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IN BRIEF

News in brief: May

THE FIFTH ESTATE 1 MAY 2025



Overview:

Struggling with planning? This AI reckons it can answer your planning questions, Fast solar deployment first to be funded by Solar Sunshot.

Struggling with planning? This AI reckons it can answer your planning questions

22 May: A new planning AI bot, originally co-developed with Victoria's Yarra Ranges Council to meet its needs, is now available to local councils around the nation.

From developers and first home builders, the AI can take information submitted by users to answer planning questions, figure out what's permitted on their land based on local planning schemes, and decide whether a development needs a permit. This includes schemes on building a house, a granny flat or a deck, as well as removing trees, extending the house and renovations.

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Software solution provider myLot said the AI allows planners to focus on their core work and ease pressure on any council's planning teams that face complex demands. The developers said that software implementation will only take 2 to 3 months and has since also gone live on Mornington Peninsula Shire Council and Bayside City Council's website, and will soon launch on Boroondara City Council, Mooney Valley City Council and Sunshine Coast Council's sites.

Fast solar deployment first to be funded by Solar Sunshot

TRENDING



We're busy on Wednesday



A plan for better buildings: beyond the National Construction Code



A metro that works for western Sydney: what success looks like



Why the planners are wrong about the Inner West housing plan



Favelas and half-built, half-arsed houses will solve our housing crisis, OK?



Nikola Tesla dreamed of free electricity; what happened?



EcoJoule's pole mounted community batteries set for growth



'Now everybody cares'. Mirvac raises the bar, again – this time with industrial



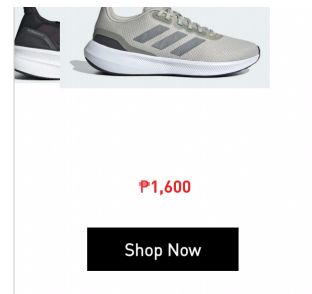
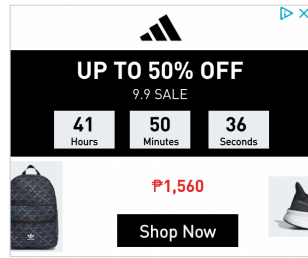
Solution for more resilient rivers is collaborative



The toxic resentments of housing

Project “Maverick” by local solar technology manufacturers 5B has been selected as the first project to receive funding from the Australian Renewable Energy Agency (ARENA)’s Solar Sunshot program.

The \$1 billion program, announced on 31 August last year, aims to fund innovation in Australia’s solar photovoltaic (PV) manufacturing industry.



The project involved a system of prefabricated, prewired solar panels that can be automatically deployed. The panels just have to be carried to the location, and the solar panels will automatically unfold and lay down on site.

ARENA said the technology has the potential to drastically speed up and scale up the roll out of solar farms while reducing costs and labour intensity and has awarded \$46 million towards the project.

Jobs news

Employee-owned architecture and engineering firm HDR has appointed **Kate Macdonald** as associate principal, defence and aviation, to bolster its expertise in the field.

Macdonald will help lead the practice in building engineering, aviation and transportation, which the firm said require “highly technical” and “high performance solutions”. She is also expected to work with the firm’s data drive design team to streamline processes and find opportunities with the nation’s defence estate and facilities projects.

Macdonald has a background of more than 20 years’ experience in delivering complex infrastructure projects in defence, aviation and transport.

Landcom appoints three new board members



NSW government developer Landcom has appointed three new non executive directors to its board of directors, **Siobhan Toohill, Kieran Pryke and Ilona** Millar for the next three years.

Toohill has spent more than 20 years leading sustainability at Stockland and later at Westpac.

Pryke has more than 30 years’ experience in financial roles across the real estate sector. This includes as chief financial officer of the GPT Group and Australand Property Group, as well as several senior finance roles within the Lendlease Group.

Millar has more than 25 years of experience in environment and climate law and finance. Millar is currently a partner in Gilbert + Tobin's banking and projects group, as well as serving on the board of the NSW Natural Resources Access Regulator and is a former Commissioner of the NSW Independent Planning Commission.

Anthony Marklund and **Jamie Conomos** have joined SLR Consulting, which has around 1000 employees along the Australian east coast, and concentrates on specialist engineering, noise and vibration issues, air quality, the transport of hazardous materials, occupational hygiene, and remediation work.

The pair previously worked at Floth, which recently closed up shop after amassing nearly 90 staff. However, sources said almost all employees had quickly found other work.



CMI says it's time to accelerate Climate Active reforms

May 19: The Carbon Market Institute has commended Parents for Climate, which launched legal action against energy provider Energy Australia for greenwashing its “go neutral” carbon offset program. The case was settled – with EA apologising to more than 400,000 Australians who signed up for the program.

CMI is now urging the government to use this case as an example to shift from carbon neutral to net zero emission reduction alignment.

[More on this here.](#)

The buyers for Aussie companies keep coming

The spate of acquisitions of Australian companies by international entities continues. Most recent is LCI Consultants, bought by French-based Artelia and Spanish Ayesa, acquiring ADP Consulting.

The LCI deal concluded in March with Artelia absorbing 300 Australian employees into its roughly 10,000 global employees spread around the world, with the Asia Pacific a major focus. The company is keen on taking up opportunities in heavy energy infrastructure but will also maintain about 40 per cent of its turnover in buildings.

ADP also, earlier this year, came under the wings of Seville-based technology and engineering firm Ayesa.



Established in 1966, the company has around 13,000 staff and will absorb 300 staff across its six offices in Australia and the UK, where recent expansion has created nearly 15 jobs in the London office.

According to sources, the attraction of Australia is its stable English speaking business environment (along with, perhaps, its Trump free politics?)

Key market sectors that appeal to the newcomers are ADP's sustainability, renewable

energy, transportation, and innovative building practices.

The WA government needs to start getting serious about net zero

In light of federal Environment Minister Murray Watts' visit to Western Australia, Curtin University Professor of Sustainability Peter Newman penned some salient words to the West Australian this week:

"The Paris Agreement requires interim targets and climate reporting on all aspects of government. States play a key role, with responsibility for power, land, transport and much more. WA remains the only state without a 2030 emissions reduction target and WA Labor's 2050 climate legislation has stalled in Parliament — which shows WA is not serious about getting on with its Paris Agreement responsibilities."

Hurry for the Banksia Awards

Nominations for the country's prestigious Banksia Awards by the Banksia Foundation are opening soon, with spots available for the NSW Sustainability Awards – Information Session on Wednesday, 21 May. The session features an impressive lineup of



- Ellis Blaikie from Bridge Housing, winner of the 2024 NSW Placemaking Award
- Jack Kensey from Hawkesbury City Council – winner of the 2024 NSW Large Business Sustainable Leadership Award
- Belinda Chellingworth – circular economy and waste consultant at BC Consulting
- Graz van Egmond – CEO of the Banksia Foundation

Murrumbidgee Council sidesteps developers for renewable energy

The Murrumbidgee Council in the Riverina region of NSW is one of the first councils to independently install off-grid public solar street lighting at the new residential development, River Red Gum estate at Darlington Point.

The council said it “side stepped” the developers and “big utility companies”, instead contracting solar lighting technology provider Leadsun Australia to provide its patented “all in one” solar light technology and installation.

The technology involves utilising LEDs, lithium batteries and wireless technology to store power for days while being remotely controlled, switches on with motion sensors and is monitored anywhere in the world.

Electric air taxis are closing in on you

California-based Joby Aviation, a company developing electric air taxis for commercial passenger service, has completed its first full transition flight from vertical to cruise flight and then back, with a licensed pilot onboard.

The ability to transition from vertical flight to horizontal flight is a key design aspect of the aircraft, “allowing it to take off and land vertically like a helicopter, while maintaining the efficiency and speed of a conventional, fixed-wing aircraft in forward flight,” the company told [Business Insiders](#).

This was seen as a milestone on its way to launching commercial services in Dubai. Since launching its prototype in 2017, its aircraft has completed more than 40,000

miles (around 64,300 kilometres) of test flights, including in New York City, Japan, and Korea.



Queensland government buckles on environment

The Crisafulli government, which moved backwards on environmental targets for the Brisbane Olympics, has now also reneged on a pre-election funding pledge to the Environmental Defenders Office, cutting its \$5000,000 commitment that funded two solicitors with specialist environment and planning law expertise.

Farmers, First Nations people and regional communities that last will no longer be able to seek free legal advice, said EDO chief executive David Morris.

He pointed to promises by Sam O'Connor, then Shadow Environment, in an email to EDO Cairns and Far North Environment Centre director Lucy Graham:

"... you can share the commitment I made to continue funding the EDO if the LNP is successful at the election this October with whoever you like!

"Queenslanders care about their local environment so landholders and communities deserve some form of access to legal advice when potential threats arise to the special places they love.

"While we will not agree with everything the EDO does, we believe the state government should continue to provide funding towards their operations just like they do with other community legal services."



See this related article: [Brisbane 2032 is no longer legally bound to be 'climate positive'. Will it still leave a green legacy?](#)

Frasers Property selling Real Utilities

May 14: Frasers Property hopes that growth in the apartment market and alongside that, demand for more embedded energy networks, will attract a buyer for its Real Utilities business that it established in 2017.

The business has around 15,000 connections across 27 sites and expects to make around \$19 million in recurring revenue by 2030, according to a note in The AFR. Its product offerings include the delivery of embedded power, hot water networks, solar and batteries, with most sites in NSW and some in Victoria and Queensland.

South Australian based Chapman Capital Partners is handling the sale. Other market activity in the sector includes Adamantem buying into Microgrid Power and Palisade Impact buying Quinbrook Infrastructure Partners' Energy Locals.

REMONDIS in buying mode

The organic recycling market continues to evolve as an alternative destination to landfill with REMONDIS Australia recently buying a majority stake in Western Australia's JD Organics, which processes organic material such as food, garden and

organic liquid wastes through various composting methods.

The composted material is supplied to retail, commercial businesses, local government and farmers.



Founder of JD Organics, Donovan Farrell will retain a minority shareholding in the company, which will be rebranded as REMONDIS GO Organics, and be based at Boonanarring, 110 kilometres north of Perth. All employees will be retained, the company’s WA general manager Chris Gusenzow said, and the business expects to soon double processing capacity to around 124,000 tonnes a year.

Stickybeak protects wild creatures

Private landholders can now upload tags and share camera trap images to protect wildlife thanks to an AI tool known as WildTracker. The tool is being used by The Tasmanian Land Conservancy has teamed up with Ionata Digital.

Dr Glen Bain, Conservation Ecologist, Tasmanian Land Conservancy, said “By automating image analysis, we can spend more time on the ground working with other landholders, implementing conservation efforts for threatened species and studying their habitats. One long-term goal is for AI to advance to the point where it can identify individual animals within a species, much like recognising faces in a crowd.

The University of Tasmania is one of the collaborators in the project.

Second hand market keeps growing

eBay Australia says the global secondhand market keeps expanding and is projected to hit sales figures of \$387 billion by 2029.

The company’s Recommerce Report shows that 92 per cent of Australian buyers says that sustainability is important to them when it comes to buying pre-loved goods.



According to Seamless more than 222,000 tonnes of clothing were sent to Australian landfills in 2023 alone.

Here’s some fun facts:

- A pre-loved dress is sold every 60 seconds and a pre-loved shirt every 90 seconds on eBay Australia
- Australian brands like Aje, Country Road, and Zimmermann are searched for every 20 seconds on eBay Australia
- There will be “pre-loved” Runway Sho as part of Fashion Week scheduled for this week

Clean airline fuels just pie in the sky

Replacing airline fuels with corn and soybeans are not a solution according to the World Resources Institute with its assessments reported in US green business publication [Trellis](#).

A report from the US on how biomass can be used to decarbonise the US economy

researchers said that as global demand for food grows, dedicating land for this purpose leads to forests and other native ecosystems being converted to agriculture, releasing additional emissions in the process.

Australian environmental ag project shortlisted in major global competition

May 12: Australia's Virtual Irrigation Academy is a finalist in what's billed as the world's biggest environmental award, the \$US2 million (\$3.115 million) Curt Bergfors Food Planet Prize.

The prize, dedicated to "driving the transition to a sustainable food system", and received more than 1000 nominations, but only six initiatives made the shortlist.

The finalists offered "science-driven scalable solutions to some of the toughest challenges in today's food systems", including cutting methane in rice production to fighting pesticide resistance, producing fertilisers from oxygen, revolutionising irrigation in low-income countries and more.

Australia's program equips smallholder farmers with smart soil sensors to help save water and increase food production of produce.

Other shortlisters include:

- USA's adaptive symbiotic technologies: uses fungal endophytes and microbes to help crops resist climate stress, cut fertiliser use, and boost yields
- Indonesia's Astungkara way: reinvents rice farming with regenerative methods that increase productivity and enhance farmer livelihoods
- Sweden's NitroCapt: a zero-emission fertiliser that uses air and plasma
- China's pride on our plates: tackles China's catering sector food waste by empowering small businesses with data driven insights and behavioural strategies
- Argentina's Semion: use plant based defences that protect yield without chemical pesticides

Winners will be revealed on 13 June.

New EV buses for Auckland

Auckland Transport (AT) has [unveiled a new fleet of 44 electric buses](#), which includes 26 double deckers. The organisation now owns and operates more than 200 electric buses, saying it hopes to "dump all diesel bus fleet" within a decade.

The new buses, including the double deckers, will run every 10 minutes on AT's WX1 Western Express service from Westgate to the city centre via the Lincoln and Te Atatū bus interchanges.

These buses will also replace the diesel buses servicing West Auckland's 11T, 11W and 12 routes.

The EVs are getting cheaper

British-founded, Chinese-owned MG cars says its new series of consumer EVs for the Australian market, the MG5's entry model Excite 49kWh, will be priced at a drive-away price of \$40,490.

According to [The Driven](#), the 49kWh (battery capacity) model has a 415-kilometre range (based on the New European Driving Cycle), while the 62kWh version pushes that to 515km (NEDC).

- For reference, the drive from Sydney to Canberra is around 287 km.

Avoided deforestation – the controversy ... again

Andrew Macintosh, former chairman of the Emissions Reduction Assurance Committee, has taken a swipe at what he said are low quality offsets around avoided deforestation, favoured by companies such as Woodside, Glencore, Beach Energy, Whitehaven Coal and Roy Hill. He told *The Australian Financial Review* this week, “These guys get carbon credits for not chopping down forests that were never going to be cleared. At the very least, the government should block the use of these credits by safeguard mechanisms facilities.”

He said they were the cheapest credits on the market precisely because they had “very low” integrity.

It’s a contentious issue, and the government banned any new such projects in 2023 after a review by Professor Ian Chubb.

Jenny Sinclair, chief scientist at Greencollar, which manages a lot of these projects, said multiple reviews had found the project to be sound.

Home Solar demand soaring

1 May: Energy technology provider Voltx has reported a 500 per cent spike in demand for solar battery storage in the past 12 months. VoltX Energy chief operating officer David Sedighi says that uptake of household battery systems is forecast to further grow 66 per cent in this quarter alone – which is on par with countries such as Germany, which saw half a million household battery installations in the last year.

Sedighi says that Australia is expected to install up to 160,000 new batteries nationwide in the next 12 months.

Student accommodation investments set to boom

According to Knight Frank’s latest update of its Australia Purpose-Built Student Accommodation report, investment volume to date this year has totalled 1.8 billion across four deals, far exceeding the \$116 million recorded in 2024.

Activities are expected to pick up further this year as investors are “increasingly targeting student accommodation” this year due to the sector being viewed favourably for having dynamics of undersupply, increasing demand and unlikelihood of demand to go down.

There are currently 6912 total beds under construction, with 2772 of those beds due for completion this year. In 2026, a further 5832 new beds are expected to reach completion.

Key themes for the sector are that barriers to entry will remain high for new investors, and more capital will be deployed to university-leased assets, the private sector, and universities will increase collaboration, there will be a repositioning of existing assets, and the exchange rate will impact international student growth.

Contracts awarded for faster Logan and Gold Coast railways

Reporting by Samantha Marshall

CIMIC Group’s CPB Contractors and UGL, as part of ActivUS Alliance, were awarded the design and pre-construction contract for the main works package on the Logan and

Gold Coast Faster Rail Project. The design process and project planning activities will begin alongside a partnership with the Queensland Department of Transport and Main Roads and Queensland Rail to complete the project ahead of the Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

The works include an upgrade from two to four rail tracks from Kuraby to Beenleigh, accessible station upgrades such as a park 'n' ride, kiss 'n' ride and bus stop upgrades, the removal of level crossings, upgraded rail systems and signalling for a European Train Control System (ETCS), modifications of the local road network with improved walking and cycling connections and an integration of the project with adjacent construction packages into the existing rail network.

Fashion: the next frontier of clean tech

Two textile-focused startups were recently awarded Bloomberg New Energy Finance (NEF)'s [Pioneer Awards](#). The research body says that the fashion industry globally valued at \$1.7 trillion is also one of the major polluters, responsible for 8 to 10 per cent of the world's greenhouse gas emissions.

Startup Circ is turning mixed-fiber fabric back into reusable raw materials, tackling the polyester and cotton blend fabric that's recently been popular due to being more durable than pure cotton, but extremely difficult to separate and recycle. The firm uses chemistry and technology to break down large polyester molecules back into their building blocks. Polyester monomers and cotton can then be purified to be reused in textiles.

Meanwhile, EverDye developed a lower impact dyeing process, allowing clothes to be dyed with room temperature water instead of the usual energy-intensive high-heat dyeing process. Other recent low impact textile firms include Galy, which grows cotton in a lab to reduce the crop's use of heavy water and fertiliser use as well as Israeli startup Algaeing, which makes biodegradable yarn and dyes out of algae.

International news: Chinese president steps up on green targets

In a recent high-level meeting organised by the UN secretary general, Chinese President Xi Jinping has [publicly confirmed](#) that all of the country's climate targets for 2035 will cover the whole economy and include greenhouse gases. The target refers to China's plans to peak emissions before 2030 and to achieve carbon neutrality on all greenhouse gases by 2060.

This was announced ahead of the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Belém.

Xi added, "As long as we enhance confidence, solidarity and cooperation, we will overcome the headwinds and steadily move forward global climate governance and all progressive endeavours of the world."

A recent *The Conversation* [article](#) noted this was a big step forward for the nation, whose previous pledge only covered carbon dioxide and did not integrate national targets into individual sectoral policies.

Xi also said that since the carbon peak and carbon neutrality goal was announced five years ago, China has built "the world's largest and fastest growing renewable energy system..." and that "no matter how the international situation changes, China's active actions to respond to climate change will not slow down."

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