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 electricity 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 the ecological and biodiversity impacts of the development.

An aim of the project will be to achieve net gains 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

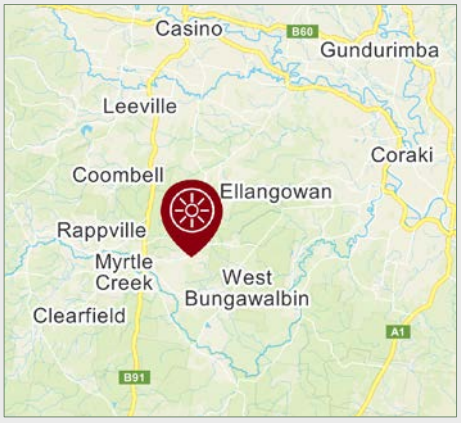
Comprehensive and rigorous assessment of the project's potential ecological impacts is required by both the New South Wales and Australian Governments.

A detailed Biodiversity Development Assessment Report (BDAR) is required by the NSW Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure (DPHI) for the project's Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). The requirements for the BDAR are outlined in the project's Planning Secretary's Environmental Assessment Requirements (SEARs).

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). The Commonwealth's assessment requirements are available from the EPBC Act Public Portal (Number 2023/09641) - epbcpublicportal.awe.gov.au –and must also be addressed by the BDAR.

The BDAR outlines biodiversity impacts, proposed regimes for avoiding, minimising, managing and reporting impacts, and offset measures. The assessment will be done by the DPHI under the bilateral agreement between the NSW and Commonwealth Governments, and DPHI will provide a recommendation report to DCCEEW for its final determination.

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. Planning 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 ✓
8. Finalising EIS for lodgment ✓
9. Development application (DA) and EIS lodged with DPHI (formerly DPE) ✓
10. DA and EIS on exhibition — **WE ARE HERE**
11. Responses to submissions and requests for additional information (if required)
12. Assessment by DPHI
13. DPHI assessment report and recommendation
14. Final determination by DCCEEW

Biodiversity assessment findings

The ecological assessment work has been done by ecologists and specialist teams and 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, were conducted between April 2023 and January 2024.

No threatened flora species have been detected during targeted surveys.

Avifauna species found to use parts of the development area are the Square-tailed kite and Grey-crowned babbler. Species found to utilise the project area outside of the development footprint are the Barking Owl and Squirrel Glider. Several species of microbats were also detected in the project area. Detailed and targeted surveys for Koalas and Emus were also undertaken and found no evidence or recording of either species within the project 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.

As more information about the site became available, the project's design was refined and modified accordingly. Refinements focused on avoiding areas of the highest biodiversity value and maintaining connectivity. This 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.

The residual impacts from a relatively small area of unavoidable clearing will require environmental offsets. A plan will be developed and may involve the establishment of biodiversity stewardship sites.

Significant numbers of cane toads have also been observed within the dams and along riparian areas throughout the site. The project has proposed management to mitigate or eliminate cane toads, to improve the area's habitat values.

The project also proposes to introduce a new 30-metre wide biodiversity corridor along the northern border of the project area. It will be planted with a variety of native species and improve connectivity between the Ellangowan and Bungawalbin State Forests.

The BDAR is available online from the Richmond Valley Solar Farm page in the NSW Government's Major Projects website - www.planningportal.nsw.gov.au/major-projects/projects/richmond-valley-solar-farm

Or to download the BDAR directly scan the QR code right.

Biodiversity Management Plan

Prior to construction Ark Energy will develop and implement a Biodiversity Management Plan (BMP). The BMP will include measures to protect, manage, and monitor vegetation and fauna habitats, control invasive species such as cane toads, as well as addressing species selection and planting of the biodiversity corridor.

Further details of the commitments can be found in the BDAR. The BMP will be reviewed and approved by NSW Biodiversity Conservation and Science (BCS) prior to construction.

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