project are signed off by State funded personnel (again with all due respect) working in areas such as DELWP, Aboriginal Victoria and the Heritage Council of Victoria. In addition to this, there appears to be no mandatory benefits being legislated for affected locals. As a result of this, sadly, we appear to have created a questionable system which often involves people being offered financial incentives to ‘go away.’ This is most undesirable.

So... when this ‘back-to-front system’ finally implodes, things inevitably end up at VCAT! This is due to lack of any clear planning regulations, clearly identified, local, renewable energy planning zones, lack of information and lack of community consultation. At this point, ‘ambushed’ opponents to these projects are expected to defend their point of view at their own expense and in their own time. As I said previously, this is a “back to front” system which clearly favours the applicant. At the moment, in Victoria, with regard to the rush to introduce renewable energy facilities, we seem to be “building a plane in the air!” We have taken off before we were ready, there are no rules and if we don’t get this right, everyone is destined to ‘crash and burn!’

The State Government must be commended for finally trying to get some policy in place regarding this issue, but sadly it is a bit too late! Precedents have already been set (based on non existent local government planning guidelines) and these are already being quoted at VCAT! The cost and stress involved in the current, flawed process is high and should have been avoided by putting a stop to all planning applications until guidelines have been agreed upon and finalised.

The writing of the new Solar Energy Facility Guidelines should be done with input from the National Energy Commission and AEMO as well as the Federal Government and other State Governments to ensure that everyone is on the same page. In short, we should have national, not state guidelines which are directed by experts in engineering and economics not politicians or local government planners.

My Detailed Response to each part of the Draft Guidelines as follows:

The Introduction: (Pg 5)
- The guidelines should have been in place before any approvals were made across the state. Failure to do this has set an unfortunate and confusing precedent which is already being referenced in VCAT hearings.

- Following the final publication of these new Solar Energy Facility Guidelines (the first ever) a ruling should be made that any decisions made prior to the publication of this document cannot be used to argue ‘precedent’.

- The guidelines seem heavily weighted in favour of proponents of Solar Energy Facilities. The document appears to be a ‘chatty roadmap on ‘how to get your project across the line.’ A clear and separate ‘Local Government Guideline’ section must be included in this document in order for good decision making to occur at local government level. The document should also allow for extra local conditions to be applied following consultation with ratepayers. (Extra fire mitigation for example)

- Given that energy from large solar facilities would be expected to connect to the National Energy Grid (NEG), it does not seem appropriate for local government to be the first responsible body in
charge of approving a planning application. Surely expert engineers and economists employed by AEMO for example, should be the first to be consulted if our ultimate aim is for reliable, affordable energy supply across the Australian Eastern seaboard. The solar energy facility proponent should firstly have to present their idea to the Australian Energy Market Operator (AEMO) for permission to supply a given quantity of solar energy to the NEG. AEMO could then decide the following; (a) whether the grid actually needs the energy in the place being considered and (b) if the grid in the area has the capacity to take it without straining the local system.

If everything seems possible, then a further application could be made to connect with the relevant transmission line owners. The proponents should then have to present their proposal to the transmission line operator for permission to connect. Prior to all this, it would be hoped that the Local Government’s role would be to consult with ratepayers with a view to determining any suitable areas that may be set aside under a ‘special renewable energy planning zone’.

Then, as soon as a proponent had permission to connect and supply to the grid, placement within a designated area (if allocated) should be quite simple. The local Government would then be responsible for for the proponent to meet the requirements in their AGREED, DOCUMENTED and FINALISED solar facility guidelines (when completed!) This should already have wide community support which must be verified by a social licence audit completed at the expense of the applicant. This system would alleviate a lot of local hassles and unnecessary expense at VCAT as well as in the courtroom.

What are Solar Energy Facilities? (Pg 5)

- I would like to see a qualifying statement added to this section regarding the **standard of engineering** expected of solar facilities in Australia. Also included should be a guideline regarding the **high standard of solar panels** expected in Australia with regards to durability and efficiency. **This should also apply to any other components such as batteries as well as the qualifications of the contractors used.**
- A statement about the **expected recycling capacity for all components** would also be welcomed. The rationale for this is to discourage poor quality facilities which would be more prone to problems of safety, efficiency and decommissioning.
- An estimate of the **emissions generated in producing the components** as well as the **environmental impact in obtaining such materials** would be welcomed in the interests of transparency. This industry advertises itself as ‘clean’ and ‘emissions free’. Outlining emissions and environmental impacts involved in making the facility should be available for all to see. This could then be put into the equation to calculate total ‘emissions saved’ and ‘environmental benefits’.
- The **source of funding, especially if it involves government financial support** for all such projects should be very clearly identified together with company details.

Policy, Planning and Legislative Requirements. (Pg 6)

- **There is a need to clarify the planning zones:** Given that a solar energy facility does not fit the category of “Farming Zone” there is a need for such facilities to be placed in their own zone category, such as ‘Special Use - Renewable Energy Zone. (REZ). These areas should be identified as suitable for solar energy facilities by the Shire following **extensive community consultation and agreement.** At the very least, an applicant proposing to build a vast solar energy facility in the area should firstly have to apply for approval of an area for rezoning to Special Use – Renewable Energy Zone (with community consultation) **before** applying for permission to build the facility. This would mean that residents in the area would not be ‘surprised’ by any such application, having previously agreed that it was a suitable location for such activity. This should be a normal part of high quality community consultation and engagement. This is the same as councils deciding upon industrial or
residential zones for example. This must not be zone declared by the State or AEMO alone. Even AEMO recognises this when it recommends extensive community consultation regarding the determining of such zones.

- **Social Licence must be established first.** The new Special Use – Renewable Energy Zones would ensure that the facility applicant had the ‘social licence’ to spend the money required to compile a planning application prior to presenting it to council. This would also alleviate potential conflict within the community and also for council. It would also help to avoid expensive, stressful and time-consuming VCAT hearings regarding planning permits. The establishment of these new zones prior to any other process would **ensure** that early and effective community consultation occurred and that clear regulations and guidelines were in place for these areas to guide effective and popular decision making. This is what AEMO recommends in its documents.

1. **State Policy Directions (Pg 7) parts 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4.**

- Proponents of solar energy facilities should certainly consider state policy objectives very early in the planning stage. However, meeting these objectives should not give proponents the right to ignore other compounding issues and overlays in order to ‘steam-roll’ projects though the planning process.
- I have already mentioned that the Victorian State Government Renewable Energy targets are at odds with those of other government bodies across the Eastern states energy grid and cannot be considered in isolation. Energy policy affects us all and should be decided by engineering experts and economists not politicians. Water supply is essential and so is secure water availability. Without it there will be no regional development. Naturally there is a need to protect biodiversity. What is not considered in this preamble is the accumulating weight of various overlays of importance over the same piece of land.
- For example, a section of land that is considered be be high quality, arable farming land, which is situated in a reliable rainfall band, in an area that also has good underground water supplies has an increased value for food production and drought resistance. If the area is also sited close to sale-yards, abattoirs, stockfeed companies, dairy processing facilities, rural merchandise suppliers as well as roads, rail and ports, this again increases its value for farming. If the same land is situated within an area of high scenic and tourist value and is a preferred location for ‘tree changers’ who seek the nearby abundant services and recreational activities (perhaps in national parks or wetlands of international significance) this again elevates the significance of the sight.
- If the sight also has an overlay of significant cultural and historical value, then its level of protection from unsuitable development should naturally be raised again. If the area is in a known area of high fire risk, this should also trigger another level of consideration. If the sight is in a low solar UV zone this would lessen it’s attractiveness for solar production considerably.
- As mentioned, many factors and overlays should come into play so that high quality farming area, which has excellent versatility, high stock carrying capacity, secure water supply, desirable liveability factors, great infrastructure, established people services, emerging tourism and recreation facilities, should **not** be the first choice for a solar facility.
- The fact that the land may be in close proximity to a transmission line should be the **very last consideration**. Perfect placement for a solar facility is in an area of high UV solar quality, low farming value, low water supply, low fire risk and low density population. It should have few services and have little recreation or tourism opportunities. If there is no transmission line line handy, then one should be built. Society has a greater need for food and water than energy. The energy overlay is not the most important one! There is no point having power if there is nothing to cook!
2. Planning Policy Framework (Pg 8)

- The key words here are ...“appropriate siting”. Just because an area is situated under a transmission line it does not automatically make it an appropriate site. All of the other factors mentioned previously must be considered in order to eradicate not ...“minimise any adverse effects on the community and environment”. There seems to be an implication that a project can go ahead if it ‘minimises’ the impact on the community. NO... the community should welcome the project not just suffer the impacts ... no matter how minimal!

- In assessing the ‘economic benefits’ of a potential solar facility in a particular area, an independent statement should also be required from an applicant which acknowledges potential employment loss as a consequence of the development. Eg: Loss in local farm economy employment, tourism etc or ... a predicted social impact on the poorer residents from anticipated temporary rental rises in the area due to contract workers for example. This document implies that the introduction of a solar facility into an area takes nothing away from another area of the community which is not necessarily the case.

3. The Victorian Electricity Transmission Network. (Pg 8)

- As mentioned above, the existence of an electricity network is ONE component of the decision making process. If inappropriately placing a solar facility means the loss of other valuable components such as high quality farming, recreation, lifestyle, tourism and environmental factors etc, then it should be sited in a more appropriate place in the state. The power lines should be upgraded to this more suitable place. Already productive and socially vibrant places should not be devalued just because they happen to have a power line through the area.

- Also to avoid marginal loss factors, the solar site should be placed close to the urban area requiring supply. Perhaps some of those vast industrial areas just around Melbourne where there are huge transmission lines. Or... for efficiency... put it in a sunny place where there is little other opportunity for employment or income. Perhaps vast desert type areas?

- Of great concern is that the AEMO “Integrated System Plan” map takes no account of the type of land use already in place underneath it. It would be foolish for approval to be granted based on this assessment of electrical networks alone. AEMO states that the grid needs to be upgraded in many places. The sensible thing to do regarding solar facilities (given the loss of land) is to find sunny, unproductive, remote places, where people are looking for an industry and associated employment opportunities. The build the electrical infrastructure should be connected to it!

4. Strategic Site Selection Assessment Criteria. (Pg 9) 4.1 - 4.8

- 4.1 Proponents need to be transparent about the NUMEROUS site options considered within a region so that it can clearly be articulated as to why this site was considered the best, not just in this council area, but the STATE. It is nonsensical to state that one productive area of farm land in the shire is suitable because it is slightly less productive than another one in the same shire. In an area which is completely covered by an overlay from state planning departments stating it is all ‘high value agricultural land’ this is a futile debate! The overlays should compound. A solar energy facility should not be built in ANY part of a shire which is all considered to be productive farmland. (See Agriculture – protection of farm land- Victorian Government) With so much of Australia and many parts of Victoria deemed unsuitable for high intensity agriculture this should be paramount. Large Industrial Solar Energy facilities must be placed in areas listed as low quality agricultural, tourism, lifestyle, areas.

- 4.1 The recommendation to hold pre-application discussions with councils is essential. However, as mentioned above, the final stage of approving this process should be with the council, not the first stage. Stakeholder engagement should not just be “strongly recommended” from the beginning of the process. It should be mandatory! The best way to get the local community off side
from the start is to ambush them with a ‘done deal’ that has little community input or perceived benefit.

- The check list of “strategic considerations” is helpful, however, given the cumulative effect of these overlays in some areas, it may mean that there is no place suitable in the whole council area. This should be acknowledged as an acceptable decision. Councils need to designate areas for large scale solar whilst keeping multiple overlays in mind, so that applicants seeking sites know where they will be most welcome.

- The cumulative effect of multiple solar energy facilities within close proximity will serve to compound the negative impact on the visual amenity of a region. Any region, known and promoted on it’s significant landscape values must be protected under under relevant legislation (eg Significant Landscapes of Victoria) and these should not just be restricted to the peri-urban areas currently protected by special legislation signed off by the planning minister. At local council level, Shires should be able to identify their own significant vistas (not just a two dimensional mapping footprint) and protect them from multiple large scale industrial developments. The cumulative effect of loss of productive rural land may not be realised until there is no food on our supermarket shelves or it is unaffordable.

- 4.2 I have already referred to planning policy overlays and zoning above.

- 4.3 Agricultural Values: The value of versatile, arable, agricultural land cannot be overstated and must be protected at all cost. An area well set up for primary production with reliable rainfall and water supply (especially ground water) should be rated more highly than that serviced by river irrigation schemes with expensive water rights. Given the latest drought events, it has been proven that without the lifeblood of the river, or secure, affordable water allocation, these areas produce very little. Proximity to factories, sale-yards, contractors, farm supplies etc is all important. So is how closely settled the area seems to be. In order to reduce impact on residents more sparsely settled areas are preferable.

- The table (Pg12) listing the “Attributes of Strategically Significant Agricultural Land” is useful. However, it fails to recognise the value of protecting, fertile, arable, versatile farm land in a reliable high rainfall area. It also fails to mention farm land that has access to ground water via bores as being highly valuable. Too often farms which have only dam water reserves have to destock when the dams go dry, leaving them much less versatile during dry times. The location of existing industry clusters and post farm gate processing is vital. It should be remembered that for every farm that is taken out of production in an agricultural precinct in order to host a vast solar facility, the economic value of associated business is also impacted and jobs are lost in that field.

- I do not accept that large solar facilities in Australia can also be high quality agricultural producers. That doesn’t seem to be the reality. The only thing that appears to happen is that farmers (usually larger, wealthier or corporate land holders) are the ones best placed to host a vast solar facility on their land. These are the major benefactors. Unless a clear commitment is made to share the wealth derived from a proposed venture with the community, there is very little long term financial benefit to the locals. There may be benefit to the finances of a few savvy investors and transient workers for a period of time. When lack of considerable community benefit is evident and individual profit appears to be associated with easy access to government subsidies, it does not go down well within the hard-working farming community. When the product produced (electricity) does not contribute to our export markets or local sales economy (1 in 5 jobs in rural areas relate to farming), it is difficult to imagine local benefit. This is especially true when important Australian food production is lost. In fact, loss of productive food producing areas will simply drive food prices up for the Australian consumers.
4.3.2. The priority given for irrigated land to be protected from development is unfounded given all of my previous statements. As mentioned above, a series of potential overlays must be considered. Access to reliable ground water and rainfall, combined with fertile, arable, versatile soils increase the layers of protection required. Proximity to established rural networks and related employment must be considered significant and worthy of protection as well.

4.4. Heritage and Aboriginal cultural values of each site must be considered by the local indigenous community in the light of local history. It should not be simply signed off by an officer in Melbourne who has done a ‘desk top assessment.’

4.5 Landscape values and visual amenity impacts matter GREATLY to the locals most affected by the impact of these developments. As these projects typically will be situated in rural areas, the sight of vast jungles of glass, metal, poles and wires is an assault on the senses for rural people. One of the reasons why people choose to live and work in these areas is the landscape. For those who were born in an area and have continued to live in it (technically indigenous) the landscape is their life’s reference point. It is the source of all of their memories and identity. The landscape is their ‘place.’ It is collectively owned and protected by the community. In areas of high scenic, environmental and heritage value this is heightened. A land title is a two dimensional piece of ownership on a map. A landscape is something different. It is a three dimensional entity which belongs to the community that values it. As such, it cannot be ‘owned’ or ‘sold.’ It is a vision without ownership. It should not be significantly altered without the agreement of those who stand to lose the value of the vista. I will go so far as to suggest that any large structure which is larger than 50 hectares in area and/or higher than three stories high should trigger an automatic review of the impact on the overall landscape and would need the community permission to proceed.

4.6 Protection of the environment and protected flora and fauna is a given. Any outcry from the local community should trigger a thorough investigation before any works are granted.

4.7. Electricity grid connection and transmission and distribution infrastructure: Much of this has been covered earlier. As stated, the need for electricity generation and the placement of electricity grid lies should not take precedence over other more valuable overlay concerns. AEMO and other such electricity and economic experts should decide on the best energy solutions for the whole country. This should not be decided by individual government bodies. In fact this decision making process should not be political AT ALL!

I am concerned by the tone of this section. There is an implication (as with much of the document) that the community should be extensively consulted about what WILL HAPPEN to ensure a smoother acceptance of something they didn’t ask for and probably don’t want! There seems to be no suggestion that proponents of an unwelcome project should concede that they may not be wanted. The use of phrases such as “minimise the impact”... are in fact, an admission that there will be impact on the community. There should be no place in planning applications for subjective statements to be made suggesting that the impact on the will be “insignificant”... based on a desk-top assessment by some ‘boffin’ in Melbourne who has never worn a gumboot! This also does not go down well with country people who understand the potential ‘impacts’ best of all.

4.8 (Pg 15) The cumulative effect of solar energy facilities in an area is a confronting thought for many country people who love where they live. They have invested their lives into an area of grass vistas not GLASS vistas. There is a huge difference between natural and built surfaces in how they hit the eye and how one can relate to them. It’s true that built structures such as sheds, silos and hot houses may occupy a rural landscape, but people largely expect that on a changed agricultural landscape. The difference between these and large scale renewable energy projects is clearly purpose and scale. I cannot imagine a farm structure normally needing to be the size and height of a medium sized rural town or higher than the local mountains!
5. Detailed Development Assessment. (Pg16)

- As mentioned previously, I have concerns about the approval process in general when it begins with the local government and no guidelines. The need for separate renewable energy zones to be predetermined is essential. That way, there should be no community surprises should a planning application be lodged. The extra duties expected of local government officers with the introduction of large scale energy generators such as solar and wind facilities are complex and costly. In some cases I have heard of more than 50 special conditions being placed on to a planning permit. Council staff are required to monitor these conditions in order to satisfy the concerns of locals. This is the result of poor planning and poor placement. (So is screening for that matter.) It also is the result of not having very clear guidelines in place before projects have been approved. The problem with all of this is that the extra rates generated by the solar project are negated by the extra wages paid by council to monitor the planning conditions. In addition to this, there is the common perception that council officers have no real “teeth” when it comes to enforcing planning conditions. This erodes public trust regarding the potential management of the project over a long period of time and ultimately it’s decommission.

5.1 Application requirements (Pg 16 – 22)

- This section should be mandatory, not merely recommended. I know of instances when the first thing ratepayers know is when an application has been lodged for a planning permit! It doesn’t go down well with the potential neighbours. As previously mentioned, things such as the DELWP “Community Engagement and Benefit Sharing” guide should be a mandatory beginning. The wording of this whole section needs review. There appears to be an implication that all these recommended stages should be done in order to ‘prepare the locals to accept the project’. In this instance it appears to have a bias in favour of a renewable energy project applicant. I appreciate the detail that has gone into things like the “design response” but, clearly, there is not enough detail if a planning application warrants 50 plus conditions and is still a matter of confusion and concern to locals. Far too often permission hinges on the advice of remotely located ‘experts’ who have never even visited the site or seen it in all seasons. There needs to be more respect given to the knowledge of locals who know the area well and will no doubt have to live with the ‘insignificant impacts’ if the experts are wrong.

5.3.6. Fire Management. (Pg 22)

- In some areas this is a topic of nightmares for the locals and must attract the tightest of controls. The bigger the facility, the greater the potential for a toxic disaster should a fire occur. Local CFA members should not have to do special training to prepare for such disasters in their own time without decent compensation. Having said that, not many want to go anywhere near such a situation. Nothing less than a dedicated, trained fire and emergency response crew is required for each facility. The capacity to quash such a fire immediately should be unquestioned. The cost of installing huge dams and tanks should be built into the the project and expenditure should reflect the fire risk zone in which the facility is sited. In terms of OH&S, nothing less than world’s best practice should apply here. This also true of chemical management which needs to take into account strict chemical regulations relating to distances recommended for spraying near agricultural areas (I am aware of a 200 metre spray drift requirement as well as lengthy withholding periods for milk and livestock sales). More detail is required here, especially when there are no detailed studies involving the effects of wind deflection over and around large areas of solar arrays. It is unknown what effects this may have on chemical spraying (to reduce fuel loads) and spray drift patterns, fire storm behaviour or even local weather conditions for nearby neighbours.
Finally:

The “Best Practice Guidance for Proponents” (Pg 23)

- As previously mentioned, prior consultation MUST occur with the locals before the planning stage goes too far and costs too much money for the project applicants to simply ‘walk away.’
- There must be clear and open community benefits stated from the beginning. (eg: a community trust fund administered by the council.) If this is not done ‘up front” and transparently, then the process becomes more akin to ‘bribes and rewards’ for supporters. If it is such a great plan, the community benefit should be obvious and welcomed. An up-front discussion regarding benefit sharing would be a great and transparent start. (6.2)
- All the various stages in the guideline may be “best practice” now, but these guidelines are very new and will require much adjustment in order for continual improvement of the process. A special committee needs to oversee that this is an ongoing process. It should be based on the feedback of those most impacted by such developments. I notice that there is no ‘guidebook’ on how to cope with unwanted impacts of solar energy facilities. Where do people go for help and advice should they be adversely impacted by a solar development? Given that they may have to use their own finances to oppose a poorly sited project in their neighbourhood, will they be eligible for a state government subsidy to help them with their legal and other costs?

10. Decommissioning Stage & 10.1 Recycling equipment. (Pg 32)

- These guidelines are grossly inadequate. Given that the components of some solar arrays may be toxic and non recyclable, a very detailed assessment must be submitted in the original planning application for decommission. The cost and process involved must be estimated by an independent expert decommissioning engineer, using best practice knowledge of the day. A breakdown of what can and can’t be recycled must be complied. The likely place where the material is to go must also be indicated. This, preferably, should not be local landfill sites. An amount of money equal to the cost of decommissioning of the plant and the rehabilitation of the site (based on current estimates) must be set aside by the project proponents within the first 5 years of operation. One fifth of the total cost of decommission must be set aside before commencement of the build. The balance must be paid before the end of the fifth year. At the end of this time, another cost estimate should be conducted (again by an independent engineer qualified in this field). The amount of money invested should be reviewed in light of this review and adjusted to ensure that costs are still covered. These independent reviews should continue every 5 years for the life of the facility to ensure that all costs will be covered when time comes for decommission. Any new owner of the facility takes on these conditions. Monitoring of this review could be done by council but reports must be sent to a higher body such as the Minister for Energy & Environment for review. Independent audits must confirm the existence of this commission fund on a yearly basis. This fund could be carefully invested and income may be derived from it. I suggest that, in good faith, it should not attract a tax penalty, especially if the profits are given to a local community benefit fund. This idea may seem harsh, but so are the realities of stranded assets. If a company sees a profit in this venture and can afford to build the structure, then they should budget for a decommissioning fund to be set aside as well.

B. Planning Permit application checklists (Pg 35 -6)

- In the light of all of my comments and suggestions above, there would need to be quite a few additions to these checklists, should any notice be taken of my comments. Accurate visual simulations should include a photo montage of the areas with an accurate ‘artist’s impression’ of
the finished facility minus the screening which will usually require time to grow. An arrow merely pointing to an abstract place on a photo is insufficient to gauge the real visual impact on the landscape. As mentioned earlier, consideration must be made regarding studies relating to wind deflection as well as impacts on ground water flows; not just surface water flows and drainage.

- **Final Comment:** I have responded here in good faith, having experienced the impact of poor planning guidelines (non-existent solar facility ones) on a small rural community. Much stress, confusion, anger, frustration and cost has been the result ... and the issue is still not resolved. I am not against renewable energy, but large scale industrial infrastructure needs to be very carefully placed in order to provide maximum efficiency together with reliable, affordable power supply. Victoria’s future energy needs must also be very carefully assessed in the light of home-based rooftop energy generation, more energy efficient homes and personal battery storage. Roof-top and personal power generation is likely to play a major factor in energy supply. Distributed Generation (small scale local systems) are likely to play an increasing role also. New battery and storage systems may lessen the need for large scale renewable projects over time. Australia (as a whole) needs to pay attention to what works and what doesn’t work overseas.

- In closing, all of this needs to be considered in the light of one major decision.... “If you had to chose between energy supply and food supply ... which one would you choose? Very careful and detailed wording of the new ‘solar energy facility guidelines’ will protect all versatile and reliable agricultural land from inappropriate development. This safeguards the future food requirements of all Australians. It will also prevent valued areas from being sacrificed for short term individual profit.

- And... finally, if the writers of this document were facing the prospect of a vast sea of over 700,000 black glass solar panels (15 times the size of Flemington Racecourse and higher than the average house) being built on the boundary of their homes, what sort of planning guidelines would they like to see in place? Would they like to see more ‘overlays of consideration’ for their area rather than just their ‘proximity to transmission lines’?

Thank you for reading my comments.
Yours Sincerely