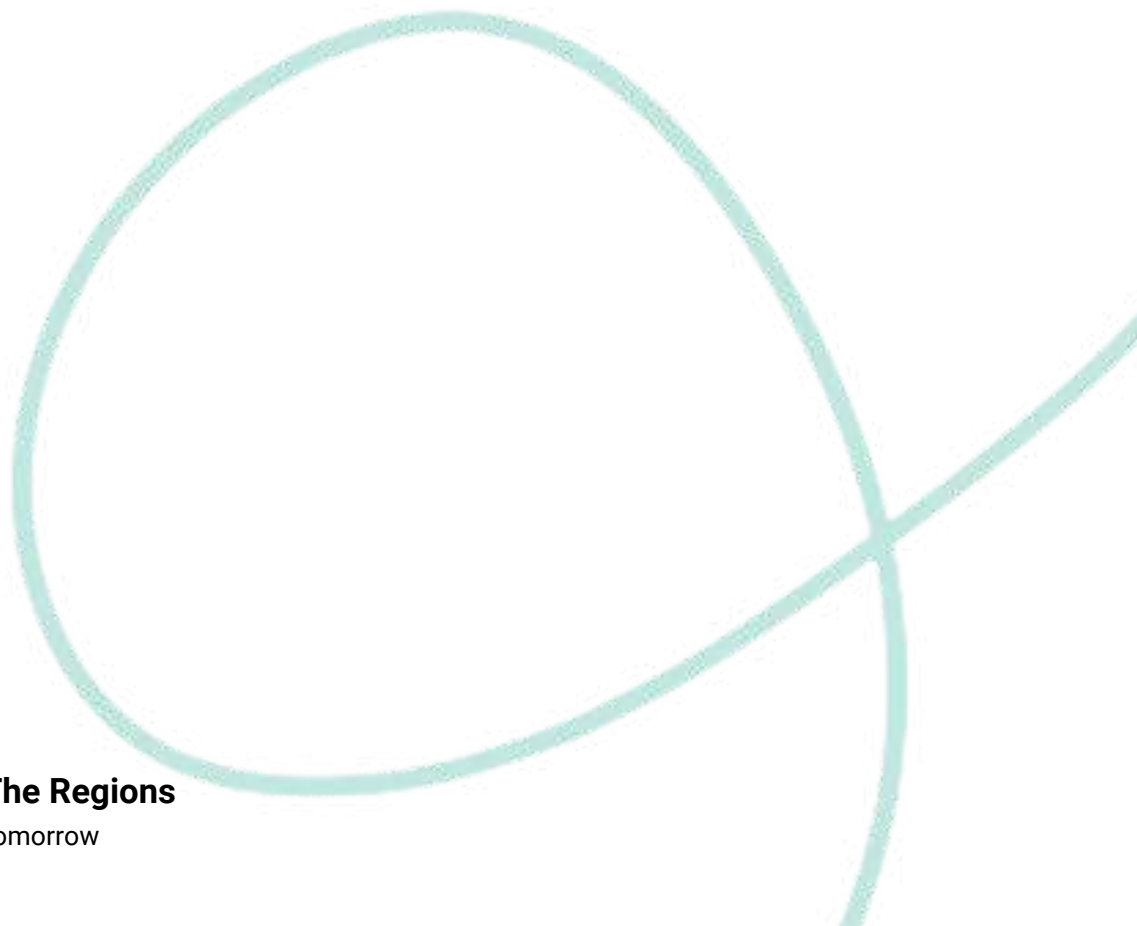


AUSTRALIA'S ENERGY TRANSITION:

VOICES FROM THE REGIONS

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INTRODUCTION



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Voices From The Regions
Foundations For Tomorrow

The Realities Faced in Australia's Regions

Australia's regional communities will feel the effect of climate change and climate action the most.

Bushfires and floods are fashioning a new way of life for farming communities, and coal-dependent communities will experience a rapid decline in prosperity.

The enormity of the challenge is magnified by the absence of meaningful national stewardship to support these communities through the energy transition.

The longer we wait, the more costly it will be, and regional communities will bear a disproportionate burden.

As part of our mandate to present a unified voice for a better Australian future, Foundations for Tomorrow has chronicled the regional perspective. Paired with electoral analysis from the landmark *'Awareness to Action'* consultation, this exploration has been designed to share the often-overlooked voices of regional Australia.

This is their story.

Australia's Policy Stalemate

As the Glasgow climate conference fast approaches, Australia is feeling the pressure to announce more ambitious climate targets. It is looking likely that the Federal Government will announce net zero emissions by 2050, and perhaps a higher 2030 target as well.

Irrespective of the Government's decarbonisation strategy—or lack thereof—the decision to decarbonise will eventually be forced upon us by market dynamics. Our electricity grid is already undertaking a rapid transformation as cheap solar and wind put pressure on the nation's coal-fired generators. Many of these generators have brought forward their closure dates—a sign of things to come.

The more significant challenge will be posed by the declining demand for Australian coal exports. Australia's top five major trading partners have pledged net-zero; this will drive decarbonisation domestically, whether we like it or not. Demand for thermal coal, used in power generation, is likely to decline first as the world decarbonises its electricity supply. Metallurgical coal, used in steel production, will come later—green alternatives (green steel) are yet to reach cost parity. But demand will decline eventually as the world approaches 2050.

A decline in demand for coal exports will pose a substantial challenge to regional areas where coal plays an important economic role—namely the Hunter Valley in NSW, Central Queensland, the LaTrobe Valley in Victoria, and Collie in Western Australia.

Both major parties in Canberra tiptoe around this issue in their own idiosyncratic way, hoping to avoid difficult discussions in electoral seats that are pivotal to federal elections. Much of the public discussion is dominated by unhelpful extremes; on the far right, some believe a transition will do more harm than good, and on the left, they say it will be painless.

Neither of these viewpoints is productive; nor are they honest.




The transition is inevitable, and it will be challenging. Its effects won't be felt in the inner city enclaves of Sydney, Melbourne or Brisbane. Rather, the requisite structural adjustments will be felt hardest in regional Australia.

The private sector can make its best effort to support workers as owners of coal-fired generators are already announcing compensation for employees as part of early closure plans. But, the scale of the coal export challenge means the private sector won't be able to do it alone.

The Federal Government must lead this inevitable endeavour; one that, at present, they're largely absent from. The longer we fail to meaningfully consider the future of coal exports—and the longer we fail to prepare for a future without the jobs and royalties that the industry provides—the more complex and painful this adjustment will be.

And, of course, the costs will be borne disproportionately by those in regional communities.



"It feels like there's a guard defending some kind of status quo, and they're just holding up this wall of resistance against inevitable change, the change is coming. And the question is whether we're ready for that change, and enabled and empowered to deal with that change, or whether we just want it to be a complete shock to our system."

Leanne Smith, Director, Whitlam Institute

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VOICES FROM THE REGIONS

The Youth Voice of the Regions

The data behind Foundations for Tomorrow's landmark research report, [Awareness to Action](#) (informed by more than 10,000 Australian responses), also highlights what young Australians in regional and rural communities really think about climate change.

Young people in regional and rural Australia are:

6%

higher in their response to “strongly agree” that government ‘should make accelerating climate action key goal of the economic recovery’ than their urban counterparts

8%

higher in their response to “strongly agree” that they would ‘vote for or support political leaders who commit to taking bold, immediate, and ambitious action to address the climate crisis’ than their urban counterparts

5%

higher in their response to “government” as the ‘most responsible for addressing climate change’ than their urban counterparts

Young Australians in some of the country's most hotly contested electorates, such as Flynn, Hunter and Monash, are 52% more inclined to identify “government” as the ‘most responsible for addressing climate change’, than their urban peers. This is particularly interesting given the economic importance of coal in these electorates.

Submissions From Young Australians

'Why are we pursuing natural gas, hydrogen and carbon capture technologies? Newer renewable technologies will outstrip these soon enough and we will be left with expensive stranded assets.'

Male, 29, Vic

'How can the Government better commit to flexible education for future jobs that don't exist?'

Female, 27, NSW

'What programs and training can we implement to address to train ageing populations in obsolete jobs to ensure we have more people working, while balancing the power of the mining industries in Australia?'

Female, 27, NSW

'I would want to help bring the isolated communities together, as they are often left out of policies and become invisible. I believe that people need to feel connected to society or radicalism (such as poverty gaps, gender inequality and disadvantaged communities) will emerge.'

Male, 22, TAS

'Pursue policy strategies that comprehensively prevent biological collapse.'

Male, 24, Qld

This builds on undeniable evidence that regional Australians want action

The Australian Conservation Foundation recently found that a “majority of voters in every one of the nation’s 151 federal electorates believes the Morrison government should be doing more to tackle climate change”.

Further, the ACF found that “a majority in the Hunter Valley coal region of NSW and in the Queensland coal seats of Flynn, Maranoa, Capricornia, Kennedy and Dawson does not believe new coal and gas plants should be built to supply Australia’s future energy needs.”

74%

These results were supported by the 2021 Lowy Climate Poll, which found that “three-quarters of Australians (74%) say ‘the benefits of taking further action on climate change will outweigh the costs’”.

70%

In the leadup to the Glasgow climate conference in late 2021, seven in ten Australians (70%) said Australia should join other countries, such as the United Kingdom and the United States, in increasing its commitments to address climate change.

Together, these findings demonstrate a resounding and unified voice for action. One is left to ask, how much longer can the Federal Government drag their feet?

Tony Wolfe, Power Plant Operator

Tony has worked in the coal industry for over 40 years. And, despite his self-proclaimed 'ocker Australian upbringing', more than two decades into his career Tony's views are now drastically different to that of the young man who entered the Loy Yang B Power Station in 1994. The switch in perspective was, in fact, triggered by the absence of one.

"My 'lightbulb' moment was sitting at the plant at 3 am in the morning and seeing the amount of power we were producing, realising how carbon-intensive our world is. Our power station didn't have light switches—the lights were on all day and all night."

At 58 years old, the father and grandfather, sharing a 'Brady Bunch' worth of children with his partner, is unafraid to stand up for the future he knows is inevitable.

"I got into the industry at 15. I went to school in regional Victoria and left high school to take on an apprenticeship." "Entering the industry seemed like the smart thing to do, it's what everyone did. It's only now I am realising it was never going to last. Things have to change."

In our discussions with Tony, it became clear that social stigma, and the need to overcome it, plays an undeniable role in our journey towards climate solutions. Tony shared that "anything seen to be part of the green movement is seen to be feminine, and that impacts the ways that people are willing to talk about it, especially in a predominantly masculine workforce."



“People are curious and are asking a lot of questions but aren't comfortable saying they support it.”

“Internally, they understand that we are coming to the end of coal, but externally they don't see the path forward. So there is no security for them to talk about it. People know it takes 20 years to plan a new power station and they haven't seen this groundwork go in.”

“In that way, we are now paying for 30 years of inaction”

When asked to talk more about his community's responses to the changing environment, Tony was quick to draw us to the heart of the issue at hand.

“Identity plays a huge part in the community's resistance to climate action.”

“In our community, people see carbon capture and storage as a lifeline to continue coal. A way to continue the life that they have build for themselves, and their families.”

“And when the very fabric of the life you have spent decades building and the security of your family is at stake, the idea of resistance to an unknown, undefined and currently unplanned future doesn't feel so unreasonable.”

Under Australian candour and courage, Tony remains an optimist, and sees the opportunity that can be created for coal-dependent communities in the future.

“The LaTrobe Valley has the social licence for heavy industry, which is great as it means people will be accepting of heavy industry in the future. So, I would love to see that coming into the community as it is a great opportunity for industrial investment. Heavy and energy-intensive manufacturing would be perfect in the LaTrobe valley.”

But the reality remains, one that all of our interviewees agreed with:

“Net zero by 2050 is too late. It's a long term target and it is an easy one to say, but it is meaningless without [higher] incremental targets along the way.”

“We need to go to the [Glasgow] climate conference supporting a global push, we need to be a team player... Australia is in a position where we can commit to those goals.”

“We are taking the path where we don't want to put anything on ourselves, but the reality is by not taking action we are putting challenges on ourselves.”

John Dalton, Teacher & Spokesperson for Kingaroy Concerned Citizens Group

John Dalton is one of many citizens that, in the face of Federal Government inaction, have taken up the mantle to defend Australia's future.

As a resident of Maranoa, a traditionally conservative seat, John Dalton knows all too well the tensions that can exist between 'progressive policy' and some in his local community. But this hasn't stopped him and other community members from recognising the impact of climate change.

"Climate change is front and centre in our community, we have failing crops and the environment is changing continuously and getting harder to manage."

"We had a storm here a few years ago the likes of which no one can ever remember. We have trees here that had the bark ripped right off them, every branch and every root was gone."

"I would say most farmers believe that man-made climate change is happening - but it's still unclear if it affects them politically."

This quote touches on a point that Mr Dalton was generous to expand upon: the 'willingness-to-live-with contradiction' that he witnesses in his community, as his peers' beliefs are increasingly divergent from their voting patterns.



He shared that: “Politics is almost like a religion for some people. They don’t associate what they want from a policy with their loyalty to a party as it is tied up with their identity.”

“There is a cognitive dissonance, where they allow themselves to vote how they always have even though they don’t agree with the policies of the party in question.”

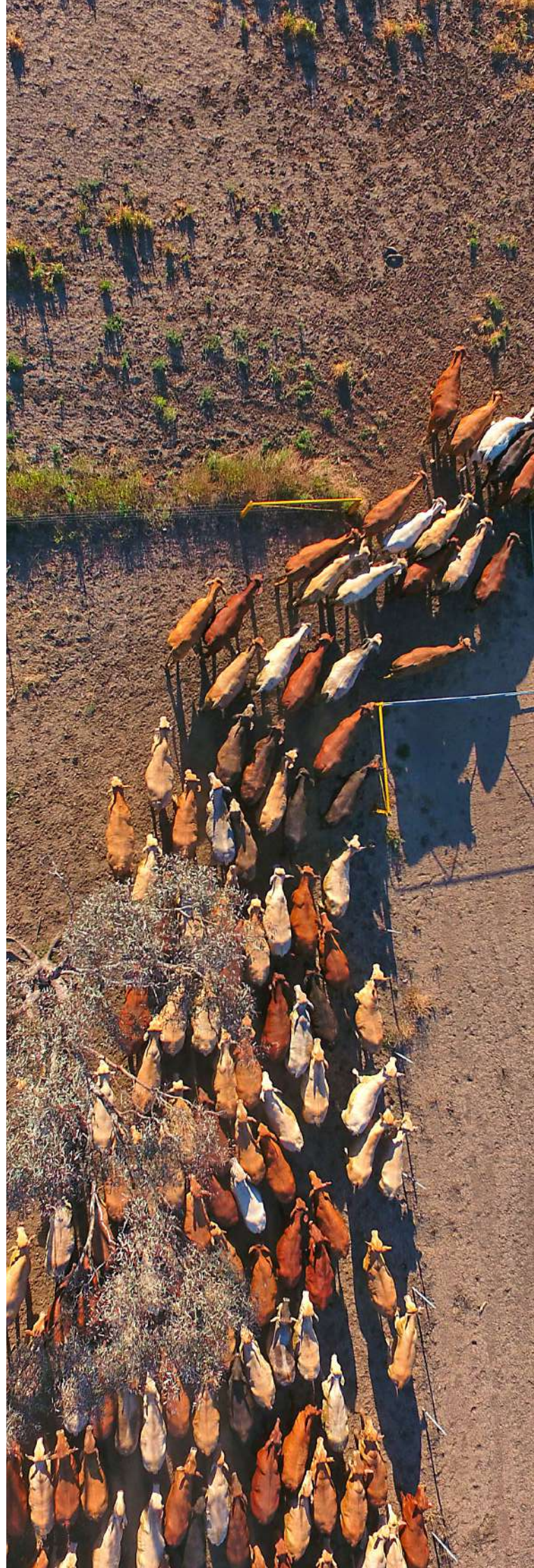
“Like all of us, they have blind spots. We see what we want to see and avoid acknowledging the incongruence in our own belief systems.”

“There is a general sentiment that the community is pro-climate action, but this isn’t translating to votes - we have many rusted on voters.”

So, how do we reconnect beliefs and behaviour to ensure that the actions of communities protect the future?

“You must take them to a place where they are willing to address the incongruence of their moral, religious and social beliefs.”

“Leadership requires us to be able to paint a new and different way of life, and do so in a way that makes people feel secure enough to move towards it. That is not what we are seeing right now.”



Lucinda Corrigan, Farmer & Director, Rennylea Angus

Lucinda Corrigan is a pillar of her local community and has long been aware of the realities and opportunities held by a future driven by climate solutions. Loyal to country Australia, Lucinda and her husband now lead a fifth-generation family farm alongside two of their three children.

"I've worked the land at Rennylea since 1986, and my husband has been 'home from school' on the property since 1968."

"It doesn't surprise me at all that regional and rural Australians have more demand for climate change."

"The farming community understands climate change more than most - we have been seeing climate change for 30 years."

But behind this deep knowing is also a demand for greater pragmatism and the need to bring climate change from the systems of 'belief' and into the world of objective fact.

"You can't use the word 'believe', it is not a scientific word. You need the right lexicon to have the right discussion with people who are tied up in their concept of identity."



“We need to get better at having these conversations with older generations so that they feel listened to, and that we can find the ‘bit we share’. That’s what leadership is. There will be people that you don’t agree with or get on with but there are lots of things you share. It is only the hard heads on each extreme that don’t understand this.”

In tandem with the need for more advanced language and leadership, the need for practical tools for transition is at the forefront of Lucinda’s concerns.

“2050 for neutrality is too late.”

“Our adaptation tools will only take us so far, now we just need to start mitigating. We have bits more we can squeeze out in adaption with incremental efficiencies, but that’s why there is real demand for change in terms of big policy.”

“There is a fair bit of misinformation and I believe that governments have become entirely seduced by the idea of carbon capture. At the end of the day, we don’t want this to be accounting tricks, we want this to be real.”

Joshua Gilbert, Farmer & Researcher

Joshua Gilbert, a 30-year-old Worimi man whose family ancestry traces back generations in the Gloucester mountains, lives with an unwavering commitment to breaking down stereotypes and truth-telling in modern Australia.

He persists relentlessly to amplify the voices of First Nations Australians in agricultural and environmental dialogues - spaces that they are all too often excluded from despite the unparalleled expertise held by First Nations communities in caring for Australian land.

As a man who has lived and spent most of his life in the regional areas of Australia, he is unsurprised by Foundations for Tomorrow's findings.

"It doesn't surprise me at all that demand [for action] is higher for climate change in the regional and rural communities."

"It's pretty obvious that people in regional and rural Australia understand climate change, they see it every day. It's more visible and the impacts of it are written into the land."



“With the bushfires that happened a couple of years ago, I know that Sydney got covered in smoke, but the reality is that it’s one thing to hear about it and it’s another thing to see it....First, they got hit by bushfires, then we got hit by the drought, then we got hit by covid, and then we got hit by floods and are now being impacted by covid again - we know pandemics have linkages to climate change, so we can see a common theme here.”

“Over the last little while, we have had a perfect storm. So it’s not surprising that people in our communities know that the environment is changing, even if they don’t attribute it to ‘climate change’, because these words are quite political and can create tension.”

In a continuing acknowledgement of the invisible social barriers at play, Joshua shares what local chatter is like when it comes to climate issues.

“Because of the political tension, it’s difficult to talk about.”

“The coffee shops here are prime breeding grounds for speaking about weather change, but no one uses the words ‘climate change’. I attribute this to the politicisation of climate issues which has predominantly been driven by far-right actors who are caught up in their own underlying motives... behind the climate change rhetoric.”

“The fear of not knowing where people stand and it being such a contested idea means that it ends up not being discussed and the stigma grows.”

“People who are pinched by climate change, even if they don’t call it that, want climate resilience. And, in fact, they are probably leading the way without even realising that they are doing that.”

“We need to praise people for what they are doing right. We bag politicians or farmers for what they are doing wrong, but we don’t look for the things that people are doing right and commend them for that. All of that good stuff people are doing. We are too quick to forget about it when we want to criticise them. We can give them a hat tilt and a bit of praise.”

For young leaders like Joshua, who have their finger on the pulse of how their community is evolving, he knows that climate change is environmentally and politically inevitable, showing an even greater link between climate change and covid-19 than many have observed.

“Because of covid, we have had a massive rise in the number of people with different experiences and perspectives moving back to country areas. The impact this has on regional and rural areas will be profound. We will need completely different leaders for these areas in the future.”

So why are we still struggling to accept this truth?

“Australian culture struggles to face up to the truth of our country on climate change. Fear mongering has been used to scare us away from progress and we are seeing that play out yet again.”



Tara Bellrose, Farmer & Content Creator

“My family has been working the land for generations, and that there is a real challenge being faced in Australia’s regional communities.”

At just 23, Tara Bellrose is fighting climate change on the new frontier, social media. Amassing an enormous 600,000 followers across her social media platforms, Tara’s informative candour and Australian authenticity leaves it as no surprise that many young Aussies view her as a trusted source. Notably, Tara reflects that:

“While older generations in the community are hesitant in accepting their role in climate change, the younger generations are desperate for change to protect the future of their community.”

“Our younger generations are making a real push for climate solutions, but half of them can’t vote yet and we can’t afford to wait several years for them to be able to vote to see change. We need change now.”

Amidst this intergenerational rift, Tara is all too aware of the role of social stigma and media influence in the way her community is portrayed.



“The media is pushing a narrative that people in regional and rural Australia don’t care about climate change and it’s not true.”

This uniquely Australian media landscape along with entrenched social pressures have created a paradox in country Australia.

Members of the community are acutely aware of the changes at hand, evidenced by their own lived experience, but are unable or unwilling to admit this publicly.

“Some members of our community are willing to admit their belief in climate change privately, but are unwilling to make this public knowledge.”

This denial and delay, propagated by a desire for stoicism and social inclusion, while deeply rooted, will be no match for the realities of climate change itself. “Nature is going to move on and continue to evolve. If we continue the way we are going, many of us will suffer the consequences and nature will continue without us.”



Wendy Farmer, President, Voices of the Valley

Like many of the Australians we interviewed, Wendy Farmer was not always a climate advocate. Her interest in and commitment to the topic has come as a natural by-product of her firsthand experience. Wendy has lived in coal communities her whole life, with the town she was born in having been dug up in favour of the coal expansion in the 1980s.

“I wasn’t aware of climate change until 2014 when the Hazelwood mine fire happened, and then a quickly starting to understand what was happening to our environment.”

The realities of the challenges that lay ahead for workers impacted by the transition is close to home for Wendy. “My husband was working at the Hazelwood mine, during and after the fire, when it was announced that it would close.”

She is quick to reinforce that coal-miners are often just doing what they believe is best for their family, showing the loyalty that she has developed in her lifetime within these communities.

“When we talk about closing down coal communities, we are talking about the security of families and the health of a community.”

Despite the uncertainty that it brings to her community, Wendy shared the growing awareness of the inevitability of an energy transition.

“In the last 12 months to 2 years, we are starting to see entirely different dynamics, realising we have to do something. Rather than simply protecting fossil fuels, we need to protect our future.”



Wendy credits this progress to the rise in open conversation in the regions and from politicians on the topic of climate change.

She states that “When leaders come out and say ‘we have to do something’, this gives the ability of communities to talk about climate change as well.”

“We know that coal is ending, and we know that it will end faster than we even think it will end.”

However, she is quick to highlight the sense of duty that is at the forefront of this community, “Coal workers are providing for their families, taking their job away is not just about them; it’s about their family. People, especially in communities that have faced many adversities to date, are willing to do what they need to to take care of their families.”

This sense of duty extends not only to their own families but to the nation at large “They feel a sense of duty to provide the state’s energy, with many asking ‘if we don’t protect this industry, where does the power come from? How do we turn our lights on?’ For many, their power station is part of their family and workers are proud of the hard work that they do.”

So, when loyalty, security and duty are bundled into one, how do you drive change that, on its surface, seems to betray all three of these Australian community pillars?

“If you speak directly about climate change, they push away. So, you need to approach them with the opportunity in a way that doesn’t exclude people.”

“For any coal community, reach out and work with them. Ask what they need, don’t tell them. Too often we have activists come in without collaboration, but they don’t meaningfully engage local communities. You can do more damage doing this than good.”

“We need to do something and we need to do it quickly, but we need to bring communities along the journey with us.”

“For the LaTrobe Valley, it will end, and if we don’t prepare for a transition, we will have 5 months notice and nothing planned.”



It's time for us to listen.

Listen to young Australians.

Listen to our regional communities, the backbone of our country.

And, listen to the ever-growing ensemble of research that clearly articulates the imperative for immediate and ambitious action to reduce emissions, while also supporting communities who will carry most of the burden.

It's the Australian way.

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APPENDIX

Awareness to Action Electoral Analysis

Available using the link below.

[CLICK HERE](#)

