

2025 consultation

Submission type	Upload
Submitter	Riverina and Murray Joint Organisation
Response ID	E25

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11 July 2025

Ms Meg McDonald

Chair of the NSW Net Zero Commission

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Dear Ms McDonald

Riverina and Murray Joint Organisation Recommendations to the NSW Net Zero Commission

The Riverina and Murray Joint Organisation (RAMJO) appreciates the opportunity to share its knowledge and commentary to this milestone Net Zero Consultation Paper. Our submission seeks to support NSW Government Net Zero Commission to address the challenges anthropogenic change climate has and will have on our region.

Introduction

Representing the eleven rural and regional councils across southern New South Wales of:

- Albury City Council
- Balranald Shire Council
- Berrigan Shire Council
- Edward River Council
- Federation Council
- Griffith City Council
- Leeton Shire Council
- Murray River Council
- Murrumbidgee Council
- Narrandera Shire Council
- Wentworth Shire Council

RAMJO operates as a statutory entity under the *NSW Local Government Act 1993*, driving strategic regional planning, intergovernmental collaboration and joint delivery of key initiatives. RAMJO is home to over 152,000 residents across an expansive 80,000sq km footprint. Our region includes nationally significant agricultural and natural assets, critical infrastructure and regional economies that are highly sensitive to energy reliability, water availability and climate variability. Thus, RAMJO and its members are acutely aware of the impacts climate change is having on our environment, communities and industries.

However, the Net Zero Commission's Consultation Paper or the *NSW Governments Net Zero Plan Stage 1: 2020-2030*¹, makes little reference to the role that local governments, particularly rural and regional councils, will need to play to achieve the State's legislated emissions targets. Moreover, Joint Organisations (JOs) are not mentioned despite being purpose-built for regional coordination and collaboration, particularly on issues like energy resilience and emissions reduction. Our *Statement of Strategic Regional Priorities* can be found here² as can our 2022 Regional Energy Strategy,³ the first JO led strategy of its kind in NSW.

¹ NSW Government's Net Zero Plan Stage 1:2020-2030

² <https://www.ramjo.nsw.gov.au/>

³ RAMJO-Regional-Energy-Strategy-November-22-Web-Version.pdf

Key recommendations

As the level of government closest to communities, local councils are uniquely positioned to and will ultimately be required to drive real, measurable progress toward Net Zero. With appropriate and consistent support from the NSW Government, local government and particularly through Joint Organisations like RAMJO, can play a transformational role in delivering the State's emissions targets in the following key areas:

1. Reducing Emissions at the Local Level

Councils have direct influence over emissions through their management of infrastructure, facilities and planning functions. Targeted investment in energy efficiency, electrification and low-carbon design for both existing and future infrastructure will accelerate emissions reductions in a cost-effective, community-anchored way.

2. Advancing the Circular Economy

Local governments are at the frontline of waste and resource management. Councils can lead on circular economy strategies that reduce waste, encourage reuse and recycling and foster sustainable business practices. RAMJO councils also serve as vital educators, building public understanding and uptake of circular principles across households and industries, as well as across Net Zero more broadly.

3. Embedding Climate Adaptation in Local and Regional Planning

Councils are best placed to lead tailored, place-based climate risk assessments and adaptation strategies. Through regional collaboration, RAMJO supports councils to respond to increasing climate hazards such as drought, flood, bushfire and extreme heat.

4. Strategically Integrating Net Zero Goals via the IP&R Framework

The NSW Integrated Planning and Reporting (IP&R) Framework offers a consistent mechanism to embed climate and emissions reduction priorities across all councils. RAMJO strongly supports further alignment of Net Zero goals with Community Strategic Plans, Delivery Programs and Operational Plans, enabling councils to plan and deliver climate action in lockstep with community priorities and State Priorities. Our collaborators at The Hunter Joint Organisation has a significant body of work further explaining IP&R integration, which can be found here⁴.

5. Supporting Economic Transition and Investment in Low-Carbon Industries

Through regional economic development and workforce planning, councils can help attract and grow clean industries that support the local economy. RAMJO sees a critical role for local government in diversifying regional economies, supporting transitions and identifying infrastructure gaps that might otherwise hinder new investment. Thanks to fertile soils and extensive irrigation networks supplied by the Murray and Murrumbidgee Rivers, our region supports the large-scale production of grains such as wheat, barley, canola and rice, as well as the production of livestock farming, positioning our Region with a unique opportunity to be at the forefront of pioneering Agricultural Low-Carbon industries for NSW and the nation more broadly.

⁴ Climate Change Integrated Planning and Reporting (IP&R) Package - Hunter Joint Organisation

6. Mobilising Community Support and Local Action

Councils are trusted communicators and 'do-ers' with deep local relationships. RAMJO councils are already facilitating climate education, community-led projects and behavioural change initiatives to foster community-wide momentum toward Net Zero, which could be more effective and widespread with more targeted support from the NSW Government.

7. Delivering Practical, Place-Based Climate Action

From urban greening and shade creation to active transport infrastructure, biodiversity restoration, and sustainable coastal and waterway management, councils deliver climate action on-the-ground every day. With adequate funding and technical support, this work can be scaled significantly to reduce emissions and build climate resilience at the local level.

8. Regional Equity in Energy Security

Climate change and energy poverty disproportionately affect rural areas. A fair transition must consider geographic, financial and capacity-based disparities and provide tailored support to ensure rural communities are not left behind. In particular, the RAMJO region continues to experience high levels of energy unreliability, significant infrastructure deficits and growing inequity in the benefits received from large-scale renewable investments such as the South-West Renewable Energy Zone (SWREZ). RAMJO councils struggle to attract meaningful benefit-sharing arrangements and lack adequate resourcing to adapt their operations to the energy transition.

Response to consultation questions

Question 1: What can you tell us about your experience of the impacts climate change and how can the commission seek to reflect and respond to this in its work?

Climate change is increasingly impacting agriculture in the Riverina and Murray region, manifesting in altered rainfall patterns, rising temperatures and more frequent extreme weather events. These changes are affecting the region's agricultural productivity, particularly for crops like wheat, canola and rice, which rely on specific climatic conditions and are having devastating impacts to our local economies and the wider state economy, of which the RAMJO region contributed over \$12 billion⁵ to in Gross Regional Product for the previous financial year. Aside of our regions significant economic contributions, projections indicate decreasing winter and spring rainfall, coupled with increased intensity of extreme rainfall events leading to flooding, which can damage crops and erode soils. Additionally, higher temperatures and reduced frost occurrences may disrupt crop phenology and increase evaporation rates, stressing water resources vital for irrigation-dependent farming systems.

Livestock farming is also under pressure due to climate change. Increased temperatures and altered rainfall patterns can lead to heat stress, reduced pasture quality and water shortages, affecting animal health and productivity. Moreover, the spread of pests, weeds and diseases is facilitated by warmer conditions, posing additional challenges to both crop and livestock sectors. Our region's dependence on

⁵ Economic profile | Riverina and Murray Joint Organisation | economy.id

irrigation from the Murrumbidgee and Murray Rivers further complicates an already stressed situation, as climate change impacts on water availability and quality can exacerbate existing vulnerabilities in agricultural systems.

The Net Zero Commission has the opportunity to play a critical role in supporting the RAMJO region by fostering a whole of government approach to advancing Net Zero, which can be greatly aided by engaging with the wider JO network. Further, by the Commission maintaining a strong and ongoing connection to our communities, industries and councils across this vast and diverse landscape, the Commission will be better positioned to help drive the co-design of rural and regionally appropriate policy instruments that respond to the practical realities of service delivery, capacity constraints and geographic challenges.

Question 2: What actions can the commission take to engage across the community and help drive the shifts needed for the Net Zero Transition and for the effective climate change mitigation and adaptation?

An effective Net Zero transition will only occur if communities feel engaged and empowered. RAMJO proposes:

- **Leveraging JO's as engagement hubs:** With long-standing relationships and trusted reputations, JOs can coordinate community consultation and feed findings into state-level planning, as well as continuing to support our member councils to continue engaging their communities through existing mechanisms, which could be significantly further enhanced with targeted funding and resource provision, achievable via the JO network.
- **Resourcing local climate officers:** Dedicated Net Zero Coordinators within JOs would support local climate planning, manage delivery pipelines, and coordinate grant applications. The Sustainable Councils within the NSW Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW) have worked extensively to source develop the Joint Organisation Net Zero Acceleration (JONZA) Program, sourcing much needed funding to commence this work. However, a lack of recognition of NSW Local Government in key NSW Net Zero plans, means areas within DCCEEW itself, are disempowered to advance this work in any long-term way. Further information of JONZA and RAMJO's work on this program can be found here ⁶and here⁷.
- **Funding participatory education programs:** Education campaigns tailored to diverse regional communities should promote practical changes (e.g., EV transition, home energy retrofits, climate-smart agriculture).
- **Co-investing in pilot projects:** Support demonstration projects (e.g., microgrids, EV tourism routes, water-sensitive infrastructure) that showcase feasibility and build momentum.

⁶ Joint Organisation Net Zero Acceleration - the JONZA Project - RAMJO - Riverina & Murray Joint Organisation

⁷ Net Zero Managers helping to reduce emissions across regional NSW

Question 5: What additional information and evidence should the commission consider when assessing progress towards NSW's targets for reducing net greenhouse gas emissions; and

Question 6: The speed of deployment of electricity generation and infrastructure is a key risk to emissions reduction targets. What more could be done to fast-track deployment?

Regional councils and JO's like RAMJO are central to the success of NSW's Net Zero agenda. Through long-term strategic planning, infrastructure delivery and deep connections with their communities, RAMJO councils are already laying the groundwork for low-emissions futures. However, existing measurement frameworks often overlook or understate the distinct contributions and challenges faced by rural and regional local governments. A more inclusive, place-based approach is urgently needed to ensure their efforts are recognised, supported and scaled.

To better capture and accelerate the role of regional local government in delivering NSW's Net Zero targets, RAMJO recommends that the Commission:

- **Strengthen the alignment between council planning and net zero targets** by investing in capacity-building for emissions baselining, tracking and forecasting. Councils require funding and access to consistent, scalable tools that support regional reporting, facilitate access to state funding programs and empower evidence-based decision-making. Joint Organisations are well placed to coordinate this work regionally.
- **Establish a dedicated Net Zero Investment Fund** for local government that offers interest-free loans or matched co-investment for shovel-ready projects with quantifiable emissions reduction outcomes. Many RAMJO councils face significant barriers accessing competitive grant funding and need alternative mechanisms to deliver strategic projects at scale.
- **Support the creation of Regional Revolving Energy Funds (RREFs)**, linked to Joint Organisations or regional partnerships. These funds would reinvest cost savings from council and community energy projects (e.g., lighting upgrades, solar installations) into further local emissions reduction initiatives, especially for councils with no internal Net Zero budget, of which there are many in rural and regional NSW.
- **Facilitate state-supported group procurement for regional councils** including shared Power Purchase Agreements (PPAs) and collective energy efficiency projects. Technical assistance should be embedded within Joint Organisations or the JONZA network to ensure smaller councils are not excluded due to resource or capacity constraints. RAMJO and the broader JO network has already commenced work in this space which could be accelerated with targeted NSW Government support. More information of which can be found here.⁸
- **Provide dedicated support for community-based energy initiatives** recognising that councils play a pivotal enabling role. Programs such as rooftop solar bulk buys, EV charging infrastructure,

⁸ Ordinary Council meeting held on 15/02/2024 - Item 13.09 Supply of Electricity - Regional Councils NSW Power Purchase Agreement - Attachment Powering Tomorrow-Regional Councils NSW PPA 20 December 2023

community batteries, and household electrification require coordination funding to succeed. Joint Organisations could deliver these programs across multiple LGAs for greater impact.

- **Map and coordinate the current net zero ecosystem** - including CRCs, regional innovation hubs, commercial and social enterprises—and identify opportunities to partner with councils in delivering applied solutions. Reducing fragmentation and duplication, while empowering trusted regional platforms like JOs, would strengthen delivery pathways and innovation adoption.

Further, RAMJO supports a Local Government Net Zero Dashboard co-designed with the DCCEEW, the Commission and JOs.

Additional Commentary

Energy Security in RAMJO

The soon to be released 2025 Updated RAMJO Regional Energy Strategy underscores systemic challenges:

- Rural towns experience chronic voltage instability and brownouts.
- Transmission planning does not align with RAMJO needs; there are few grid connection points.
- Large-scale renewable developments proceed without adequate community benefit sharing or local workforce involvement.

Key recommendations include:

- Developing microgrid trials in towns with weak grid performance.
- Introducing planning standards to require REZ developers to contribute to community infrastructure and housing.
- Mandating benefit-sharing contributions as a condition of project approval.

JOs as Delivery Partners

JOs are best placed to:

- Prepare regional Net Zero Implementation Plans aligned with State policy.
- Aggregate emissions data and co-design reporting dashboards.
- Coordinate regional procurement of EVs, solar, batteries, and climate-smart tech.
- Serve as liaisons between state agencies and local implementation partners.

RAMJO and the broader JO network has already led successful collective action through JONZA, regional energy procurement and the RAMJO Energy Strategy. These should be built upon, not sidelined.

Conclusion and Recommendations

RAMJO urges the Commission to formally recognise the critical role of local government and the JO network in achieving NSW's emissions targets. We recommend:

1. Embed JOs into the Commission's engagement and delivery model via MOUs and formal coordination structures.
2. Appoint a Local Government and JO Advisory Panel to guide implementation of the Net Zero Plan.

3. Resource dedicated Regional Net Zero Coordinators through each JO, with core funding secured over 4+ years.
4. Develop LGA-level emissions profiles with data-sharing protocols between DCCEE, councils and the Commission.
5. Fund rural demonstration projects that deliver emissions reductions and community benefit, co-designed by councils.
6. Mandate benefit sharing for REZ developments and ensure alignment with regional housing and infrastructure priorities.

The road to Net Zero must be inclusive, have a whole of government approach, be equitable and grounded in the lived realities of communities. RAMJO and its members stand ready to partner with the NSW Government and the Commission to ensure our region leads, not lags, in building a climate-resilient, low-emissions future.

For further information or comment, please contact the RAMJO Executive Officer directly at yvonne.lingua@ramjo.nsw.gov.au or on [REDACTED].

Sincerely



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