



Golden Plains Story

4th of June 2025

One of the narratives of fighting climate change and transitioning to a renewable energy future is that there are benefits to be had for rural communities, both economically and financially. Hosting an energy park on your land is promoted as a way to combat rural decline; increase local population, employment and overall wealth. The other touted benefits are the diversification of income streams for farmers and the compatible nature of harnessing wind or solar energy at the same time as continuing to grow food and fibre.

Are these claims accurate?

The Golden Plains Wind Farm, located near Rokewood in Victoria's Golden Plains Shire, is touted to be Australia's largest wind energy project, and one of the most significant in the Southern Hemisphere. Spanning approximately 16,739 hectares, the project aims to deliver up to 1,300 megawatts (MW) of energy. It will comprise of 215 turbines across the two sites of stage one, east and stage two, west. It will potentially contribute to 9% of Victoria's energy needs.

The initial planning and feasibility for the site began in 2005, some 20 years ago. Planning was permitted in October 2018, and it is projected to reach full completion in 2027. The road towards this giant project has been long and marked by protest, conflict and even tragedy.

The Golden Plains Wind Farm, initially proposed with 228 turbines, underwent a reduction to 215 turbines due to legal challenges led by mechanical engineer and environmental advocate Hamish Cumming, represented by solicitor Dominica Tannock. Their concerns centred on the potential environmental impacts, particularly on the brolga, a vulnerable bird species native to the region. They argued that the project's approval process did not adequately assess these impacts. In response to these challenges, the project was amended to reduce the number of turbines to 215, incorporating measures to mitigate environmental concerns.

Farmer Russell Coad, whose property borders the Golden Plains Wind Farm, has raised serious concerns about safety hazards stemming from the wind farm's operations. In September 2024, during a period of strong winds, serrated plastic components—designed to reduce turbine noise—detached from the turbine blades and were found scattered across his land, some as far as 750 meters from the turbines.

Golden Plains Story

In response to these incidents, the wind farm operators established 400-meter exclusion zones around the turbines and advised nearby farmers to wear hard hats during essential outdoor activities.

In addition to this, safety concerns have been raised following a fatal incident in 2024, where a worker was tragically killed during a turbine installation.

Ben Coad, the son of Russell Coad, and a farmer, also neighbours the wind farm. His house, built in 2010, falls on the southern end of stage one of the project. He has witnessed first-hand the wind farm from its time of inception and now lives within 2 km from 9 turbines that are 231 meters high. He was never asked to host the turbines, but other family members were and ultimately declined.

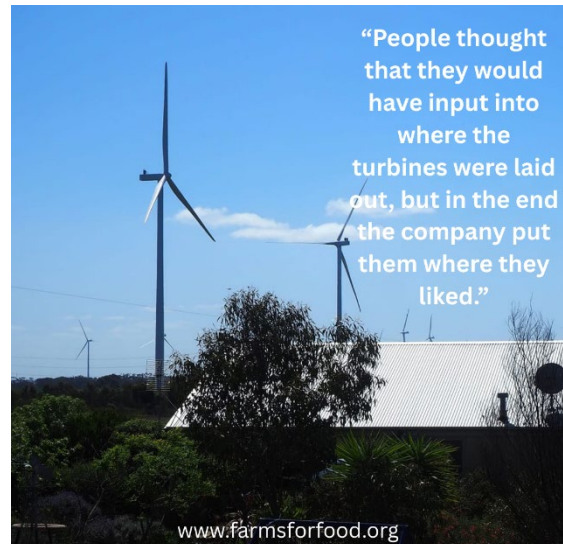
Ben Coad said that “This project was delayed for many years for legal reasons due to the endangered Southern Brolga. There is no evidence that a brolga has ever nested within or near an operating wind farm.”

Hamish Cumming's observations and analyses suggest that brolgas exhibit avoidance behaviour towards areas near wind turbines. He has cited data indicating that brolgas tend to avoid nesting within a 5-kilometer radius of wind farms, attributing this to disturbances such as noise and movement from the turbines.

Of the initial consultation process with the proponent Ben Coad felt that “interaction with the proponent and the government is non-existent, once they get a permit to build, in our experience so far, you are treated as if you don't exist and that your concerns around wildlife or noise are ignored. The attitude seems to be that they will build it anyway, so tough. People thought that they would have input into where the turbines were laid out, but in the end the company put them where they liked. And this has been very divisive for the community living around the windfarm.”

When asked about the community benefits of increased employment in the area Ben Coad said that “wind farms are generally owned by multinational companies, so any short-term construction employment generally just takes people away from other civil construction in other areas. There is a lack of skills in the sector and companies need to look for overseas workers to fill the roles.”

As well as having buffer zones placed on his property Ben Coad and his family have had the enjoyment of their home and their business affected. He stated that “when we are



Golden Plains Story

outside and the turbines are operating there is a constant noise like a plane is always flying over or a generator noise, a motor running. We have noticed that the more moisture that is in the air, the more noise. We are affected by blade flicker at times.” Ben admits that some people are more sensitised to the noise than others and that everyone experiences the sound differently.

He also said that “the tracks to the turbines are very high above the natural ground level, causing problems in wet years. Money could surely be better spent on Victoria’s crumbling roads. The new above ground powerlines have increased fire risks and wildlife collision and the substations are very brightly lit creating a large amount of light pollution at night and are visible for many kilometres.”

As a primary producer Ben is concerned about the turbine trailing serrated edges that have broken off onto his families’ paddocks. One of the main sources of noise from wind turbines is aero acoustic noise caused by air turbulence at the trailing edge of the blades (where air flows off). Trailings are serrated (zig-zag) structures that smooth the transition of air off the blade, reducing this turbulence. He said that “hundreds of small hard plastic segments have blown off the blades after construction causing a massive hazard to neighbours and those close to the road.”

As part of the recent upgrade to the Livestock Production Assurance (LPA) accreditation in 2024, and reaccreditation process, Integrity Systems Company (ISC) included solar panels and wind turbines as examples of potential equipment on farms that should be considered in a producer’s property risk assessment.

In Ben Coats experience, having a wind farm in his community has not proved to assist local employment in the long term, nor has it been financially beneficial for the broader community. What has been affected is the enjoyment of his own home and an added risk to his farming business. “Perhaps when the second stage of the project has been completed, then the townspeople of Rokewood might benefit from the community benefit scheme, but not for us twenty kilometres from there.”

When asked what he would change, if he could, Ben said “legislation needs to change, neighbours should not have the buffer zones put on their private property, from the project boundary, as is currently the case. Setbacks from homes must be increased to at least 2.5km from large turbines and local communities and councils should have some authority over project design. It should not just be left to the state government.”



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