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SA's clean energy transition shaped by female power

'Female power' is shaping South Australia's clean energy transition and the previously male-dominated energy industry as well.

This significant industry change was on full display during a panel discussion led by Professor Ross Garnaut at the Women in Energy forum in Adelaide, hosted by ElectraNet and ZEN Energy, yesterday.

Three of South Australia's most important energy organisations – ElectraNet, the South Australian Chamber of Mines and Energy (SACOME) and the Office of Hydrogen Power SA - have women in their senior leadership positions. These key leaders spoke to a room full of people from across the energy sector about the guiding influence women have had on male-dominated politics and energy policy over the past decade.

"Women have been increasingly front and centre of South Australia's clean energy transition, shaping the solutions that the state needed following the 2016 statewide blackout," ElectraNet Chair Dr Julie Beeby said.

In 2017, while South Australia was accelerating its take up of rooftop solar, SACOME CEO Rebecca Knol alerted the government to the vital importance of storage infrastructure to 'firm' or stabilise the electricity grid.

"We developed what turned out to be a significant and influential policy document that emphasised the growing importance of storage in the energy debate and called for all political stakeholders to support storage options that would improve the reliability of intermittent renewable energy generation and supply in South Australia," Ms Knol said.

"Well before the 2017 'tweet that changed South Australia', ZEN had been advocating for the need for a big battery, a grid-scale battery," the company's Chief Financial Officer Phillipa Chen said.

"ZEN could see that if you were really going to solve South Australia's energy problem, you needed a firming capability at grid-scale, while dealing with everything else in parallel.

"We worked with the South Australian government to develop early concepts and then things accelerated beyond imagining, when Elon Musk took up Mike Cannon-Brooke's challenge to deliver a 100MW battery within 100 days."

Dr Beeby joined ElectraNet in 2023 and said the \$2.3 billion Project Energy-Connect link from South Australia to NSW is pivotal to delivering on the government's accelerated 2027 renewable energy target.

"We have made it a priority at ElectraNet to have an achievable plan in place to support South Australia's transition to 100 per cent renewable energy by 2027. We are proud to have completed construction on the South Australian component of Project EnergyConnect, which will be a transformational project for not just our state but the whole of the National Electricity Market," she said.

Nicola McFarlane, Chief Operating Officer at the Office of Hydrogen Power SA, said the next stage of the state's energy transition will see opportunities for regional South Australians.

"By investing in hydrogen and renewables, we're opening doors for job creation and industry development in regional communities," Ms McFarlane said.

Construction of a world-leading hydrogen plant at Whyalla is set to start before the end of the year.

"Harnessing our state's abundant renewable energy at the hydrogen facility will not only help us reach our 100 per cent renewables target and help stabilise the grid, it will also pave the way for the production of green steel and green iron, establishing South Australia as a hub for sustainable manufacturing," Ms McFarlane said.

The Women in Energy Forum was jointly hosted by ElectraNet and ZEN Energy at Immersive Light and Art (ILA), a social venture initiative, in Adelaide.

Media enquiries: Paul Sheridan, ZEN Energy, 0410 516 656, paul.sheridan@zenenergy.com.au