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PROFILE

It's easier to fight climate change as a group, writes engineering student **Ben Henley**.

Solar power to the people

I GREW up in Newcastle and have always loved the place. I studied engineering at university and I'm now doing a PhD in hydrology and water resources at the University of Newcastle. I'm an active member of Climate Action Newcastle.

What are the origins of Climate Action Newcastle (CAN)?
CAN is a committed group of everyday Newcastle residents from all backgrounds who have joined together to address the single biggest issue facing humanity: climate change.

We are a community-based, non-party political group of volunteers who recognise that the world faces a crisis and we can be a part of the solution.

What is CAN trying to achieve?
Our mission is to secure a clean, energy and low-carbon future for the Hunter which will in turn contribute to a sustainable future for all. We aim to motivate and build the capacity of government, industry, business and people to take action towards a clean energy future and to achieve measurable outcomes towards the reduction of carbon emissions in our region.

How did you get involved in CAN?
I came along to one of the human signs that CAN made at the beach that said "Beyond Coal". This message summed up my attitude that we simply must look beyond coal for our stationary energy supply.

I grew up in Newcastle. I have felt increasingly guilty about the impact our city, region and

individual lifestyles have on the environment. Having watched enormous coal ships leave our port my whole life, knowing that this is at odds with our future, I felt I needed to do something.

What can just a few everyday people hope to achieve?
When we see something wrong in the world, I feel it is our obligation as citizens to stand up and speak out. CAN's achievements are many and varied. It amazes me what a group of volunteers can achieve. Take for example our Smart Energy Expo recently - we had over 700 attendees. It was a big success and a significant financial boost to local businesses doing the right thing.

A major project is CAN's bulk-buy of solar electric systems. How does this scheme work?
A discount is achieved by buying solar systems in bulk. We've had over 140 households sign up for our round one installation and now we have interest from about 150 households for round two.

We take proposals from local solar companies to supply and install the panels. We then go through a process to get people the best deal. For example, if you are eligible for the government rebate of \$6000, a basic one-kilowatt system will now cost you \$1369 fully installed through our bulk buy. It's hard to find a solar provider who will charge less than \$8000 if you were to buy it on your own.

With one kilowatt of solar panels on a sunny roof in Newcastle, you'll generate about five kilowatt hours a



day on average. If the Government implements a strong gross feed-in tariff, similar to what is in place right now in the ACT, the payback time on a one-kilowatt system in our bulk buy is about 2.2 years. After this time your solar panels will be making you money every day.

If the Government decides to introduce a weaker scheme, called a "net feed-in tariff", you'll only get paid for the electricity you don't use yourself. The payback time in that case would be six years or more with our bulk buy (or up to 15 years for a solar system installed on an individual basis).

Why not just buy accredited green power from your electricity retailer?
No argument here. Buying 100 per cent green power is a great thing to do. But by generating your own electricity, you can actually make money in the longer term. Having solar panels on your roof also makes you more aware of the electricity

you are using so you end up being far more efficient with energy. This in turn reduces the need for governments to invest in expanding our centralised electricity generation. They can get on with the real task of replacing coal-fired power with large-scale renewable energy like wind, geothermal and solar thermal power.

The response to our bulk buy shows that many Newcastle people feel gutted and powerless about the millions of tonnes of climate-destroying coal that leaves our port Hunter Valley communities and landscapes the coal industry destroys.

Ben Henley is a PhD student at the University of Newcastle.

RISE

HOME GROWN

A LARGE variety of fruits can be grown in the Hunter Region. On my 600 square metres at Lake Macquarie I grow mangoes, blueberries, grapes, passionfruit, strawberries, watermelons, rockmelons, avocados, apples, persimmons, pomegranates, olives, lemons, oranges, mandarins, peaches, figs, almonds, plums and apricots.

I now have 10 mango trees (after removing three) and six blueberry bushes, and there is still a fair bit of room for more fruit. Guavas and kiwifruit could be next.

I also have plenty of room for vegetables.

This is achieved by not having a ridiculously large house. Large houses consume enormous amounts of energy in their manufacture (called embodied energy), tend to be energy-hungry in their day-to-day operation and are often full of rooms that never get used, especially when children leave home.

The trend to build a house that takes up most of the yard is a bad and a folly, like owning a large four-wheel drive that never goes off road.

If you need more internal volume, build two storey. Don't waste space with long driveways. Barber, put the garage near the road.

If you are new to fruit growing, citrus can be a good place to start. The trees are relatively easy to manage and the fruit is always welcome.

Citrus like full sun, good drainage and regular watering. Remove any grass under the trees and mulch heavily, but keep mulch away from the trunk to avoid fungal decay collar rot.

Citrus are fairly heavy feeders, so apply organic fertiliser about four times a year.

Trace elements applied annually can do wonders. Browned orange bags are a common pest but they can be easily picked off with a gloved hand once a week, but wear eye protection as they can squirt a quite nasty substance.

An excellent book on citrus growing in Australia is Allen Gilbert's Citrus.

- Stephen Williams

FAST FACTS

DAM LEVELS	
Grahamstown Dam	95.4%
Chester Dam	97.6%
Tomago Sandbeds	100%
Ann's Bay Sandbeds	72.2%

ORGANIC FOOD CO-OP

THE not-for-profit community organisation beanstalk was established a few years ago to help connect local organic food producers and local consumers. The result is an expanding co-op, based at

local, seasonal food. The group is becoming so popular that prospective members have to sometimes go on a waiting list. You won't get watermelon in July, but you'll get

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