Landscape character & visual impact assessment

347 Dangarsleigh Road, Armidale, NSW

Petersons Solar Farm

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Document Details & History

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The report has been prepared using information supplied by the client and other stakeholders. All care is taken to ensure the accuracy and veracity of this information, however, no responsibility is accepted for the interpretation of that information by end users.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this report is to assess the landscape character and visual impacts of a proposed solar farm located at Armidale.

The scope of this report is to evaluate the potential landscape character and visual impacts. To achieve this end the report addresses:

- the location and physical characteristics of the site on which the works are proposed,
- the character or the surrounding landscape and the visual catchment within which the proposed works may be of significance,
- potential impacts on the landscape, viewpoints and receivers located within the visual catchment, and
- means to avoid or mitigate potential impacts.

2. Methodology

Impacts on the visual and scenic amenity of the proposed Petersons Solar Farm have been assessed using the RMS guideline *Environmental Impact Assessment Practice Note – Guideline for Landscape Character and Visual Impact Assessment* (EIA-N04 Version 2-0 released on 28 March 2013). Details of methodology are given below.

A site inspection of the location of the proposed works and the surrounding area took place in September 2019. The visual catchment, the context of the site of the proposed works and viewpoints were identified at this time. Land uses and characteristics of the environment such as topography, vegetation, design of neighbouring buildings and any heritage values of any significant sites in the vicinity of the proposed solar farm were noted and the capacity of the area to absorb physical change is assessed.

Development plans for the solar farm have been reviewed and the likely impacts on landscape character identified. This is determined by the sensitivity of the landscape to physical change and the magnitude, or relative size and scale, of the works.

The visual significance of the site to viewpoints and receivers within the visual catchment is described in terms of proximity to the site, landscape character, the composition of views and the sensitivity to change that will affect scenic values. The visual impacts that will be experienced by each receiver are

identified and evaluated in terms of the sensitivity of each receiver to change and the magnitude of that change in terms of the proposed works.

The impacts are calculated and ranked according to negligible, low, moderate or high impact based on the following matrix (sourced from the RMS *Guideline for Landscape Character and Visual Impact Assessment).*

Table 1: Landscape character and visual impact grading matrix. Source: RMS Guideline for Landscape Character and Visual Impact Assessment, 2013

Landscape character and visual impact grading matrix					
	Magnitude				
Sensitivity		High	Moderate	Low	Negligible
	High	High impact	High-moderate	Moderate	Negligible
	Moderate	High-moderate	Moderate	Moderate-low	Negligible
	Low	Moderate	Moderate-low	Low	Negligible
	Negligible	Negligible	Negligible	Negligible	Negligible

The findings of the landscape character and visual impact assessments are given below. Recommendations as to refinements of the development plans to avoid or mitigate significant landscape and visual impacts are made if necessary.

3. Proposed works

ITP (Development) Pty Ltd proposes to develop a solar farm and ancillary facilities with an AC output of 5.0MW at 347 Dangarsleigh Road, Armidale, NSW. The site is located approximately 4 kilometres south-east of the town centre of Armidale and is an irregular shape with a total area of 100.5 hectares. The proposed development would occupy approximately 13.7 hectares of the total site. The array is proposed to be placed within a section along the northern edge of Lot 494 DP 66672.

There are proposed to be 16,000 solar modules installed on 200 mounting structures running north to south. There is approximately 6 metres spacing between each row. Each row of PV modules will rotate to track the sun across the sky from east to west each day. The hub height of each tracker is 1.7 metres with the peak of the modules reaching an approximate height of 2.5 metres when the array is fully tilted to 60 degrees from horizontal, i.e. in the early morning and late evening.

Two 2.5MW AC inverter stations and a transformer will be installed at the solar farm. These inverters are to be located within the array and are each mounted on a 6 metre long skid. Each of these inverter stations incorporate high and medium voltage switchgear. Each will connect by way of underground cables to connect to the 22kV feeder line that transects the development site within an easement to inject power to the electricity grid at Galloway Zone Substation.

The solar modules are to be enclosed within a chain mesh steel security fence topped with three rows of barbed wire to a height of 2.1 metres. The fence is to be setback 23.2 metres from the northern boundary and 13.1 metres from the western boundary and surrounding the array. Solar arrays are to be setback a further 10 metres from the security fence on all sides. The development site is ringed by a hawthorn hedge around the perimeter of the property which provides privacy screening from public places such as Dangarsleigh Road. The hedge varies from 3.5 metres to 8.0 metres in height.

The location of the proposed solar farm is shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: The location of the proposed solar farm

4. Description of the landscape

The character of the landscape near the site of Petersons Solar Farm is predominantly an open modified agricultural landscape that has been sculpted by farming. It is gently undulating with some remnant vegetation along road reserves and steeps sections of land. A number of creeks traverse the landscape that flow into Commissioners Waters and Dumaresq Creek.

The site itself is rural and located south-east of the township of Armidale. Rural living and farm dwellings dot the hills surrounding an open modified landscape characterised by rural activities/structures and some infrastructure development such as a waste management facility. Photographs provided below illustrate the site and surrounding area. The landscape is assessed to have medium sensitivity to change. Elements of existing landscape character are described in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Landscape character in the vicinity of the development site

Item	Description
Land use	The development site is zoned RU4 Primary Production Small Lots. A compartment of partially subdivided R5 Large Lot Residential zoned land is located to the west of the rail line with a swath of vegetated land zoned E3 Environmental Management running north-south through the centre of the rural living area. Land to the north is zoned IN1 General Industrial, RU4 and E4 Environmental Living.
Structures	The site is occupied by Peterson's Guest House and Winery. Farm structures associated with the property are sited to the east and south of the development footprint, however, there are no structures in the vicinity of the footprint. Structures within the vicinity of the site comprise scattered rural farm and rural lifestyle dwellings set within primary production land uses.
Topography	The development site and land in the vicinity of the proposed solar farm is flat with intermittent drainage lines. There is a gentle to moderate slope towards the north from the guest house. The site is surrounded by low undulating hills. A significant landform feature known as Arthurs Seat is located to the south.
Vegetation	The site has been cleared in the past for agricultural use such as grazing and it has been cleared of most vegetation. A stand of eucalypts remain to the south of the development footprint The site has a sparse surface cover of exotic pasture grasses and common weeds. The Hawthorn Hedge lines the boundary of the property to the north and west of the development footprint. Neighbouring properties are sparsely vegetated.
Infrastructure	Armidale waste management facility is located north-west of the site off Long Swamp Road. A rail line, formerly known as the Main North line, runs north-south to the west of the site. Dangarsleigh Road is a local distributor road collecting traffic from smaller local roads to the south of Armidale. An 11kV power line runs across the property to the south of the development footprint which feeds into the Galloway Zone substation.

Photographs of the landscape in the vicinity of the development site are provided below.

Plate 1: Looking north-west from the homestead

Plate 2: Looking west from near the development footprint

Plate 3: Looking south towards Arthurs Seat

Plate 4: Looking east across Dangarsleigh Road and the rail line towards the development site

5. Assessment of impacts on landscape character

The development site has a dry appearance as does much of the farmland south of Armidale due to intense agricultural use, lack of native vegetation and recent drought conditions. The area south of the township is a predominantly open modified agricultural landscape, however, commercial development north of Roseneath Lane, the rail line and the waste facility contribute to a landscape that is partially industrial.

Local roads, the rail line, farmland and vegetation separate the site from recently-developed rural living properties to the west and south and to the residences to the north along Roseneath Lane. The development footprint will not be visible from Arthurs Seat and would be obscured by topography to the farm properties east of Dangarsleigh Road.

The sensitivity of private property to landscape change would be moderate given the distance separation. The sensitivity of public roads would be moderate to high tempered by the Hawthorn Hedge even when devoid of leaf during winter. The magnitude of the project and impact on landscape character is also considered to be moderate to high for private property and moderate for public roads.

Given that the character of the area is essentially rural comprising a mix of land uses, the solar farm would merge with other structures over time as a rural use suited to the varied and complex landscape.

6. The visual catchment

The visual impact of a solar farm depends on the scale and type of infrastructure, the prominence and topography of the site relative to the surrounding environment, vegetation, and any proposed or existing screening measures to reduce visibility of the site. Some potential viewpoints may not have a clear line of sight towards the solar farm because of significant existing features such as built structures and vegetation.

The visual catchment of a new development is usually defined by an area within 2 kilometres of the site from which the works may be visible. The greater the distance from the development site the less clear is the view of the solar farm and the ability to distinguish the type of land use and the actual composition of materials diminishes with distance.

This visual assessment considers residential areas, public roads and the airport that have a direct line of sight to the development footprint. The site itself is cleared and there are no existing structures in the development area that would screen the site. However, the undulating slope of neighbouring land and

the hawthorn hedge along the northern and western boundaries provides screening from those directions. Residences, public areas and infrastructure assets that do not have a direct line of sight due to the presence of structures or vegetation are not considered. Commercial and industrial development are not considered sensitive receivers in terms of visual impact.

The visual catchment and land areas encompassing sensitive receivers (viewpoints) are shown in Figure 1 below. The black arrows represent broad viewpoints from clusters of receivers. Photomontages that indicate the visibility of the panel arrays from each of these viewpoints are attached.

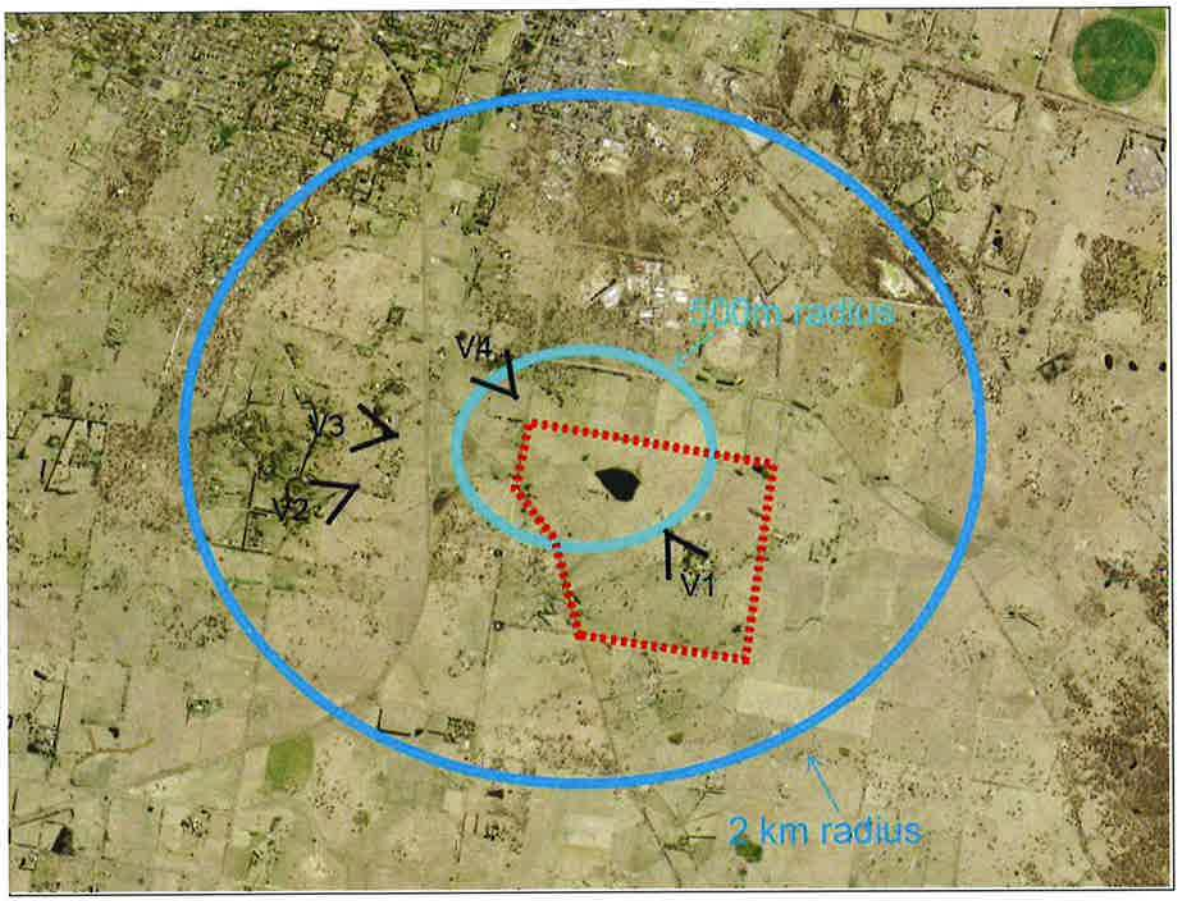

Figure 1: The visual catchment. Source: SIX Maps

There are 41 dwellings and commercial properties as well as five public roads and a railway line within the 2 kilometre radius of the development area. There is one dwelling within a 500 metre radius of the development area which is (OP1) to the north of the development area. The separation distances from each dwelling to the nearest point of the development area are given in Table 5. The solar panels would be visible from public roads such as Roseneath Lane, Seaton Street, Simmons Road and Old Gostwyck Road and the railway line but screened by the hawthorn hedge from Dangarsleigh Road, and

topography from Lucas Lane and Old Swamp Road. Visual impacts on commercial properties are generally considered negligible.

The sensitivity of some neighbouring dwellings to landscape change is moderate to high given the existing modified landscape, distance separation of the development area and topography. The sensitivity would decrease with distance so that visibility of the solar farm to dwellings and other structures beyond 2 kilometres outside the visual catchment would be negligible. The sensitivity of public places to landscape change would be high for Dangarsleigh Road and moderate where the place is elevated such as Simmons Road and Old Gostwyck Road and there are unobstructed views of the development area. Distance separation, vegetation on intervening land and topography mitigates that sensitivity for other road routes which are assessed to be low to negligible.

7. Assessment of visual impacts

Table 5 below indicates the magnitude of the proposed solar farm in terms of the visual change in the landscape and proximity to the viewpoint, and the degree of sensitivity based on the quality of the view, whether the site is clearly visible or obscured by landform or vegetation, the direction and composition of the view, and how sensitive the view is to changes in the landscape that will result from the proposed development.

A rating is then given based on magnitude and sensitivity using the landscape character and visual impact grading matrix.

Table 5: Viewpoint impacts

Viewpoint	Location relative to solar farm	Comment	Magnitude	Sensitivity	Rating
OP1 Residence	500 north	Partially screened by private and roadside vegetation	Moderate	High	High-moderate
OP2 Commercial	890m north	Partially screened by private and roadside vegetation	Negligible	Negligible	Negligible
OP3 Commercial	900m north	Partially screened by private and roadside vegetation	Negligible	Negligible	Negligible
OP4 Commercial	970m north	Partially screened by private and roadside vegetation	Negligible	Negligible	Negligible
OP5 Residence	1.6km north	Screened by vegetation and distance separation	Low	Low	Low
OP6 Residence	1.8km north-west	Remotely visible but obscured by distance separation	Low	Moderate	Moderate-Low

Viewpoint	Location relative to solar farm	Comment	Magnitude	Sensitivity	Rating
OP7 Residence	1.5km north-west	Remotely visible but obscured by distance separation	Low	Moderate	Moderate-Low
OP8 Residence	1.3km north-west	Remotely visible but obscured by distance separation	Low	Moderate	Moderate-Low
OP9 Residence	880m north-west	Remotely visible but obscured by distance separation	Low	Moderate	Moderate-Low
OP10 Residence	750m north-west	Remotely visible but obscured by distance separation	Low	Moderate	Moderate-Low
OP11 Residence	510m north	Partially screened by private and roadside vegetation	Moderate	High	High-moderate
OP12 Residence	2km north-west	Remotely visible but obscured by distance separation	Low	Moderate	Moderate-Low
OP13 Residence	1.4km north-west	Remotely visible but obscured by distance separation	Low	Moderate	Moderate-Low
OP14 Residence	1.2km north-west	Remotely visible but obscured by distance separation	Low	Moderate	Moderate-Low
OP15 Residence	1.6km north-west	Remotely visible but obscured by distance separation	Low	Moderate	Moderate-Low
OP16 Residence	1.2km west	Visible due to elevated position but significant distance separation	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
OP17 Residence	1.2km west	Visible due to elevated position but significant distance separation	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
OP18 Residence	1.1km west	Visible due to elevated position but significant distance separation	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
OP19 Residence	1km west	Visible due to elevated position but significant distance separation	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
OP20 Residence	1.4km west	Visible due to elevated position but significant distance separation	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
OP21 Residence	1.7km north-west	Remotely visible but obscured by distance separation	Low	Moderate	Moderate-Low
OP22 Residence	1.4km west	Visible due to elevated position but significant distance separation	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
OP23 Residence	1.5km west	Visible due to elevated position but significant distance separation	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
OP24 Residence	960m west	Visible due to elevated position but some obscurity due to distance separation	Moderate	High	High-moderate
OP25 Residence	830m west	Visible due to elevated position but some obscurity due to distance separation	Moderate	High	High-moderate
OP26 Residence	710m south-west	Partially visible but screened by hawthorn	Low	Moderate	Moderate-Low

Viewpoint	Location relative to solar farm	Comment	Magnitude	Sensitivity	Rating
		hedge and topography			
OP27 Residence	1.1km south-west	Visible due to elevated position but significant distance separation	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
OP28 Residence	960m south-west	Partially visible but screened by hawthorn hedge and topography	Low	Moderate	Moderate-Low
OP29 Residence	1.2km east	Not visible due to topography	Low	Low	Low
OP30 Residence	720m south	Significant screening by mature vegetation and outbuildings, in same ownership	Low	High	Moderate
OP31 Residence	850m south	Not visible due to topography	Negligible	Low	Negligible
OP32 Residence	1km south	Not visible due to topography	Negligible	Low	Negligible
OP33 Residence	900m south-east	Not visible due to topography	Negligible	Low	Negligible
OP34 Residence, commercial	1.2km east	Not visible due to topography	Negligible	Low	Negligible
OP35 Residence	1.5km south	Not visible due to topography	Negligible	Low	Negligible
OP36 Residence	1.5km south	Not visible due to topography	Negligible	Low	Negligible
OP37 Residence	1.5km east	Not visible due to topography	Negligible	Low	Negligible
OP38 Residence	1.6km east	Not visible due to topography	Negligible	Low	Negligible
OP39 Residence	1.5km east	Not visible due to topography	Negligible	Low	Negligible
OP40 Residence	1.3km east	Not visible due to topography	Negligible	Low	Negligible
OP41 Commercial	1.2km north-east	Partially visible from landfill site	Negligible	Negligible	Negligible
Dangarsleigh Road	west	Effective screening by hawthorn hedge	Moderate	High	High-moderate
Long Swamp Road	east	Not visible due to topography	Negligible	Negligible	Negligible
Railway	west	Glimpses from moving trains amongst a diversified environment	Low	Low	Low
Roseneath Lane	north	Partially screened by hawthorn hedge and private vegetation	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
Seaton Street	North	Partially screened by hawthorn hedge, roadside vegetation and topography	Low	Low	Low
Simmons Road & Old Gostwyck Road	South-east	Overlooks the development from elevated positions	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
Lucas Lane	East	Not visible due to topography	Negligible	Negligible	Negligible

The visual impact of the proposed works is assessed to range from negligible to high-moderate for the residential viewpoints identified in this assessment. The solar farm would be marginally visible to

dwellings in close proximity along Roseneath Lane due to the presence of mature vegetation and the hawthorn hedge, and there would be distant views of the development from elevated viewpoints along Simmons Road and Old Gostwyck Road. Distance separation, topography and the effective screening provided by the hawthorn hedge and roadside vegetation would assist to mitigate the impact on dwellings to the east, south, south-west, south-east and north-west. Generally, roadside vegetation and the sloping undulating topography of the land within a two kilometre radius would serve to minimize or mitigate visual impacts to most observation points.

These impacts are considered acceptable given the nature of the proposed development and that it will contribute to renewable energy generation. It is expected that acceptance of and adaptation to change will occur within a relatively short space of time following completion of works. The rural landscape to the south-east of Armidale has already been compromised by subdivision and development of rural lifestyle dwellings and, significantly, the waste management facility which is located on an elevated south-facing site in the vicinity of the development area.

The development site is ringed by a hawthorn hedge around the perimeter of the property. The hedge varies from 3.5 metres to 8.0 metres in height. It is considered that landscaping of the site after installation of the panel arrays is not necessary as the planting of trees within the property would not provide any additional screening benefits. Adjoining properties to the north along Roseneath Road and rural lifestyle properties to the west overlook the development area from higher ground, however, additional landscaping plantings would not provide an enhanced visual screen to these properties due to their elevation.

8. Assessment against planning principles

The Land and Environment Court consistently applies a set of planning principles derived from the case *Tenacity Consulting v Warringah* [2004] NSWLEC 140 when considering the acceptability of the impact of a proposed development on views enjoyed from private property in the vicinity of that development. These planning principles are addressed below in relation to the proposed Petersons Solar Farm.

Impact on private property

Step 1: The views to be affected

The solar farm would be marginally visible to dwellings in close proximity along Roseneath Lane due to the presence of mature vegetation and the hawthorn hedge, and there would be distant views of the development from elevated viewpoints along Simmons Road and Old Gostwyck Road. The view

enjoyed from these properties is one of a mixed and complex rural landscape with each element dispersed across farmland.

Step 2: From what part of the property the views are obtained

District landscape views are from dwellings, yards and access roads. Private property has not been accessed during preparation of this assessment, however, the parts of the properties that obtain views would vary depending upon the orientation of each dwelling and positioning relative to topography.

Step 3: The extent of the impact

Given that the rural landscape is open and expansive, the scale of the solar farm within that landscape is limited and accounts for only a small area within the landscape. The extent of the impact is therefore considered minimal, even for the occupants of Peterson's Guest House. This is demonstrated by the photomontages in particular from viewpoints 2 and 3.

Step 4: The reasonableness of the proposal that is causing the impact

The proposed solar farm is a project that is suited to the rural location. The property is a working farm and the production of solar energy is an activity that is mandated by *SEPP (Infrastructure)* as permissible in a rural location. The development will contribute to the viability of other farm operations, be compatible with those operations and enable to the property to continue to be productive. A solar farm is considered a reasonable land use at Petersons property.

Impact on the public domain

Similarly, the case *Rose Bay Marina Pty Ltd V Woollahra Municipal Council and Anor* [2013] NSWLEC 1046 established planning principles to be considered when assessing the impact of a development on the public domain. The process must account for reasonable development expectations as well as the enjoyment of members of the public of outlooks from public places.

Step 1: The nature and scope of existing views

Views from the public domain towards the development site are predominantly from local roads and to a lesser extent from the Main North rail line. These views are across an open but modified and complex rural landscape. Views into the development site from Dangarsleigh Road are screened by the Hawthorn Hedge surrounding the property to a varying extent during the year. The site is fully concealed when that hedge is in full leaf during summer and substantially obscured during winter when the exotic

deciduous trees lose leaves. Views from local roads over the landscape are expansive and no individual element of the landscape captures attention.

Step 2: The locations from which the potentially interrupted view is enjoyed

The views are potentially interrupted from local roads on high ground such as Old Gostwyck Road and Simmons Road and smaller roads to the west and south of Petersons Guest House. The location is partially visible to Dangarsleigh Road although motorists travel past the site at relatively high speed. Fleeting glimpses would be available to passengers of trains travelling the Main North Line.

Step 3: The extent of the obstruction at each relevant location

The photomontages from viewpoints 2 and 3 indicate the extent of view obstruction from higher elevated roads. There are no landscape features obstructed by the solar farm other than the earth beneath the arrays as the views across the site are from higher elevations. The extent of obstruction to Dangarsleigh Road and the rail line are negligible.

Step 4: The intensity of public use of those locations where that enjoyment will be obscured

The local roads are used to access rural living properties and are of low intensity of use. Dangarsleigh Road is a collector road with moderate use of an estimated 600 vehicle movements per day. The rail line is used infrequently.

Step 5: Whether or not there is any document that identifies the importance of the view

There is no strategic plan of Armidale Regional Council or the NSW Government that identifies the importance of the view. It is not mapped as a scenic landscape or as visually sensitive land in *Armidale Dumaresq LEP 2012*.

In .summary, assessment against the planning principles established by the NSW Land and Environment Court finds that the potential impacts of the proposed solar farm on views from both private property and the public domain are acceptable. It is important to note that all development has a visual impact, irrespective of the size or scale of that development.

The planning principles are not predicated on a position that a landowner or occupant has a proprietary right to retain all or part of the views enjoyed from their land. The Court has acknowledged that even entire view loss is reasonable in certain circumstances (Lindsay Taylor Lawyers, November 2015). In

this case there is no view loss, the impact is a change to the view – a new element within a complex and varied landscape that is likely to merge with and add interest to that landscape.

9. Conclusion and recommendations

The landscape to the south-east of Armidale is one that has been modified by human activity associated with the agricultural industry. It is characterised by a mix of farming, rural uses, rural lifestyle properties, a waste management facility and public roads.

The impact of the proposed Petersons Solar Farm on landscape character has been assessed to be moderate based on magnitude of works and the sensitivity to change of surrounding properties. The works would be partially visible to motorists travelling along Dangarsleigh Road northbound on approach from the south but the hawthorn hedge would provide effective screening particularly during spring and summer when in leaf. There are also distant views towards the site from elevated positions along Simmons Road and Old Gostwyck Road and from the railway. The diversified character of the landscape would go some way towards distracting motorists and train passengers, and roadside vegetation would provide effective screening at lower levels along these roads. There would be views across the development from roads to the north, Roseneath Lane and Seaton Street, but roadside vegetation and landscaping on private properties would provide partial screening. Undulating topography would screen the development to roads to the east and south.

The visual impact of the proposed works is assessed to range from negligible to high-moderate for the residential viewpoints identified in this assessment. The solar farm would be marginally visible to dwellings in close proximity along Roseneath Lane due to the presence of mature vegetation and the hawthorn hedge, and there would be distant views of the development from elevated viewpoints along Simmons Road and Old Gostwyck Road. Distance separation, topography and the effective screening provided by the hawthorn hedge and roadside vegetation would assist to mitigate the impact on dwellings to the east, south, south-west, south-east and north-west. Generally, roadside vegetation and the sloping undulating topography of the land within a two kilometre radius would serve to minimize or mitigate visual impacts to most observation points including for motorists travelling along Dangarsleigh Road.

Given the expansiveness of the landscape it is expected that acceptance of and adaptation to change will occur within a relatively short space of time following completion of works. The impacts on landscape character and visual amenity are considered acceptable given that the facility will contribute to renewable energy generation.

The following recommendations are made to reduce or minimise impacts on landscape character and the views from private properties and public places.

Construction phase

To minimise visual impacts during the construction phase it is recommended that stockpiling of materials and car parking be located to the centre east of the location of panel arrays.

Operational phase

Given that the development site is ringed by a hawthorn hedge around the perimeter of the property with a height ranging from 3.5 metres to 8.0, it is considered that landscaping of the site after installation of the panel arrays is not necessary as the planting of trees within the property would not provide any additional screening benefits metres. The hedge provides privacy screening from public places such as Dangarsleigh Road. Adjoining properties to the north along Roseneath Road and rural lifestyle properties to the west overlook the development area from higher ground, however, additional landscaping plantings would not provide ah enhanced visual screen to these properties.

No mitigation measures are recommended.

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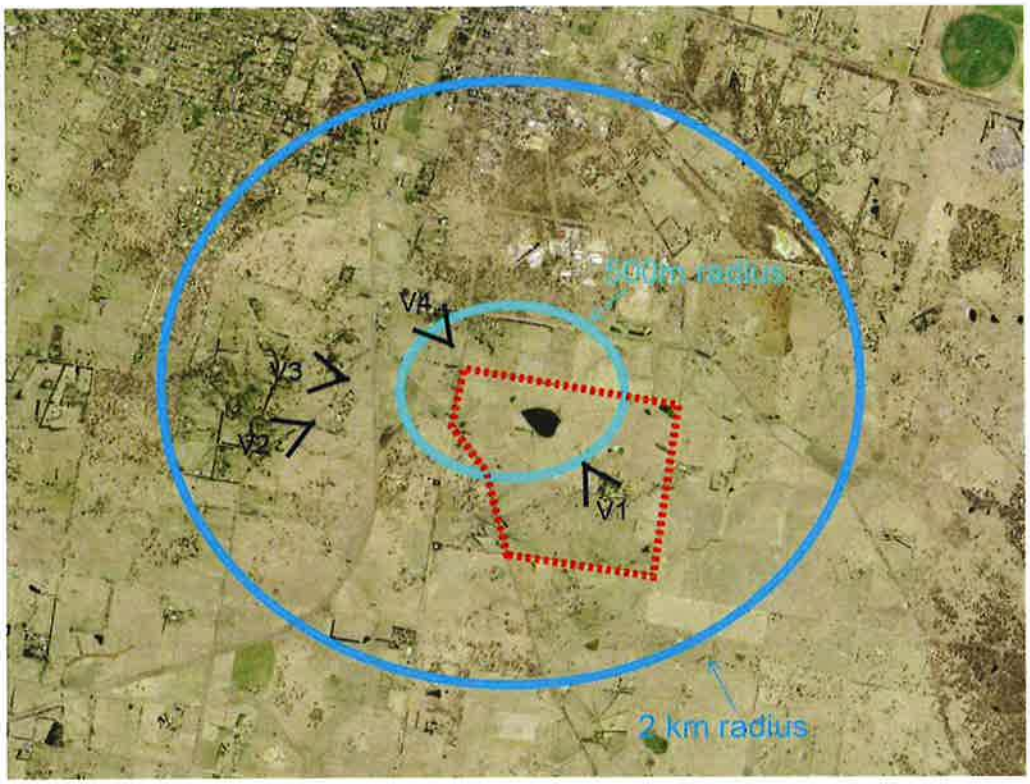
ATTACHMENT – PHOTOMONTAGES

PETERSONS SOLAR FARM



Viewpoints

Viewpoint 1 – prior to development

Viewpoint 1 – after development

Viewpoint 2 – before development

Viewpoint 2 – after development

Viewpoint 3 – before development

Viewpoint 3 – after development

Viewpoint 4 – before development

Viewpoint 4 – after development