



THE GREAT Land Demand

Aligning Australia's land agents in the renewable energy boom

BY TOM EVERITT

Consider the following scenario: An international multibillion-dollar company proposes a new development, and as part of this project, it must obtain rights over a number of private properties in remote Australia. They casually allocate \$80,000,000 for it, and there is no Plan B — no land, no project.

They hand one of the team members the keys to the ute, the property list, the paperwork, the proverbial checkbook and most importantly, the responsibility to uphold (even improve) their mammoth reputation which they've, to date, spent decades and countless dollars on establishing.

This "land agent/acquisition lead/landholder liaison officer/land access officer" (we have many terms) makes their way to the town where these landholders reside, who historically have never been more informed, connected and agile in forming opposition groups. In a way, the fate of this currently volatile project and the company's reputation is in this lucky individual's hands.

How many years' experience and minimum qualifications might you expect this person is formally expected to hold? Australia's current answer: zero.



Down Under we're known to be one of the most resource-abundant countries in the world. We're also lucky enough to have a good amount of wind and sun out here too. Our land is ripe for renewable energy harvesting, yet our industry's education and regulations are still emerging. We've certainly taken learnings from areas like Queensland which saw a coal seam gas boom starting in the mid-'90s, and elsewhere around the country we've picked up many best practices and talent from this relatively mature fossil fuel energy industry to implement in our growing renewables industry.

Furthermore, we see a scrambling of community engagement consultants trumpeting the importance of industry social license and ensuring communities benefit, support and ultimately accept these projects. Communities at-large are obviously extremely important with such projects, yet to date, we have no real consideration to the consistent and best-practice approach to working with the individual landholders who we need to work with to secure land rights to "host" (term in quotations, given the controversy in even using that term!) these projects on their own farms for decades or even forever.

Your average punter may not give this separation a second thought, assuming that directly affected landholders fall into the classification of their community — the same community who might merely drive past these completed projects on the actual landholder's property every once in a while. While impacted communities and landholders are both very important project stakeholders, they both face very different impacts and legislative engagement requirements and therefore must absolutely be considered and treated separately.

While there are dedicated and experienced landholder engagement professionals in our industry, the role itself has grown from a niche role, where it might've been someone within a project team speaking to landholders in addition to their main day job. However, with the rise of new state Ombudsmen, Land Access Codes of Practice and Conduct and new legislation for energy companies accessing land, gone are the days where companies can just send anyone out from the office who got the short straw or "has the gift of the gab." Not to mention, a National Energy Infrastructure Commissioner overseeing industry best practice, releasing a sobering and detailed report with a number of recommendations (including training).

Many of these compliance measures have been established not from the push for renewables but as outcomes from what has happened to date in our industry; we hear stories of "cowboy" developers, and even middlemen, on land-selling options, saying anything they need to have landholders provide land tenure options. We hear of compensation unfairly applied, using an array of agreements ranging from strict confidentiality clause inclusions, dividing communities by having landholders needing to hide what they could have on their land from neighbours and friends. as well as little regard to how these confidential interactions are recorded — if they are at all — which must be captured and handled in line with company privacy policies. Combine these issues with the aggressive

transition to net-zero and no formal education on how to do this work, and we foresee a long and bumpy ride on our road to renewables.

We are, however, in our early days of formalising our approach to education in this field of work. To get the ball rolling on this educational piece, since August 2023, I've been developing a national accreditation for a "Course in Landholder Liaison Officer Services" which looks to provide the baseline knowledge and role expectations for people currently working in this space and to support the need to bring more people into this growing market. The 4-day course, delivered through the Australian Renewables Academy, comes from consulting the industry's biggest stakeholders such as landholders affected by projects, farming associations, legal firms representing both landholders and projects, Australia's Energy Infrastructure Commissioner, experienced landholder liaison personnel, various levels of Government, industry bodies, companies and developers across Australia.

This course looks to bring the following benefits to the industry:

- Competency-assessed and accredited Landholder Liaison representatives, so landholders, regulators and employers can expect representatives are properly qualified to undertake this work
- Better landholder relationships with projects, in turn leading to stronger social licence and ultimately more approvals
- Addressing the shortage of experienced personnel needed for this work as their demand continues to increase
- Huge opportunities to create jobs and retrain people working in regional and remote areas who upon completing this course would be qualified to join the quickly growing amount of energy and linear infrastructure projects around the country

To be able to facilitate or transfer land via private sale, a real estate agent must be qualified and a registered member of an association. To even be a buyer's advocate — which holds some similarities to a Landholder Liaison role — requires minimum training. We also know in many other countries overseas there are strict training, licensing, experience and compliance requirements to work in this field. It only makes sense that Australia starts to follow suit. 🌟



Tom Everitt is the director of TDC Services and holds more than 15 years' experience in the field of landholder engagement. He is currently leading a land agent team securing land approvals for a proposed overhead transmission line, as well as providing landholder engagement advisory support to Victoria's government agency developing renewable transmission infrastructure.

