

Submission to the Victorian government's 'Help build Victoria's gas substitution roadmap' consultation paper from 2030Yea.

About 2030Yea

2030Yea is a community energy group dedicated to achieving 100% renewable energy in the town of Yea by 2030. The group was formed early in 2020 by a small number of concerned locals. Membership is increasing and the group has had a number of wins.

Gas de-carbonisation strategy

A major concern regarding the roadmap is the assumption that we have to use the current gas infrastructure because it is a significant and expensive investment that will otherwise be redundant. Pursuing a gas decarbonisation substitution so we can use the current infrastructure is not a good decision when we have other cheaper, 'ready' options such as solar, wind and battery storage. Hydrogen is something to consider in the long term, but we need results *now*, so should be focussing strongly *now* on the technologies that we can be sure will give fast results. Is gas decarbonisation the best, safest and cheapest alternative we have? Will it provide enough jobs? The roadmap is not convincing of this.

Lack of urgency

Urgency is missing from the roadmap. Depending on who you listen to or what you read (and this is a problem in itself) a transition to 50% renewable energy by 2030 will be too late to save the world as we know it. We need to shift much more quickly, with the target of 100% renewable by 2030 being the preference of most environment scientists and people in the regions. Regional towns and environments have been hit hardest by the effects of climate change and we need to see action now.

Regional towns

Like many regional towns, Yea is not connected to the main gas lines so residents who use gas rely on LPG bottled gas. These residents, as well as the companies and businesses who service them, want to be guaranteed they will be included in transition plans. If hydrogen becomes a gas substitution in cities, regional towns who aren't on the gas pipeline will want to see parallel benefits in renewable electricity generation.

Social licence

We believe that events of environmental devastation, such as bushfire and flood, present the government with an opportunity to enact rapid change. For both economic and social reasons, regional Australia cannot continue to suffer these disasters. We want our leaders to respond with decisive action today. Setting the low and inadequate target of 50% transition to renewables by 2030 will not slow climate change and its effects. The community response to the COVID pandemic has shown we can galvanise and adapt in the face of threat. Government should take advantage of our readiness for change--see it as social licence--and set bolder targets for transition: we call for 100% renewables by 2030.

Young Australians

Young people have the ability to cut through the 'noise' and tell it how it is. Their very important voices of the future are missing from the roadmap.

The pathways:

Improving energy efficiency

We welcome regulatory reform and national standards, but it is a concern that even the simplest of measures relating to energy efficiency are neither widespread nor the norm eg awareness of Powerpal, home energy efficiency checks, awareness of heatpumps, draught proofing, effective window covering and shading. Some of these measures (Powerpal installation, LED light globe changeover) are not even available in parts of regional Victoria and this is an equity issue as well as a failure of government. We need a huge public education programme and campaign to ensure the community understands what energy efficiency tools and programmes are available to them, and how to access them. The uptake of many efficiency measures depends on how informed the consumer is, where consumers get information from and whether they have information around access. It goes without saying energy efficiency must be affordable and the providers reliable.

It is a concern that people who are renovating or building are still being advised to use gas for space heating, hotwater and cooking, and that houses are being built without solar panels. This is a failure of policy and regulation. It is also a failure of public education.

Electrification

If grid infrastructure won't cope with the added demand of increased solar and wind generated electricity, a more concerted effort is required by government to invest in ways to overcome this, such as by neighbourhood battery and microgrid installations, especially in new housing suburbs. Government must expand investment in cheaper, proven forms of renewable electrification rather than rely on speculation of what might be available in decarbonised forms of gas, and carbon storage.

Community energy groups such as 2030Yea, are left to shoulder way too much of the burden of increasing fair and equitable electrification and home efficiencies. This should be the role of governments of all levels, and of government policy. It is a very inefficient system that relies on community volunteer groups to search for funding opportunities, apply for them, then spend them. We can only achieve small changes when it is large -scale change that is required. Relying on market forces will be a risk of too little too late.

Substituting natural gas with hydrogen

While we understand that future energy will need to be met by multiple renewable sources, the community needs to know how much substitution with hydrogen will cost, when it might happen, and who will benefit. Will it keep prices down and will everyone benefit? Will it be shipped overseas, as gas is now, causing prices to rise? How will regional Victoria benefit from hydrogen development? Who will own hydrogen provision? Solar power has the potential of community ownership, providing jobs and wealth to regional communities - can hydrogen follow a similar model? And as for carbon storage (necessary when de-carbonising hydrogen) – we don't know if this will ever be possible on a large scale.

Is the focus on hydrogen more about looking after the interests of those invested in gas infrastructure, rather than on the benefits it will have for all?

Workforce challenges and opportunities

The roadmap needs to address workforce challenges and opportunities more thoroughly. Evidence suggests once governments have committed to a green future, the jobs will follow. The community needs to see in the plan, or the roadmap, that the local gasfitter, the local electrician, the hardware store, the farmer, will all have employment, retraining, access to the relevant technology and ecological and financial advice, before giving the government the social licence to make change. The roadmap does not provide this level of security to the Australian workforce.

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