



farmers for
climate action

Renewable Energy in Farming Communities

Summary Report

September 2024



Solar farm at Finley, NSW

Acknowledgement of Country

89 Degrees East acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional custodians of the lands where we live, learn and work. We acknowledge and pay respect to Elders past and present and recognise that sovereignty was never ceded.

This report was prepared on Wurundjeri Country.



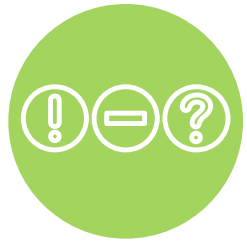


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KEY INSIGHTS





Support for renewable energy projects on farmland is strong. Among farmers that support is deeply qualified.

- **7 in 10 people** living in a renewable energy zone (REZ) **support these projects**. Importantly, **73%** of those who have a connection¹ to farming hold this view.
- **More than two in three people (69%)** believe that **local communities stand to gain** when their local area hosts renewable energy projects if things are done right.
- **Most farmers offered support for these projects**, so long as they delivered real benefits to both them and their community.



Farmers and community members see income diversification for farmers – especially in hard times – to be a key benefit of these projects.

- **More than 7 in 10 people (71%)** in REZ communities agree it is important that farmers who chose to are **allowed the opportunity to drought-proof their income** by hosting renewable energy projects on their property.
- **Almost 7 in 10 (69%)** agree that during periods of drought or hard times, payments from renewable energy projects **provide farmers with steady income**, supporting small businesses and maintaining local jobs.

- For farmers, the **opportunity for steady income was the key – and for some the only – benefit** of these projects. However, the benefit of this additional income would need **to be weighed against other factors** that could impact upon their farm.

¹ Respondents with a connection to farming were defined as those who work on or own a farm, or have a partner or immediate family member who do.



For farmers, additional benefits included the potential to increase the reliability and lower the cost of their (and their communities) energy supply, and possible upgrades to farm infrastructure.

- Many farmers were optimistic that hosting renewable energy projects could **provide them with more stable access to power**, particularly in regions prone to blackouts. They also believed that these projects should benefit them and the community by **lowering their energy bills**.
- In addition, some farmers believed that hosting renewable energy projects **could lead to necessary infrastructure upgrades, such as improved access roads or fencing**.

- **Cheaper energy for Australia and their local community** was also seen as a key benefit of these projects by those living in REZs. Specifically, **75%** believe that renewable energy operators **should pay an energy bill bonus** to local households and businesses, effectively giving locals cheap energy.



Farmers want to be empowered to co-design these projects with developers, ensuring both the projects and their existing farming operations are productive and profitable.

- Farmers clearly want to **drive project design** in a way that ideally **utilises less productive parts of their land**

- and they want to know there is a process that will empower them to do this.
- Additionally, among REZ community members, the **potential for impact of these projects on farms and farmers** was the **most common concern** overall (including for those who support this type of project as well as those who are opposed) – something that farmers are looking to minimise by being active contributors to the design process.



Farmers also hold a perception that there is little regulation around decommissioning – and they are concerned about being ‘on the hook’ for this.

- Farmers believe there are **no clear regulations on decommissioning**, and that without them they could be left with **potentially toxic, broken, eyesores** in the decades to come. Many are **concerned that they will have to spend more money decommissioning them than they received in payments.**
- Concerns about decommissioning, and a lack of knowledge about how this is handled is **magnified by their distrust of developers.**



Both community members and farmers are wary of developers, and are calling for government to better regulate how they engage with and financially support farmers and the wider community.

- Most farmers **believe developers are driven solely by profit**, and do not care about the impact they have on communities or farmers themselves.
- Farmers **feel powerless in negotiations**, with several calling for independent legal advice to be provided to help farmers navigate complex negotiations and contracts.
- Among community members, the vast majority believe that **developers**

should be required to repair damage caused during construction (88%) and invest in the local community (77%). Importantly, most (76%) also believe that **authentic and early communication with communities by developers** is essential to building community trust.

METHODOLOGY



Farmers Online Discussion

To understand the attitudes of farmers towards renewables energy projects on their land and in their communities, Farmers for Climate Action commissioned 89 Degrees East to undertake one three day online consultation with this cohort.

For this discussion, we recruited n=19 farmers from across Australia – the map to the right shows how many were drawn from each state.

These farmers differed in their general attitudes to renewable energy projects on farms, in their age (ranging from 26 to 67) and in the commodities they produced on their farms (both livestock and crops).

Over the course of three days, farmers discussed their reasons for support, opposition and their general concerns and hopes for these projects.



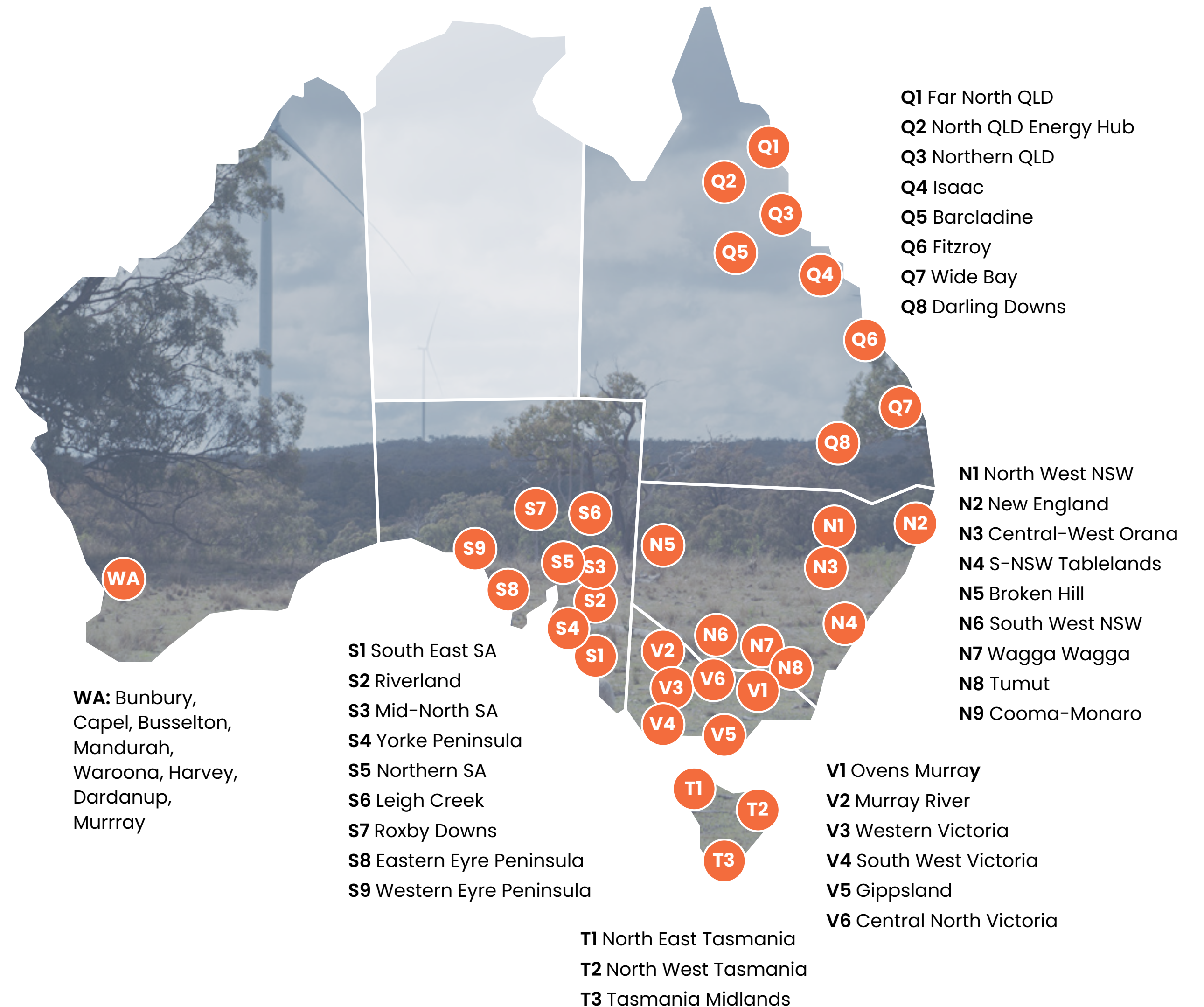
Survey of REZs

To determine attitudes of residents in impacted communities towards renewable energy projects on farmland, Farmers for Climate Action commissioned 89 Degrees East to conduct a survey of people living in Renewable Energy Zones (REZs).

Specifically, this was a 5-minute online survey of n=1,001 Australian citizens (18+) living in one of 33 nominated renewable energy zones.

Respondents were drawn from REZs (in regional areas) in all states excluding the Northern Territory & the ACT. The renewable energy zones were identified from the map seen on this slide. The WA renewable energy zone covered an area around Bunbury.

The results of the total sample have been weighted so as to be representative of the adult population of Australia by age and gender.





SUMMARY of FINDINGS

REZ Community Members



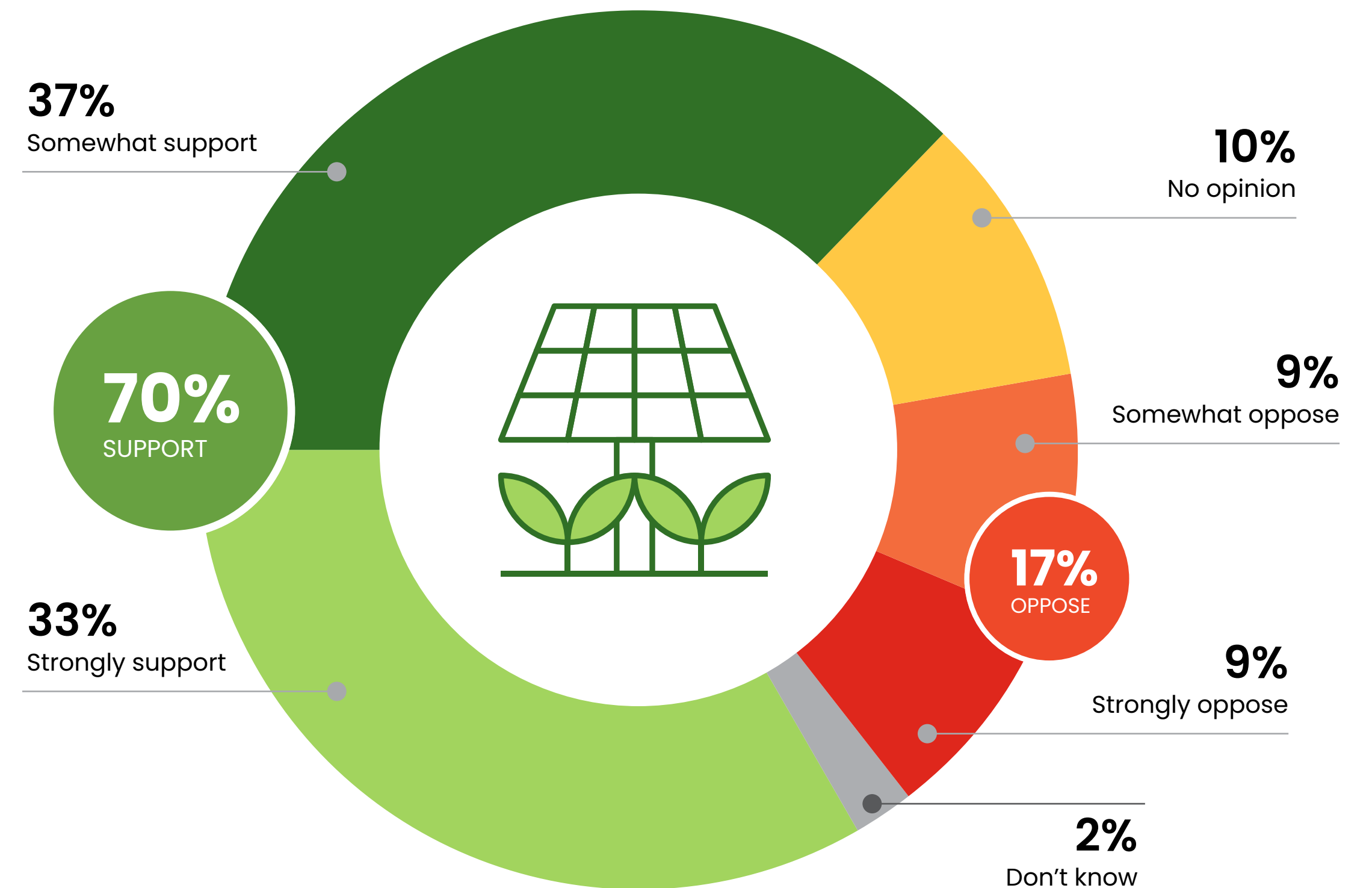
Support for renewable energy projects is strong in REZs

Q: In general, how strongly do you support or oppose renewable energy projects operating on farmland in and around your local community?

There is strong support and little or no substantial opposition to these projects in REZ communities.

- **7 in 10 people (70%)** support these projects – **1 in 3 (33%)** strongly support them.
- **Fewer than 2 in 10 people (17%)** are opposed, with **less than 1 in 10 (8%)** saying they are strongly opposed.

Almost three-quarters (73%) of those with a connection to farming support these projects



Key benefits and concerns

REZ Community members were asked both what they believed were they saw as the key benefits and concerns about renewable energy projects of farms in their local area.

Top 3 key benefits were seen to be

- 1 Benefits to the environment** including:
 - Reducing pollution (i.e. 'cleaner air'). Commonly they mentioned this in conjunction with the 'reduced costs' theme below.
 - Respondents were also concerned about a generally healthier environment, and a safer environment for animals.
- 2 Reduced costs** (through utilising a free natural resource) including:
 - For their local community.
 - Australians more broadly.
- 3 Creation of local jobs** including:
 - Construction and maintenance and 'skills for the future'.

Top 3 key concerns were seen to be

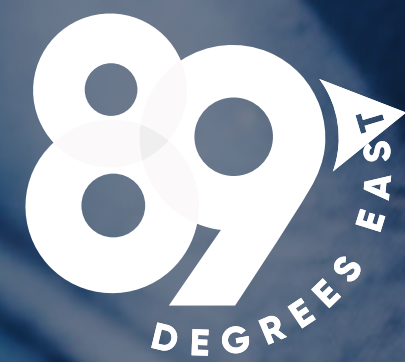
- 1 Potential for impact on farmers** including:
 - Any impacts on farm operations
 - Any impact on food production
 - The cost to farmers and inadequate support from renewable energy developers.
- 2 Any cost** including:
 - The cost of construction and ongoing maintenance.
 - Wastage of (government) money.
- 3 Any environmental impact** including:
 - Interference with wildlife due to noise, and the disturbance and danger caused by turbines.
 - Pollution from 'run-off' and the environmental cost of production.

Community opinions on specific issues

- **More than 7 in 10 (71%)** people in REZ communities agree it is important that farmers who chose to are allowed the opportunity to **drought-proof their income by hosting renewable energy projects** on their property.
- **Almost 7 in 10 (69%)** agree that during periods of drought or hard times, **payments from renewable energy projects provide farmers with steady income**, supporting small businesses and maintaining local jobs.
- **More than 3 in 4 (76%)** people in REZ communities believe that **early and genuine community consultation** for renewable energy projects helps build community trust.
- **More than 2 in 3 (69%)** believe that **local communities stand to gain** when their local area hosts renewable energy projects, if things are done right.
- **Almost 9 in 10 (88%)** people in REZs believe **developers should be required to repair any damage** to local infrastructure (i.e. road) caused during the construction phase.
- **Almost 8 in 19 (77%)** believe developers of these projects should be **required to invest in local community infrastructure**.
- **Just 3 in 10 (30%)** agree that farmers are **already making good money** from hosting renewable energy projects on their properties.
- **3 in every 4 (75%)** believe that renewable energy operators should **pay an energy bill bonus to local households and businesses**, effectively giving locals cheap energy.

SUMMARY of FINDINGS

Farmers Online Discussion



Farmers support renewable energy projects on their land – but that support is qualified.

These projects can only be supported if 'done right', so that farmers and the community can benefit.

Farmers commonly stated that they supported these projects 'in general' – but then went on to explain all the reasons why their **support was qualified**.

While only a small number expressed outright opposition to these projects, there was a significant proportion who were undecided – they could see both the positive and negative impacts and thought these projects needed to be **weighed up 'case by case'**.

The key benefits of these projects were seen to be the potential to diversify their income, the potential to be supplied with

cheaper and more reliable power and infrastructure improvements on their farms.

The key concerns – and the reasons why their support was so highly qualified – were any potential impacts on farmland, a perceived lack of clarity and concern around the cost of decommissioning and a general distrust of developers.



I do not oppose renewable energy being hosted on farmland, provided they do not throw the baby out with the bathwater. It needs to be approached with caution and not seen as the be-all and end-all; neither does it need to be forced on farmers; nor must there be any coercion. Farmers' concerns need to be listened to and respect for their opinions shown.

Livestock farmer, female, SA

I support renewable energy projects on farmland only if done appropriately

Livestock farmer, female, SA

Key benefits | Income diversification

Income diversification was considered by most to be the primary – and for some the only – benefit of hosting renewable energy projects on their farms.

Those who were strongly in support of hosting renewable energy projects thought **the returns would substantially add to – or even exceed – their traditional farm income.** This income would be stable, in contrast to the unpredictability of their agricultural income (both in terms of outputs and price).

However, several farmers commented that this **income diversification needed to be weighed against** other, potentially negative implications for their farm.

Others suggested there were possibly better or easier ways to diversify their income off-farm and that most farmers were well versed in this.



The biggest benefit would be a constant source of income regardless of seasonal conditions and livestock prices. This is very important to me, particularly given the current returns in agriculture.

Livestock & crop farmer, male, NSW

RAIN and STORAGE is the only way to drought proof a farm.

Livestock & crop farmer, male, TAS

Key benefits | Cheaper & more reliable energy

Some farmers were cautiously optimistic that hosting these projects might provide them with cheaper and (just as importantly) more reliable power.

These farmers held the view that if they are hosting these projects, **they should have 'first access' to the available power.** This would **lower their energy bills and (hopefully) provide more reliable power** for both them and their local community.

There was also a belief that hosting these projects would require the **surrounding infrastructure to be upgraded** – likely ensuring a more reliable power supply.

Additionally, the importance of these projects and their connection to the

grid may mean that **local outages and blackouts were resolved faster.**

There was, however, some **skepticism about the reliability and ability of renewables** to provide stable, ongoing power.



They hopefully have the benefit of making the electricity supply in the area around them more resilient.

Crop farmer, female, QLD

If there could be a grid that supplies the area that the renewables is on – rather than the feeds going to the national grid – it may have more benefits to the local area. Our local area has many load shedding and blackouts due to weather so having a local supply would help alleviate that.

Livestock & crop farmer, male, TAS

If used to supply the local areas and towns near these projects, I agree but if it's to subsidise major cities shortfalls then no.

Crop farmer, male, QLD

Key benefits | Infrastructure investment

Although less commonly mentioned, some farmers believe that these projects may result in beneficial infrastructure upgrades on their farms (i.e. roads, fencing, bridges).

A small number of farmers suggested that by hosting these projects they **may benefit from the required upgrades to farm access** – especially the building of roads that would help them move around their property.

For some, these are upgrades they **would like to undertake themselves** but lack the capital to do so.

Farmers also suggested that these benefits could be enjoyed by the local community, as **roads and bridges may need to be upgraded in order to transport construction materials**

(including things like the turbines themselves) to the site.

Researcher Note: Although some saw benefits with improved infrastructure access, for others this came at the cost of losing control over who accesses their farm and when (as maintenance workers require ongoing access). Additionally, some lamented the loss of farming land and the long-term ramifications of this infrastructure (it is hard to remove when no longer needed).



They provide farmers with some good access roads between turbines.

Livestock & crop farmer, male, TAS

The access roads are insane! 12m wide and like the monash freeway but without the traffic – a waste of farming land but compensated for it.

Livestock & crop farmer, female, WA

Projects in the area would lead to better infrastructure due to more traffic on the road and to make the ability to get to the project in all weather events.

Crop farmer, male, QLD

Key concerns | Project design

Farmers strongly asserted that they needed to have control over the project design.

Farmers who had not yet had experience with a project expressed concern that they would not have sufficient control over the location and design of a project on their farm.

Farmers were supportive of projects that minimised disruption and utilised **parts of a property less unsuitable for farming** (i.e. steep, rocky) or less productive – they felt that this would allow farming to continue while delivering financial benefits to the farmer. Co-design of projects was therefore highly important to farmers.

Farmers were **aware of the ability for these projects to exist alongside** farming. However, farmers questioned how they would come to such an arrangement with a developer who was motivated by the profit of their project rather than the ongoing viability of their farm. Failure to come to an agreement would lead them to refuse to host the project.

This again highlighted the need for farmers to be provided with independent legal advice, to help them negotiate a deal that was beneficial to both them and the developer.



In general, I support renewable energy projects being hosted on farmland if all parties are in agreeance. There are some locations across farms which are deemed “unproductive” and generate no revenue though could serve as a site to generate renewable energy.

Crop farmer, male. QLD

I think you can't lump all farmland in one category ... there's plenty of rocky, arid “farmland” that's a perfect place to put infrastructure.

Crop farmer, female, QLD

Key concerns | Decommissioning

Farmers repeatedly raised concerns about the decommissioning of these projects – particularly if it meant they would be left covering the cost.

There are deep concerns about the perceived **lack of planning** or regulation on decommissioning. Farmers believe there are no firm rules in place, leading to high levels of concern that **they will be left with the clean up and decommissioning costs.**

Some farmers also expressed concerns about how decommissioning will be navigated if the developer or operator 'goes bust'.

There was also some concern (driven by a clear lack of knowledge) about the **liability that landowners would hold over**

any environmental damage caused by these projects, and whether they would need to pay to rectify this.



Disposal is a big concern. Wind farms are short lived 25 to 35 years and then what?

Livestock & crop farmer, male, TAS

Moreover, I'm concerned about what will happen to the materials at the end of a project. Will the companies go bust and leave the cleanup to the farmer or local council?

Livestock & crop farmer, male, NSW

Key concerns | Distrust of developers

There was little to no trust among farmers on the intentions of developers of these projects. Developers were seen as driven solely by profit.

Farmers strongly believe that **developers only care about the profits** of their projects and not the impacts on farmers or the community. They believe developers will do whatever they can 'get away with' in order to increase their profit margin.

In a reflection of their distrust of developers, several farmers suggested that those who are approached to host these projects should be provided with **independent legal advisors**, who can negotiate on their behalf.

Farmers were clearly concerned about

the idea of these projects being forced upon them and/or the parameters of the project being outside their control. **Farmers felt that they should** have the final say over how these projects would be constructed and operated on their properties, rather than being dictated to by developers.

There was a sense that **farmers know their land best**, and they should be able to guide (or even demand) where infrastructure can and can't go.



You need the very best legal team who specializes in renewable energy which is fully paid for by the developing business. The only way I would recommend hosting renewables is to make sure you have done your homework and establish ground rules to be enforced when dealing with the company/ies.

Livestock & crop farmer, female, WA

Once they have used it, they won't even be the same company you started with. I know this as our neighbour has a solar farm on their property and they have sold the project 3-4 times over and more than likely will continue too.

Livestock & crop farmer, female, QLD



Thank you

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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