



WILDFLOWER SOCIETY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA (INC)

POSITION STATEMENT

Renewable Energy and Native Vegetation Wildflower Society of Western Australia (Inc.) Position

The Wildflower Society of Western Australia (the Society) in WA is opposed to the clearing of native vegetation for the purpose of constructing and operating renewable energy facilities, such as wind and solar farms, dams and bioenergy plants, and their attendant infrastructure including power transmission lines.

Renewable energy production facilities in WA are best located at, adjacent to, or near where the energy will be used. Suitable locations include:

- buildings, both public and private
- abandoned mine, quarry and industrial sites
- cleared land including farm land and unused cleared land
- coastal waters.

These recommendations are applicable throughout the whole of Western Australia.

Background

The Society recognises the urgent need to shift to renewable energy supply as an action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and limit global warming.

WA has abundant solar, wind, wave, and tidal resources, and is well placed to capture this renewable energy to supply the entire state. To avoid and minimise transmission losses and costs, energy is best produced at or near where it is used. Independent 'off-grid' or 'micro-grid' local supply of renewable energy with local storage and/or backup is suitable in many cases, and especially for remote locations. Transmission losses may be up to 50% for energy produced far from its site of use.

Most renewable energy facilities require large areas of cleared land, or in the case of wind farms, large numbers of small cleared areas spread over large areas connected by constructed roads.

Impacts of constructing and operating renewable energy facilities on native vegetation

Western Australia, including the Southwest, Wheatbelt, Goldfields, Pilbara, Murchison, Gascoyne, Kimberley and 'deserts', is home to highly diverse and unique variety of native flora, fauna and vegetation. Many of these native flora, fauna and vegetation are rare or endangered as a consequence of development over the last 200 years, and are in serious need of protection and conservation.

Clearing native vegetation for renewable energy facilities in these regions, would have unacceptable impacts including:

- releasing greenhouse gases (that the construction of renewable energy facilities is meant to avoid and reduce) through the decomposition or burning of cleared vegetation;
- loss of carbon sequestration;
- destroying and removing native plants;
- disturbing and losing native animals including mammals, birds and reptiles through loss of habitat;
- fragmentation of native vegetation which makes it more susceptible to degradation through the introduction of weeds and other alien species;
- sending rare or endangered plants, animals and vegetation ecosystems to extinction through physical removal that the construction of renewable energy facilities is meant to address by reducing or avoiding temperature increases to which these plants, animals and vegetation cannot adapt;
- damaging areas of stunning views and landscapes and incredible wildflowers that tourists come from all over the world to experience;
- damaging soils;
- exposing and reducing the resilience of Western Australia to further climatic and meteorological impacts, including desertification, salinity and flooding;
- introducing weeds and disease, such as *Phytophthora dieback*, through unclean equipment;
- destroying and interfering with sacred and culturally important sites.

Construction and operation of renewable energy facilities

Native vegetation should not be cleared for the purposes of constructing and operating renewable energy facilities. The most appropriate locations to construct renewable energy facilities, in order of priority, should therefore be as follows:

- buildings, both public and private, including public and private car parks
- abandoned mine, quarry and industrial sites
- non-native forests and plantations.
- cleared land including farm land and unused cleared land
- highly degraded pastoral leases.

The uptake of roof-top solar in Australia has been very strong. However, there are still many opportunities for this to be further encouraged, financially supported, and expanded on:

- government and private company office buildings
- schools and hospitals
- warehouses and factories
- sporting facilities
- retail facilities
- farm buildings.

There are increasing numbers of solar and wind farms being established on already cleared farmland. In some cases, this is in conjunction with specific, albeit modified, farming practices. The Society opposes clearing of more native vegetation on farmland solely for the purpose of establishing renewable energy facilities.

Some of the best solar and wind resources in WA are in the rangelands and the Pilbara but unfortunately these regions are far from areas of electricity demand. Wherever possible, renewable energy facilities should be sited as close as possible to areas of substantial demand, such as population centres, mine sites or work camps, and be restricted as much as possible to already cleared areas such as:

- abandoned or mined-out mines and quarry sites

- mining waste dumps
- degraded pastoral lands beyond the point of being recoverable.

Benefits include:

- avoids the cost of clearing other land
- avoids the need and substantial costs to rehabilitate/restore native vegetation sites to their former environmental condition
- mine waste dumps may be higher in the landscape and provide improved wind or solar energy generation conditions.

The Society totally opposes the harvesting of native timber for the production of woodchips or other feedstock for the generation of electricity. There are existing and potential opportunities to harvest non-native timber plantations established on previously cleared land.

In the pastoral zone of the Pilbara, Murchison and Gascoyne, there are some pastoral leases that are, at least partially, in degraded or very degraded condition. Some of these leases have been re-possessed by the WA State Government through the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions with a view to de-stocking them and turning them into nature reserves. In some other cases, private lessees or other interests are acquiring these leases to revegetate/restore/rehabilitate them to return them to better condition. These are expensive, time-consuming activities with no guarantee of success.

An alternative option, **only for degraded or very degraded pastoral leases**, is to accept that these leases are degraded, with very limited flora and fauna, and to utilise them to site renewable energy facilities. While currently the Lands Administration Act prohibits activities other than grazing livestock on these leases, there is potential to allow activities to include tourism, and selected industrial activities such as renewable energy generation. This makes considerable economic, environmental and ecological sense compared with unacceptable clearing of pastoral leases in very good to excellent environmental and vegetation condition; and then potentially (as part of an environmental offset as a condition of approval to clear that particular pastoral lease), having to revegetate/restore another or the balance of the same pastoral lease in degraded or very degraded condition, to good or better condition.

To encourage the avoidance of vegetated areas for siting renewable energy facilities, detailed consideration also needs to be given, in the emissions accounting for a project, to the loss of CO₂ sequestration that occurs with clearing, as well as the increased emissions arising from the decomposition of the cleared material. From an economic perspective, the financial accounting needs to include the financial losses that arise from not being able to use the carbon credits attributed to any area proposed to be cleared.

Wildflower Society of Western Australia (Inc) www.wildflowersocietywa.org.au

Endorsed by the Society's Management Committee at its meeting on 22 February 2023