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ARENA Submission to the Review of the Role of the National Wind Farm Commissioner

About ARENA

The Australian Renewable Energy Agency (ARENA) was established with the aim of improving the competitiveness of renewable energy technologies and increasing the supply of renewable energy in Australia.

ARENA provides financial assistance to support innovation and commercialisation of renewable energy and enabling technologies. This assistance is designed to accelerate the commercialisation of these technologies by helping to overcome technical and commercial barriers. A key part of ARENA's role is to collect, store and disseminate knowledge gained from the projects and activities it supports for use by the wider industry and Australia's energy market institutions.

The benefits of effective community engagement

Like all private infrastructure projects, the development of large-scale renewable energy generation is subject to state and territory planning legislation including requirements for community consultation, or potentially Commonwealth requirements in relation to offshore projects. The level of local community support for a project can have a significant bearing on project costs and timeframes and whether it ultimately achieves planning consent.

In recent years ARENA has witnessed significant improvement in the way renewable energy project developers have engaged with local communities. Positive initiatives, like community co-ownership schemes, and early and responsive engagement, have helped build strong community support for new wind and solar farm projects with benefits for project developers and local communities.

Scope of the role of the National Wind Farm Commissioner

The Climate Change Authority has asked whether the Commissioner's scope, which is currently focused on proposed and operational wind farms is sufficient, and whether it should be expanded to other large scale renewable energy projects, such as solar and storage.

ARENA's large scale-solar competitive round has helped close the gap between the costs of solar and wind energy. It also revealed the need for best practice approaches to manage community consultation and potential points of conflict such as proximity to residential areas or agricultural land in solar farm development. This experience indicates that the issues faced by large-scale renewable energy developers, be they solar, wind or other forms of generation, are likely to be common across all large-scale infrastructure developments. This is true of battery storage which, while typically having a relatively small footprint, can be subject to the same types of concerns to wind and solar

farms with regard to noise, electromagnetic radiation, visual impact and disruption caused by construction and operation.

It is also important to consider the trend toward co-locating wind, solar and battery storage, and the potential for emerging technologies such as concentrating solar thermal and co-located hydrogen storage. These classes of renewable energy assets are subject to similar issues and opportunities with regard to effective community engagement and it would be difficult to differentiate developments in terms of their underlying technology. ARENA is seeing emerging interest in offshore wind development in Australia and this may present a new set of stakeholder issues.

Building on our experience in large-scale solar, ARENA is supporting the Clean Energy Council to develop solar best practice guidelines, helping embed strong engagement processes across the sector. A number of stakeholder workshops with industry have been completed and a consultation group has been formed. It seems likely that these guidelines will seek to address wind and solar together, replacing the existing best practice guideline for wind. We expect the project to be completed by late 2018.

The future role of the Commissioner

The Climate Change Authority has asked about the future role of the Commissioner in relation to leading efforts to promote best practice, information availability and provide a central, trusted source for disseminating information.

ARENA considers that the National Wind Farm Commissioner has served a useful function in providing a positive vehicle to ensure concerns about wind farm development could be heard and addressed. There are benefits for communities and renewable energy developers in having continued access to an independent arbiter, as has been the case since the Commissioner's role was established.

As Australia's economy continues to grow, the range of energy resources being developed will expand. This increases the likelihood that energy developers will come into contact with agricultural, residential and other land uses. Accordingly, ARENA supports a continued focus for issue resolution in the energy sector with an emphasis on broadening best practices, information sharing and capacity building in industry.

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