

# CLIMATE COUNCIL CHOICE AWARDS: SOLAR, WIND AND STORAGE PROJECTS THAT SET THE BAR





# INTRODUCTION

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**Across Australia, we are bringing on renewable power and storage at record rates. Renewables like rooftop solar, grid-scale wind and solar, backed up by storage, already provide around 40% (and sometimes even more!) of the power in Australia's main grid.**

Renewables are not only the lowest-cost option for reliably powering our homes and businesses, but renewables at all scales are creating new job pathways for Australians, lowering people's power bills, empowering First Nations communities, revitalising essential community infrastructure and services, just to name a few of the benefits.

The problem is, we don't hear very much about them! In fact, many Australians falsely believe that community support for renewables is much lower than it actually is. Two-thirds of Australians living in cities and rural areas support renewable power projects, including within their own communities.

**That's where the Climate Council Choice Awards come in. We have selected 11 renewable energy and storage projects that are giving back to communities in meaningful ways for an Award.**

These are just a few of many fantastic projects out there already, with many more in the pipeline!



**These award winners are all unique - just like the communities they are based in. But they each demonstrate how wind, solar and storage projects are benefiting Australians in innovative ways to meet the needs of local communities.**

## THE WINNERS ARE...

CATEGORY	PROJECT	WHAT MAKES THIS A WINNER?
Solar Saver	Haystacks Solar Garden, Riverina, New South Wales	Haystacks is the first solar garden in Australia - leading the way to show how we can unlock the benefits of solar for people renting and living in apartments with community-owned renewables.
Women in Renewables	Bomen Solar Farm, near Wagga Wagga, New South Wales	Bomen Solar Farm's 'Women in Solar' program shows how the industry can combat traditional barriers to employment in the energy sector, by directly helping women gain new skills, experience and qualifications for future employment.
Energy Equity	South Australia's Virtual Power Plant (VPP)	South Australia's VPP is leading the way to show how governments can help lower power bills for citizens who are doing it tough (in this case: those living in social housing), while also helping to provide more clean power to the community and strengthening the energy grid.
Greener Grazing	New England Solar Farm, Uralla, New South Wales	The New England Solar Farm demonstrates how renewables can happily coexist with farming. As one of Australia's newest and largest solar farms, it's providing ideal grazing conditions for around 6,500 happy sheep.
Empowering First Nations	Marlinja Microgrid, Marlinja, Northern Territory	The Marlinja Microgrid is leading the way for other projects to help First Nations communities take control of their power. It is the first First Nations community-owned and grid connected renewable energy project in Australia, and will enable First Nations pre-paid meter customers to benefit directly from their own solar investment; working in a similar way to the benefits enjoyed by households with rooftop solar.

# THE WINNERS ARE...

CATEGORY	PROJECT	WHAT MAKES THIS A WINNER?
People-Powered	Totally Renewable Yackandandah (TRY), Yackandandah, Victoria	TRY is punching well above its weight and showing how a small, volunteer-led group can achieve amazing things. We are especially big fans of its Virtual Power Plant, which generates and stores clean power and gives it back to the Yack minigrid so other locals can access it.
Brighter Futures	Victorian Big Battery (VBB), Geelong, Victoria	VB is already a household brand, but wait until you hear about VBB. It's one of the world's biggest batteries, and empowers future generations by supporting science and sustainability initiatives at a local school, and funds a scholarship for diverse students to pursue a career in STEM through Deakin University.
Trailblazing Towns	Denmark Community Wind Farm, Western Australia and Hepburn Wind, Victoria	The Denmark and Hepburn community-owned wind farms have been powering their communities for more than 10 years. They were ahead of the curve in showing what's possible to achieve when a small group of passionate, hard-working people join forces to help their community and the planet.
Workforce Ready	Karadoc Solar Farm, near Mildura, Victoria	Karadoc Solar Farm shows how renewable power projects can actively contribute to employment in regional communities. More than 300 locals worked on its construction, all from diverse backgrounds, as part of its construction and it has also helped 25 apprentices start careers in solar.
Dream Team	Kennedy Energy Park, Hughenden, Queensland	Kennedy Energy Park is the first in the world to combine the dream team of wind, solar and battery storage all in one place. It is also doing its bit to support local sports teams, among many other initiatives that are revitalising the community.



# SOLAR SAVER: HAYSTACKS SOLAR GARDEN, NEW SOUTH WALES

**The Haystacks Solar Garden, near Grong Grong in the Riverina region of NSW, is the first of its kind in Australia. It's helping people renting, or in apartments and other homes without sunny roofs, unlock the benefits of solar power.**

More than four million Aussie households (one in three!) have taken control of their power bills by putting solar panels on their rooftops - each saving up to \$1,500 every year. As many families struggle with increasing costs of living, rooftop solar is a clear opportunity to help more Australians cut their power bills and our climate pollution at the same time. However, for the 30% of Australians who live in apartments, rent or face other barriers to installing solar, these benefits are usually out of reach.

That's where solar gardens can help. They are just like a community garden, but instead of veggies, the gardeners harvest renewable power. Solar gardens are already popular in other parts of the world, but Haystacks is an Australian first. It came about through a local farmer's vision to make renewables accessible for everyone and enable communities to have more control over their energy future. The farmer, Gemma Purcell, worked with a solar project manager and community energy expert to turn this vision turn into reality.

**Haystacks and the Grong Grong Solar Farm are:**

- making enough power for up to 700 households
- reducing climate pollution by around 2,700 tonnes each year
- saving the solar gardeners at least \$455 off their power bills every year.





## SOLAR SAVER: HAYSTACKS SOLAR GARDEN, NEW SOUTH WALES

Haystacks is part of the 1.5MW Grong Grong Solar Farm, which sits on Gemma's farm. The solar farm was part-funded by the Haystacks Co-operative, which raised \$735,000 by selling solar 'plots'. People all over the country - in New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria and South Australia - bought plots in the garden.

Grong Grong Solar Farm is repaying the loan to the Haystacks Co-op, which passes the repayments on to the solar gardeners through savings on their power bills. The solar gardeners receive at least \$455 off their power bills every year for a decade, with guaranteed returns of \$505 annually for the first five years. In total, Haystacks is expected to save its solar gardeners nearly \$900,000 off their power bills over 10 years.

Haystacks Solar Garden is a project of Community Power Agency, Pingala and Komo Energy with Energy Locals as the participating electricity retailer. The NSW Government also provided funding for the project under the Regional Community Energy Fund.



**Haystacks Solar Garden paves the way for more solar gardens across the country, to help more Aussies cut their power bills and climate pollution at the same time.**



## WOMEN IN RENEWABLES: BOMEN SOLAR FARM, NEW SOUTH WALES

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Australia's fossil fuel industry is dominated by men – only 23% of people working in coal and gas are women. The proportion of women in renewables is already much higher, at around 39%, and the industry is working hard to make sure women are benefiting from the employment opportunities that come with the switch to a power system free of climate pollution.

**Bomen Solar Farm near Wagga Wagga in NSW ran a 'Women in Solar' program during its construction, training and qualifying 12 local women in solar panel installation, including single mothers, Aboriginal women and women who were long-term unemployed.**

The majority of these women continue to work in the industry, and the project owner is continuing its community employment program.

**Bomen Solar Farm shows how the industry can combat traditional barriers to employment in the energy sector, by directly helping women gain new skills, experience and qualifications for future employment.**





## WOMEN IN RENEWABLES: BOMEN SOLAR FARM, NEW SOUTH WALES

The benefits of the Bomen Solar Farm don't end there. It has also established a \$1 million community fund, the largest community benefit fund in Australia for a solar project at inception.

**Through the community fund, \$500,000 over 10 years has been provided to initiatives at the Mount Austin High School. The Transition Program is designed to give year-12 students the skills and tools needed to successfully transition into life beyond high school. The Girls at the Centre program empowers young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in years 7-12 to set themselves up for success later in life.**

Bomen Solar Farm is also supporting tree plantings and biodiversity projects in the area, and has supported the installation of solar panels on housing for people with intellectual disabilities, to help lower their power bills.

On top of this, the solar farm shares its land with beehives belonging to local Wagga Wagga beekeepers, and is home to more than 1,000 Merino sheep (and even up to 2,000 when the grass gets long and more lawn mowers are needed)!

The owner, Spark Renewables, is also partnering with PV Industries to participate in the Circular Solar Trial, funded by NSW EPA, to develop solar panel recycling and end-of-life solutions.



**Bomen's 310,000 solar panels are making enough to power around 36,000 Australian homes, while also delivering meaningful benefits to all parts of the community including women and young people.**



# ENERGY EQUITY: SOUTH AUSTRALIA'S VIRTUAL POWER PLANT, SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Australians who are on low or fixed incomes, and who stand to benefit the most from reduced power costs, are often unable to install rooftop solar and batteries due to rental arrangements and the high upfront costs. To combat this, governments around Australia are introducing initiatives that help unlock the benefits of solar and batteries for more Australians.

**The South Australian government is leading the way – it established South Australia's Virtual Power Plant (SA VPP) back in 2018 to help reduce power costs for social housing tenants, and at the same time support the state's grid in ways that reduce power costs for all South Australians.**

Households that choose to join the program receive a home battery, with or without solar, installed and maintained for free. The batteries store excess renewable power from the grid and make it available when needed. Through the VPP, individual household and solar battery systems are connected so they can work together as a single, large power plant.

Households that join SA VPP get a reduced power rate. In 2024 alone, SA VPP helped social housing tenants across the state save around \$3.5 million on their power bills.

**More than 6,500 Housing SA homes are already benefiting from SA VPP, and more are being added every month. A typical home is saving up to \$551 every year off their power bills.**



# ENERGY EQUITY: SOUTH AUSTRALIA'S VIRTUAL POWER PLANT, SOUTH AUSTRALIA

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All South Australians benefit from SA VPP, as it helps keep the state's grid stable. It has helped with significant events like the bushfires near Port Lincoln in November 2019, and several times when SA's grid has lost connection with Victoria over the past few years.

Building on the success of SA VPP, the South Australian government is now expanding similar benefits to social housing tenants outside of the VPP, with community batteries like emPowering Magill and emPowering Edwardstown. These two community batteries will bring renewable energy and lower power rates to at least 600 Housing SA tenants in these Adelaide suburbs. Over their expected 15 year life, emPowering Magill and emPowering Edwardstown alone are expected to together deliver around \$5 million of benefits to Housing SA tenants.

**South Australia's Virtual Power Plant shows how governments can help lower power bills for people who are doing it tough (in this case: those living in social housing), while also helping to provide more clean power to the community and strengthening the energy grid.**



## GREENER GRAZING: NEW ENGLAND SOLAR FARM, NEW SOUTH WALES

Renewables use far less land than most people realise. We will need just 1,200 square kilometres of land to provide all Australia's energy needs – equivalent to just 0.02% of our land mass. For comparison, over half of Australia's land mass is used for agricultural purposes.

Even better, renewable power projects can happily coexist with farming and improve biodiversity when done well. Renewable energy projects also give farmers an opportunity to diversify their incomes, which is becoming increasingly important as climate change fuels more frequent and intense extreme weather events.



**The New England Solar Farm in Uralla, northern NSW, is one of Australia's newest and largest solar farms – and is also home to around 6,500 Merinos and other sheep.**

The New England region makes up around a quarter of NSW's agricultural production, and droughts in the region can be catastrophic unless landowners diversify their income. For its host landholders, New England Solar Farm is an opportunity to increase their business resilience.

Through early engagement with landholders, many of which had been running sheep on the land for five or six generations, the solar farm was designed to successfully graze sheep across the site. For example, the solar farm provides water sources for the sheep, secure fencing, adequate spacing between the rows of panels, and underground cabling where possible. The solar panels shade pastures in the early morning which helps retain moisture and encourages growth of the grass beneath, providing plenty of food for the resident lawn mowers. The panels also provide shade for the sheep in the heat, and protect them from frost in the winter.



## GREENER GRAZING: NEW ENGLAND SOLAR FARM, NEW SOUTH WALES

The New England Solar Farm was also developed in consultation with the Traditional Owners, the Anaiwan people, to identify culturally significant sites and ensure continued safe access.

This solar farm is doing so much more to support the local community - including providing \$7 million to support community groups and projects through a community fund. Like many of these projects, it supported local jobs and skills with an 80% regional workforce and 20% of project working hours to be delivered through traineeships and apprenticeships.

Construction of the first stage of the New England Solar Farm, made up of about one million solar panels, was completed in 2023. The second stage is under construction and will add more solar panels, as well as a big battery, with support from the NSW Government's Emerging Energy Program.

**The New England Solar Farm demonstrates how renewables can happily coexist with farming, and can even improve conditions for the animals they are sharing the land with.**

**When stage 2 is complete, the New England Solar Farm will:**

- **make enough renewable power for around 300,000 homes**
- **store enough on-demand energy for around 175,000 homes.**
- **avoid 4 million tonnes of climate pollution over 25 years.**





# EMPOWERING FIRST NATIONS: MARLINJA MICROGRID, NORTHERN TERRITORY

Marlinja is a remote community in the Northern Territory, near Elliot (about halfway between Darwin and Alice Springs) on the traditional lands of the Mudburra and Jingili people, and is home to around 60 people.

**Like many remote communities in the NT, Marlinja historically experiences severe energy insecurity. In 2019, the Marlinja community invited Original Power to help them with a plan to power the town with reliable renewables with a community microgrid.**

First, Original Power supported the installation of solar panels on the Community Centre, which meant it had a more reliable source of power and could save on its electricity bills.

The Marlinja community was involved in the project planning, installation of rooftop solar panels, and received training in electrical technology and carpentry skills. School students also took part in a Solar Schools Day to learn more about how solar power works for the community.

**The Marlinja Microgrid is leading the way for other projects to help First Nations communities take control of their power.**





## EMPOWERING FIRST NATIONS: MARLINJA MICROGRID, NORTHERN TERRITORY

Next, in June 2024, came the installation of the Marlinja Microgrid - the first grid-connected First Nations community-owned renewable energy project in Australia, showing how other remote communities can improve community wellbeing with lower cost, more reliable, clean power. Marlinja Microgrid is a grid-connected solar array backed up by a battery, aiming to provide a majority of residents' daytime and nighttime energy needs. The microgrid reduces Marlinja's reliance on the diesel-gas hybrid power station located in Elliott.

The Marlinja project is trialling an innovative benefit-sharing model developed by Original Power with support from Northern Territory government retailer Jacana Energy. For the first time, First Nations pre-paid meter customers will benefit directly from their own solar investment, similar to the benefits received by households with their own rooftop solar.

**The Marlinja Microgrid project demonstrates how we can support the wider uptake of renewable energy in First Nations' communities and drive improved energy security, affordability and climate resilience.**

The Marlinja Microgrid received funding through the [Barkly Regional Deal](#), with the remainder of the project's \$750,000 price tag raised through philanthropic networks and technology partners.





## PEOPLE POWERED: TOTALLY RENEWABLE YACKANDANDAH, VICTORIA

There are more than 100 inspiring community-led organisations around Australia working to get their towns off polluting coal and gas, improve their energy security and reduce power bills. While it was hard to pick just one, Totally Renewable Yackandandah (TRY) takes the prize for the amazing things they have achieved in their rural Victorian town.

**TRY is a volunteer-run community group aiming to power Yackandandah, near Albury-Wodonga, with 100% renewable energy. The people of Yackandandah convinced the group to set a goal for the town to be 100% renewable. Yack has already reached 60% renewables thanks to their hard work, and is on track to achieve 100% by 2027.**

The town has experienced extreme storm events in recent years, impacting its energy security. This February, TRY announced that it is collaborating with the local Yackatoon retirement village to install solar and batteries to increase energy resilience for the residents, many of whom are vulnerable to extreme cold and heat. At the same time, it will reduce power costs and support Yack's efforts towards 100% clean local power.





## PEOPLE POWERED: TOTALLY RENEWABLE YACKANDANDAH, VICTORIA

TRY has also established the Yackandandah VPP, which includes 10 buildings with solar systems and three public buildings (the Yack Public Hall, Sports Park and the CFA station) with batteries. While the solar and batteries may generate and store relatively small amounts of power on their own, together they add up to large amounts that can help balance out supply and demand on the grid. The buildings also contribute locally generated renewable energy to the Yackandandah minigrid which other locals can access. The Yack VPP has installed 74 kW of solar across the town's footprint, generating an extra 104 MWh of clean energy each year.

**TRY is punching well above its weight and showing how a small, volunteer-led group can achieve amazing things for its community.**

**The Yackandandah VPP will avoid around 88 tonnes of climate pollution every year. The project provides the core for a robust, localised, low-carbon and resilient electricity supply, while reducing running costs for community groups.**

TRY has also delivered many other successful projects, including:

- installing the town's first community battery, with a second on the way
- securing an Australian Government grant to investigate the feasibility of community-scale energy storage and generation for Yackandandah using microgrids
- installing a public electric vehicle (EV) charger in the town.





## BRIGHTER FUTURES: VICTORIAN BIG BATTERY, VICTORIA

**The most important thing that all renewable power projects are doing for our communities is helping to secure a safer future for our children and young people.**

Recognising this important role, many renewables projects have initiatives to support local schools, sports clubs and young people who are interested in entering the renewable energy industry. One of these is the Victorian Big Battery (VBB) in Geelong.

**The VBB gives \$25,000 every year to empower students in the area to help build a more sustainable future, and increase diversity in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and maths).**

The VBB has partnered with Deakin University to offer the Victorian Big Battery Engineering Scholarship. The scholarship supports First Nations person and women to pursue a career in STEM, including an opportunity to undertake a work placement with the project owner.

On top of this, the VBB has partnered with the Kardinia International School's grove campus, to support a range of sustainability projects at their Grove farm campus, which is next door to the battery. The Grove campus was a pilot school for the development of curriculum-aligned resources to help teachers create dynamic, engaging lessons about renewable power.

**The VBB is one of the world's biggest batteries, with the capacity to power 1 million Victorian homes for half an hour. The VBB has helped pave the way for the record number of new big batteries that are now being developed in Australia, all while giving \$25,000 every year to local students.**





# TRAILBLAZING TOWNS: DENMARK COMMUNITY WIND FARM, WESTERN AUSTRALIA & HEPBURN COMMUNITY WIND FARM, VICTORIA

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**The Denmark and Hepburn community-owned wind farms have been powering their communities for more than 10 years. They were ahead of the curve in showing what's possible to achieve when a small group of passionate, hard-working people join forces to help their community and the planet.**



The Denmark project began way back in 2003, with the local community wanting to be a part of the response to the global challenge of climate change. Their vision was to build a small, community-scale windfarm feeding into the regional grid. At the time, it was Australia's first proposed community wind farm. The project was a true community effort, employing local businesses at all stages of the project, from planning to surveying, roadworks, internal electrical works, switchroom construction, executive management and financial oversight. The vision turned into reality when the wind farm was completed in 2013.

The Denmark wind farm belongs to the community, thanks to the high number (90%) of local shareholders. Everyone in Denmark, whether a shareholder or not, has access to home-grown clean energy. The Denmark Sustainability Fund is a significant shareholder which returns its income from dividends to the local community by funding local enterprise projects.

**The Denmark Wind Farm meets close to 50% of the town's annual power needs, preventing about 6,000 tonnes of climate pollution entering the atmosphere each year.**



# TRAILBLAZING TOWNS: DENMARK COMMUNITY WIND FARM, WESTERN AUSTRALIA & HEPBURN COMMUNITY WIND FARM, VICTORIA

Hepburn's wind farm beat Denmark to the post to become Australia's first operational community-owned wind farm in 2011. The idea for a co-op wind farm in Hepburn was born in 2005, when a different proposed wind farm in the area was met with opposition from some locals.

**A group of passionate locals who wanted their community to play its part in addressing climate change decided to take matters into their own hands and started an education campaign to show the community how a wind farm could benefit them, if done in the right way.**

The group's hard work paid off – they convinced the community of the benefits and raised the \$13 million needed to get the project off the ground. All neighbours within 2.5km of the wind farm were offered a gift of 1,000 shares in the co-operative, enabling them to share in the economic benefits. Today, the Hepburn Energy co-op has more than 2,000 members, many from the local region. Since generation began in 2011, all financial debts have been paid off earlier than expected and there has been more than \$1.6 million in direct financial benefit for the co-op's members.

**Hepburn's two turbines, affectionately named Gale and Gusto by the local community, provide enough clean energy for more than 2,000 homes in the region. 42% of the Hepburn Shire's energy needs are provided by local renewables and it has avoided more than 100,000 tonnes of climate pollution since 2011.**





# TRAILBLAZING TOWNS: DENMARK COMMUNITY WINDFARM, WESTERN AUSTRALIA & HEPBURN WIND, VICTORIA

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Hepburn Energy also supports local projects to help the community thrive. Altogether, it has provided nearly \$327,000 back to the community and leveraged over \$6 million in community value. It has also supported the community to reduce its climate pollution in other ways, including through funding the installation of rooftop solar on community buildings, and partnering in community bulk buys of electric vehicles and heat pump hot water systems to reduce the upfront costs of these purchases.

Hepburn Energy is a key partner in the Hepburn Z-NET Community Transition Pilot (Hepburn Z-NET) in Victoria, which aims to reach net-zero energy by 2025 and net-zero emissions by 2030. It's now working to expand its horizons and become Australia's first hybrid wind, solar and battery co-operative.





## WORKFORCE READY: KARADOC SOLAR FARM, VICTORIA

The switch to renewable power is creating more jobs and employment opportunities, particularly for people in regional Australia. We will need an energy workforce of around 60,000 by 2050, compared to just over 30,000 in 2024, to build new infrastructure, and maintain and operate our clean energy system. Many renewable projects have initiatives to train and employ local residents, and they also support regional economies by sourcing goods and services from local suppliers.

**Karadoc Solar Farm, near Mildura, employed over 300 locals from diverse backgrounds as part of its construction, and supported apprentices to start their careers in solar. The construction of the project has opened opportunities for many locals to find ongoing employment in the renewables industry.**

During construction, the project employed people who were long-term unemployed, on community-based orders, from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, First Nations and people with disabilities. The developer, Beon Energy, also partnered with the Sunraysia Institute of TAFE in Mildura to involve 25 apprentices as part of the Solar Industry Career Pathway program.

**Karadoc Solar Farm shows how renewable power projects can actively contribute to employment and kick start careers in renewable energy in our regions.**

**Karadoc solar farm's 340,000 solar panels make enough clean energy to power 65,000 homes and avoid 52,000 tonnes of climate pollution every year.**





## DREAM TEAM: KENNEDY ENERGY PARK, QUEENSLAND

**Kennedy Energy Park near Hughenden in north-west Queensland is making the most of the region's wind and solar resources to help provide renewable power around the clock.**

The energy park was connected to the grid in 2019, and since last year has been operating at full capacity to contribute consistent and reliable clean energy to Queensland's power system. Wind generally picks up in the late afternoon and evening as the sun sets, enabling the project to produce steady, clean power throughout the day and night.

The energy park's Community Benefit Fund provides \$50,000 every year to groups, events and projects in the community. The energy park sponsors the annual Hughenden Rugby 7s competition and supports a free rugby clinic to local kids with the stars of the Western Force Super Rugby and Super W teams. During construction the project created around 240 construction jobs, as well as injecting \$20 million into the region through local equipment hire, materials, labour, food and accommodation. Kennedy Energy Park continues to support local jobs, supply and procurement opportunities and investment in regional community development initiatives and events.

**Kennedy Energy Park is the first in the world to combine the dream team of wind, solar and battery storage all in one place. It's also doing its bit to support local sports teams, among many other initiatives that are revitalising the community.**

**Kennedy Energy Park makes enough electricity to power more than 30,000 average homes each year. This will help avoid around 3 million tonnes of climate pollution over its life.**





## IMAGE CREDITS

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Cover: Community Power Agency - Haystacks Solar Garden launch

Images 2 & 3: Community Power Agency - Haystacks Solar Garden launch

Image 4 & 6: Spark Renewables - Bomen Solar Farm Women in Solar Program

Image 5: Chandler Macleod - Women in Solar Program

Image 6: South Australian Government Department for Energy and Mining- South Australia's Virtual Power Plant

Images 7 & 8: ACEN Australia - New England Solar Farm

Images 9 & 10: Original Power - Marlinja Microgrid launch

Images 11 & 12: Totally Renewable Yackandandah - Yackatooon Retirement Village and 2020 Victorian Premier's Sustainability Awards

Image 13: Canva - Children

Image 14: Jeff Ovenden - Denmark Community Wind Farm

Images 15 and 16: Hepburn Energy - Hepburn Community Wind Park

Image 17: Canva - Solar installer

Image 18: Canva - Solar and wind infrastructure