Ecology

Photograph of the project area

Caring for the natural environment

Australia's electricity market is in transition to clean, renewable sources of energy to reduce carbon emissions and mitigate the impacts of climate change. The impacts of climate change, including rising temperatures and severe weather events, are among the greatest threats to biodiversity, threatened species and other wildlife.

Increasing renewable energy capacity and biodiversity conservation are both critically important and compatible objectives, with careful planning and management.

Avoiding and minimising impacts to flora and fauna species that might utilise the project area is a priority. The Richmond Valley Solar Farm project team is committed to collaborating with environment stakeholders, ecology specialists and host landowners to implement responsible strategies to avoid and mitigate ecological and biodiversity impacts of the development.

An aim of the project will be to achieve net positive outcomes for biodiversity and key species in the project area over the longer term. Measures to achieve this and improve the area's habitat values include rehabilitation of the initial construction disturbance, improved land management regimes for threatening processes such as for pest control, weed control and fire management, and offset areas that present the opportunity to increase and improve available local habitat for key species.

Environmental assessment

Comprehensive and rigorous assessment of the project's potential environmental impacts is required by both the New South Wales and Australian Governments.

The NSW Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure (DPHI) requires a detailed Biodiversity Development Assessment Report (BDAR) outlining likely biodiversity impacts, proposed regimes for avoiding, minimising, managing and reporting impacts, and offset measures if those are required.

The project has also been determined a controlled action under the Commonwealth *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act) by the Australian Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW) (Number 2023/09641). The project's EBPC Act assessment requirements will be addressed in the BDAR and assessed by the DPHI under a bilateral agreement.

Rrequirements for the BDAR are outlined in the project's SEARs, which are available online from the NSW Government's Major Projects Planning Portal (SSD-41020244) - www.planningportal.nsw.gov.au/major-projects/projects/richmond-valley-solar-farm - and documentation for the Commonwealth's requirements is available from the EPBC Act Public Portal (Number 2023/09641) - epbcpublicportal.awe.gov.au

Location

The Richmond Valley Solar Farm is proposed to be located across two private properties in the locality of Myrtle Creek, in the Northern Rivers region of NSW.

The majority of the area where the development footprint is proposed involves land that was previously used for commercial forestry and currently used for cattle grazing. It is disturbed and mostly cleared, and the terrain is relatively flat.

The location is well suited for solar energy generation, with an excellent solar resource and the Coffs Harbour to Lismore 330 kV powerline running through the north-west corner. Proximity to the existing transmission network means the clean energy can be supplied to grid faster and without requiring development of new high voltage transmission lines.

Planning & assessment

Utility-scale solar farms in NSW are considered State Significant Development and assessed by the NSW Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure (DPHI).

1. Site selection and preliminary investigations ✓
2. Initial concept and consultation ✓
3. Scoping Report submitted to the former NSW Department of Planning and Environment (DPE) ✓
4. Secretary's Environmental Assessment Requirements (SEARs) for the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) issued by DPE ✓
5. Referral to the Australian Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW) for review under the Commonwealth *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act). ✓
6. Determination by DCCEEW – controlled action (ref 2023/09641) ✓
7. Studies, assessments, design — **WE ARE HERE**
8. Design completed, finalising EIS for lodgment
9. Development application (DA) and EIS lodged with DPHI (formerly DPE)
10. DA and EIS on exhibition for public comment
11. Responses to submissions and requests for additional information (if required)
12. Assessment by DPHI
13. DPHI assessment report and recommendation
14. Determination by DCCEEW

Findings to date

The ecological assessment work is being done by ecologists and specialist teams, and has involved field studies and surveys across multiple seasons as well as targeted investigations for key species.

Seasonal and targeted surveys for threatened species of flora, nocturnal birds, diurnal birds, amphibians, reptiles, mammals and microbats, have been completed over the 10 months from April 2023 to January 2024.

To date, no threatened flora species have been detected during targeted surveys. Threatened fauna species detected within the project area but outside of the development footprint include the Barking Owl and the Squirrel Glider. A species of microbat, the Southern Myotis, has also been found near the farm dams.

As more information about the site has become available, the project's design has been refined and modified accordingly. Work to date has focused on avoiding areas of the highest biodiversity value and maintaining connectivity. This has resulted in design changes to minimise impacts on the highest quality areas of habitat and complete avoidance of wetland vegetation associated with a key threatened ecological community in the southern part of the site.

Detailed and targeted surveys for Koalas and Emus have found no evidence or recording of either species within the site area. It is acknowledged however that they have been recorded nearby and the site contains suitable habitat so it is possible that they frequent the area occasionally.

Significant numbers of cane toads have been observed within the dams and along riparian areas throughout the site. This presents an opportunity to improve the area's habitat values. Removal of these dams and cane toad eradication/mitigation will have a significant positive impact to the area.

Ark Energy also proposes to develop and manage a 30 metre wide Biodiversity Connectivity Corridor along the northern boundary of the project area, to improve connectivity in key areas.

The BDAR including details of all the ecology work undertaken for the assessment will be available when the EIS is placed on public exhibition by the DPHI.

Prior to any construction Ark Energy will also develop and implement a Biodiversity Management Plan for the corridor and other site vegetation including site preparation, planting, plant replacement, watering, weed control and monitoring.

Environmentally responsible development

Avoiding and minimising ecological impacts is an important focus during the planning and assessment phase. Ark Energy's approach is to:

- Iterate the project design as more information becomes available, to avoid and minimise environmental impacts to the maximum extent achievable.
- Consult with ecology stakeholders and workshop solutions where required.
- Find workable compromises with meaningful benefit.
- Invest and collaborate on strategies and commitments for repair such as rehabilitation of the initial construction disturbance.
- Develop strategic environmental offsets where required, with tailored management regimes such as for fire management and weed control, to improve habitat values.
- Focus on nature positive outcomes.

More information

Tel - 1800 731 296

Email - info@richmondvalleysolar.com.au

Newsletters – register at **arkenergy.com.au/mailing-list-details** for email news, or to receive newsletters by post, send us your postal address and a request to be added to the mail (post) list.

Website - richmondvalleysolar.com.au or scan the QR code right

Scan QR code to visit the project website