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Hunter Water flicks the switch on its largest renewable energy project

Hunter Water has completed its renewable energy initiative at Balickera Water Pump Station, receiving the first electricity from its biggest solar PV installation yet helping power the station's large pumps and other critical water supply assets.

Bringing Hunter Water's total renewable energy generation to more than 6 megawatts (MW), the groundbreaking Balickera solar farm, with a capacity of 3.1MW, marks a significant milestone in Hunter Water's commitment to sustainability and to reducing its carbon footprint.

Hunter Water Managing Director, Darren Cleary, said the project is expected to generate substantial annual savings and benefits, estimated at approximately \$700,000 per year.

"Electricity use across our operational area is one of Hunter Water's major expenses, accounting for up to 10% of our operating costs. Generating electricity from solar energy is one of several opportunities that can help reduce these costs and carbon emissions.

"As well as significantly decreasing our operational costs, this project is also an important step towards minimising our environmental impact, underscoring our dedication to creating a more sustainable future for the Lower Hunter region.

"By connecting directly into Hunter Water's existing high voltage transmission network, the power from the solar farm will supply electricity to critical assets such as Grahamstown Water Treatment Plant and Tomago borefields," Mr Cleary said.

The installation involved approximately 5,500 ground-mounted solar panels over three hectares adjacent to Balickera Pump Station, positioned in two sections on either side of the Balickera Canal.

Hunter Water undertook extensive environmental rehabilitation to accommodate the solar array, planting more than 1,500 trees, shrubs, and ground cover to offset the removal of about 70 trees from the site and reduce the visual impact of the array. Another 1,500 plants and trees are scheduled for planting in September, ensuring the project contributes positively to the local ecosystem.

"Environmental sustainability is at the core of everything we do. We've gone to great lengths to ensure that the impact of this project is minimised and that we are giving back to the environment through thoughtful and responsible practices," Mr Cleary said.

Following the tree removal, logs were transported to a nearby environmental restoration site to serve as a future habitat for native animals. The remaining removed vegetation was mulched and reused on-site for landscaping, with excess mulch stored for future use. Additionally, a small park is being re-established adjacent to the solar array, providing a space for visitors and tour groups to enjoy.

"This project is not just about renewable energy; it's about enhancing our community and environment. We are excited to welcome visitors to the new park and to share the benefits of this significant investment with the broader community."

In conjunction with this project, Hunter Water is delivering an additional 450kW of solar across three sites in Shortland, Dungog, and North Lambton, slated to be switched on in early 2025. A 450kW solar site and a 300kW battery energy storage system at Cessnock is also in the planning phase.

To learn more about Hunter Water's commitment to renewable energy head to: <https://www.hunterwater.com.au/community/major-projects-in-your-area/renewables>

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