

Publication: Ecogeneration Magazine

Date: Jan/Feb 2011

Link: http://ecogeneration.com.au/news/communities_embark_on_clean_energy_path/053996/

Communities embark on clean energy path



Construction has commenced at Australia's first community-owned wind farm in Victoria. Going first has meant a long, hard road for the team behind the project, but now many other communities around Australia are asking how it was done. Embark's Alicia Webb reports.

In the United Kingdom and Europe, community-owned projects are commonplace. Denmark alone has over 200,000 investors owning more than 5,500 turbines. In the United States and Canada, the community renewables sector is strong and growing, with an installed capacity similar to Australia's entire renewables sector. According to windustry.org, US community wind projects added 544 megawatts (MW) of new energy capacity in 2009, adding to bringing the current total capacity to 1,521 MW.

Here in Australia, Hepburn Wind is building a two-turbine wind farm at Leonards Hill, approximately 10 km south of Daylesford in Victoria. Work on the project began five years ago, when the Hepburn Renewable Energy Association was established as a grassroots community movement, running town hall meetings, more than 100 street information stalls, and taking more than 250 locals on bus trips to wind farms.

With assistance from a developer, the project's permit application was submitted to Hepburn Shire in early 2007. The unprecedented levels of community engagement paid off – although council received 18 objections, the planning department was overwhelmed with a reported 320 letters of support.

Over the past two years Hepburn Wind has secured over \$8.4 million from more than 1,350 mostly local members, with the balance of the \$12.9 million project funded by Victorian State Government grants and a finance facility from the Bendigo Bank. Having signed construction contracts with REpower for two MM82 turbines, Hepburn Wind's official groundbreaking ceremony took place on 8 October 2010. The ceremony was attended by over 120 supporters including federal and local politicians, industry stakeholders, and members of the Hepburn Wind Co-operative.

As well as turning the first sod, the Victorian Minister for the Environment Gavin Jennings launched an independent non-profit organisation called Embark, dedicated to establishing a robust community renewable energy sector.

Mary Dougherty, Executive Director of Embark, took the opportunity to outline the organisation's vision of assisting other communities to establish their own renewable energy projects.

It aims to build on the lessons learned by Hepburn Wind by systematically addressing the barriers the project came across, so that communities around the country can adapt and implement the Hepburn model to their own requirements. Embark hopes to shift the community energy sector into

the mainstream as a proven and financially-viable model, capable of attracting large-scale investment.

Creating conditions for community energy projects to thrive will require good policy frameworks as well as skills, knowledge, and dedicated community groups.

Since launching in October, more than 25 communities have been in contact with Embark, asking questions ranging from “What’s the best governance structure for our group?” to “How do we put up a wind monitoring mast?” At this stage, Embark’s primary aim is to provide practical support and advice for these projects, the majority of which are in the very early stages of development.

In response to a barrage of practical questions from communities, Embark has developed a collaborative wiki site, partially funded by Sustainability Victoria. With the help of experts across industry, government, academia and members of Hepburn Wind, the site is already a valuable resource for communities. More than 100 articles cover a broad range of topics on how to start and run a community group, project establishment, funding and finance, legal structures, communications, community engagement, solar bulk buy schemes, and wind farm project development.

In addition to this practical assistance, Embark is bringing sustainability and renewable energy community groups together so they can share knowledge and build a network of known suppliers, developers and financiers interested in this emerging sector.

There is currently a significant gap between policy aimed at domestic installations (eg. 1 kilowatt) and utility-scale generation (eg. 100 MW).

Community projects operate in the middle ground, typically around 1–10 MW, depending on the technology. Because of their unique scale, these projects require tailored policies with transparency, longevity and certainty. Embark is advocating with governments around the country to ensure that these barriers are understood and that new opportunities are created for Australian communities.

Embark defines community projects as those that are instigated by locals in a community, scaled to the community’s needs, and significantly funded and owned by members of their host community. Community projects are generally configured to make direct contributions to the community and aim to maximise local opportunities for employment. As a result, these projects are welcome in the area.

Although typical community energy projects will be dwarfed by large-scale renewable energy developments, they play a vital role. Each community project has the potential to create thousands of new advocates for renewable energy, and valuable examples of communities embracing low carbon solutions.

While coal power is slowly losing its social licence in Australia, renewable energy has not been given a free kick. Embark and the community groups it is working alongside are putting in the hard yards to earn the community’s support for renewable energy.