

TRANSCRIPT

SELECT COMMITTEE ON VICTORIA'S RECREATIONAL NATIVE BIRD HUNTING ARRANGEMENTS

Inquiry into Victoria's Recreational Native Bird Hunting Arrangements

Sale – Monday 26 June 2023

MEMBERS

Ryan Batchelor – Chair

Michael Galea – Deputy Chair

Melina Bath

Jeff Bourman

Katherine Copsey

Bev McArthur

Evan Mulholland

Georgie Purcell

Sheena Watt

WITNESSES

Mr Trevor Williams, Victorian District President, and

Mr Mark Richards, Victorian District Secretary, Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy Union.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the representatives of the Mining and Energy Union. I will read the obligatory statement out before we start off and let you know that all evidence taken today is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act* and the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during the hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of the Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

For the Hansard record, could you please state your name and any organisation you are appearing on behalf of.

Trevor WILLIAMS: Yes. I am Trevor Williams. I am the Victorian President of the Mining and Energy Union.

Mark RICHARDS: I am Mark Richards. I am the State Secretary for the Mining and Energy Union.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much for joining us today. I might invite you to make an opening statement if you choose. Then I will introduce the committee, and we will start asking you some questions.

Trevor WILLIAMS: The Victorian Mining and Energy Union represents the industrial interests of working people in the power generation and associated mining sector. Our union has a proud history of not only improving the wages and conditions of our members, but also takes a great interest in the expectation of our members in relation to a healthy work-life balance. A healthy work-life balance in simple terms is a balance between spending time at work making a reasonable living wage and the time you spend with family and friends socialising, enjoying common interests and hobbies away from the stresses of work.

Victoria has had a proud history when it comes to access to public land for recreational activities. That principle has been supported by previous governments, whether they be Labor or Liberal. This has enabled generations of Victorians from working-class backgrounds the freedom to enjoy pastimes, including hunting and fishing. These freedoms would not be possible without access to public land and would only be available to the privileged few. Over the years we have seen a sliding decline in the standard of some of the state game reserves – how they are being managed – with poor access in a lot of cases. Hunters have reasonable expectations that tracks should be properly maintained into these areas. Our members believe hunting, fishing, camping, four-wheel driving and motorbike riding should be encouraged and supported by all governments as a healthy pastime for public land users. We would call on all governments to take a conservative approach when assessing the future of long-term held freedoms that people have had, no matter how small that group may seem.

That is basically just to give you a little bit of background. We were approached by a number of our members that were concerned about what they see as ongoing: how our public land is used and how there does not seem to be support, in a lot of cases, for recreational activities that they enjoy on that public land. So they asked us to involve ourselves and, after discussing this through our board, gave me the job of writing a short submission. That is about it for our side, unless you want to supplement it with anything, Mark?

Mark RICHARDS: I am not a shooter. I do not have a licence. I do not have any guns, never have. I am definitely in support of having the freedoms they have got continue. As Trevor mentioned, we were approached by members with a petition. We were asked to follow up. That process usually involves our members representatives, who are elected by their fellow workers, going back and talking to their individual groups, and then they come back and we have a board meeting every three months. Back in, I think it was April, we had a motion put on the table, basically for our Mining and Energy Union to follow along with what the ETU was also doing with its advocacy group for recreational activities. We moved a motion that basically resolved to

appoint our district executive, as in Trevor, to provide a submission to the select committee in regard to that. So that is how we have arrived here – from a grassroots push upwards.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much for the contribution today. I might get members of the committee to introduce themselves and then we will start asking some questions. Mrs McArthur, do you want to introduce yourself?

Bev McARTHUR: Bev McArthur, Western Victoria Region.

Evan MULHOLLAND: Evan Mulholland, Northern Metropolitan Region.

Jeff BOURMAN: Jeff Bourman, Eastern Victoria Region.

Melina BATH: Melina Bath, Eastern Victoria Region. Welcome.

Sheena WATT: Hello. Sheena Watt, Northern Metropolitan Region.

Georgie PURCELL: Georgie Purcell, Northern Victoria Region.

The CHAIR: Ryan Batchelor, Southern Metropolitan Region and Chair of the committee. I will kick off the proceedings today. Thanks very much for coming today and expressing the views of your members to the committee. It is very important to hear from you. In the course of your deliberations internally, have you done any surveys or similar of the membership to understand how many of your members you expect are active game hunters or duck hunters here in Victoria?

Mark RICHARDS: It is probably not the exact way it normally works. We will get stuff from our members, as I mentioned earlier. That kicked off a petition. From that point on, we roll it back through basically a structure that goes down to the grassroots. What I could say is that in Gippsland we would have approximately 900 members that are in the power industry and the Mining and Energy Union. We have other members outside of this region, but that is within this region. They are rough numbers. And for those that are not aware, the majority of those are shiftworkers, because power is on 24/7.

Probably the quick point I would put to that is that most shiftworkers do not work a seven-day week, so they will be on a 10-day week or cycle or something similar. The reason I raise that is that if someone was to join the footy club, they might be able to make training but they cannot make the match, or they might be able to make the match but they will not make training; therefore they will not be picked to play. It is pretty rare to find shiftworkers being involved in the football teams as such, so you usually find they are doing a lot of outdoor recreational activities. If you look in the car parks, you will see there is a majority of four-wheel drives for those such reasons. I myself worked for about 28 years in that industry representing the members, going back to health and safety – some 25 years. It is very common to have people hunt et cetera and recreational activities from dirt biking through to four-wheel driving. I do not think in my 30 years I have heard a single person ever talk about supporting the banning of any such activity.

Trevor WILLIAMS: Just if I can supplement, because our Victorian office is actually in Morwell, so our office is in the region. I have been in my present position for seven years. I was an organiser for two years, but I have been a member of the FEDFA, which was before the Mining and Energy Union, since 1985, and I have always lived in this area, so I think I have got a pretty good handle. I could not give you the exact numbers of people that hunt, fish, shoot and camp, but I would have a pretty good idea that it would be a majority of our members that would at least participate in one of those activities. I know that you primarily are looking at the arrangements for native bird hunting here, but they believe this is possibly the thin edge of the wedge for some of those activities now. So they are very interested in maintaining this freedom but also protecting the other things that they believe will become the focus of people that just currently do not agree with native bird hunting.

The CHAIR: You must have read what I wrote down here as a question. I was going to say, 'Do you think this is the thin edge of the wedge?', so you clearly do. What is that range of other activities that your members participate in? Obviously we are here talking about native bird hunting, but can you talk a bit more about what other things your members do in terms of outdoor recreation? The evidence about shiftworkers needing in

effect not independent, but activities they can organise on their own in the time that is available to them is important to them – what are those sorts of activities?

Trevor WILLIAMS: Well, Mark talked about the shiftworkers, but we also represent a large number of people that effectively work a nine-day fortnight as well. Because of where we are situated in the region, it lends itself to being able to partake of things in the natural environment, because it is just easy. I mean, in most cases, where our people live and work, they have only got to drive 15 to 20 minutes and they are in the bush, so to speak, or they are in the wetlands, so to speak, or they are at the beach, for instance. So that lends itself to them being able to participate in those type of things.

Deer hunting is very popular amongst our members. Camping, fishing in particular – I mean, our people are high-end earners, so they can afford the equipment to be able to go and do things. It is only the time that stops them from doing anything. If they have got the time, they can afford to do most things, and they are prepared to buy the equipment to do those things. All that money goes into the local community as well, because they are high-end earners and they are not scared to spend the money on the equipment that they purchase to do those activities.

The CHAIR: You mentioned in the opening statement your critique of the management of state game reserves. What more do you think government needs to do with respect to keeping game reserves up to a standard so that they can be enjoyed for outdoor recreation purposes?

Trevor WILLIAMS: Well, when I wrote this I went for a bit of a tour of just this local area, and I can really only talk about state game reserves in this area because this is primarily where most of our people are and where I generally get about a little bit. It is interesting I think that your group went into the Heart Morass, which I believe as an area of wetland is a picture, to be honest. I think you would be hard-pressed probably to get a better example. But it would have been interesting if someone had said to you, ‘Well, let’s go across the river to Dowd Morass’, for instance, where you have not got the Field and Game – and others – that have got a fair bit of control about how that is groomed and how the roads and the tracks are maintained, because if you went down to the riverside there, just across the river, in places it is impassable. Now, that has been a state game reserve for a long time.

You would say the same about Jack Smith Lake and the same about Lake Coleman, all those areas where there is not a lot of involvement with the Field and Game as far as maintaining things. The tracks are almost impassable most of the time. And that is what I said in my initial spiel: that if you are a law-abiding duck hunter, for instance, there should be an expectation that you can get into a state game reserve where you can actually do that activity, but there are places at the moment that are impassable. They are tracks that have been there since they have been state game reserves, and they have slowly gotten worse. I mean, I am 64 years old and I probably have been hunting ducks and other game for 50 years, and I have seen the slow decline. But it is speeding up. I mean, when I did my tour I also went to Jack Smith Lake, which currently does not have water in it. That is another mismanaged wetland. There is an area there they call the roller. There is a road around the end of the roller that is almost impassable. Unless you have – and I have got a fairly well-equipped LandCruiser – a vehicle as good as the one I have got, you would not get through.

The CHAIR: All right. Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thank you very much, gentlemen. Thank you for being here, and thank you for being part of a force, a union, that has kept the lights on for 100-plus years. I have a particular interest in public land as well; it is a tiny portfolio of mine. I am interested in, following the questions from the Chair – whoever we are, we have assets; we need to maintain them or they are going to degrade either for the value or for the environment, in this case Jack Smith Lake and Lake Coleman et cetera. If you were in the chair here and you were going to advise this committee, what would you want us to do in reporting to government as a recommendation around that?

Trevor WILLIAMS: Well, in relation to access – and I temper all this with I am not an expert on any of this – what I hear when I talk to people out in the field, particularly some of the people that are very active in Field and Game, is that when they approach the government departments and say, ‘Look, we’ve got an announcement that there’s going to be a duck season this year. The track into such and such is in an atrocious state. It’s been unkept all through the year. Something needs to be done so people can get into that area,’ there

seems to be a lot of red tape about how you actually go about that. I would have thought it would be quite simple – that there would be some sort of budget there. The tracks should be maintained most of the year, because other than what we are interested in, we hear about people wanting to go in there and look at the birds and the bugs and all the other things associated with those wetlands. If duck hunters cannot get in there, neither can birdwatchers.

I think it is terribly mismanaged. I do not understand the red tape behind it. You are only talking about maintaining tracks with a bit of gravel and a few machines. I mean, you are not talking about building a freeway. I just cannot understand how things have been allowed to deteriorate over the years, and that is also before you even touch on invasive weeds, vermin and all the other things that are not managed as well in most of those places. I am not a scientist, but I would have thought they would have a fairly big impact on the success rate of ducklings and other native birds when they are more vulnerable, when they are nesting and stuff. I think even people from the other side of the argument should also be concerned about the mismanagement and the access problems in state game reserves.

Melina BATH: Thank you.

Mark RICHARDS: If possible, I might supplement something about that, specifically Lake Coleman. In 2019 the upper house Member for Eastern Victoria Jane Garrett had conversations with people about access to Lake Coleman. Because I do not know if anyone is aware, but in 2019, I think it was, or prior to 2019 – there is an area by Lake Coleman which borders the game reserve, I believe. People have been camping there for 80-plus years, from my understanding from all the people we talked to. I talked to different departments to find out what was going on. Apparently Gippsland Water decided there might have been an insurance issue for them, so they just put signs up – with zero consultation with anyone – that said, ‘No camping in this area.’ So you can still drive there but not camp. The outcome of that was: after speaking with Jane Garrett, she suggested I contact the people at DELWP, and the person that I remember talking to was – I will not name them, but basically they were the person that banned the netting on the Gippsland Lakes so they could help the fish area recover. To put it bluntly, the conversation from them was, ‘Well, I got very little thanks for all that work involving banning the Gippsland Lakes netting. I don’t want to do it.’

Melina BATH: They were not going to put their hand up.

Mark RICHARDS: They worked for DELWP and were not interested in doing anything to follow up with Gippsland Water about this issue. So then I contacted the CEO, I think, or someone very similar at what at the time would have been Tasmanian Basslink – I will not name that exact position, but it was very close. He was in the executive team of that and used to be an executive with Gippsland Water. He said he saw no problem with doing it. Obviously he needed to talk to DELWP to make that conversation happen, and basically nothing happened. So I went down to have a look at the road in my wife’s Ford Focus. Well, I can tell you I stopped.

Melina BATH: It did not turn out well.

Mark RICHARDS: I turned down the road and I stopped. I had to walk about half the way, but there were potholes there and parts of cars – plastic bits torn off on the road there. There was zero maintenance of that area, and that sort of surprised me because it was not the wet season or anything particularly. So there is a complete lack of either funding or management from DELWP in terms of access. This is camping access essentially, but you could not even drive there to visit the place.

Melina BATH: Thanks, Mr Richards. I have got 6 minutes and have lots of questions. It is important to hear those case studies, so thank you very much. The thin edge of the wedge – do you feel as a union that if duck hunting is banned, it will be, ‘Right, it’s banned, decision made’ – not by this inquiry necessarily, but it is made. Do you feel that there will be the next thing banned and the next thing? Is that part of your thought process or your workers’ thought processes around the thin edge of the wedge?

Trevor WILLIAMS: Absolutely. I think deer hunting would come next – fishing, for instance. I mean, with some of the arguments we hear, fishing would come under scrutiny as well. When you go to the other end of the spectrum, there are some views that you should not be up in the bush at all. You should not be camping and you should not be driving on those tracks at all, you should not walk off the road and all those types of things.

Melina BATH: You could get fined for it, potentially.

Trevor WILLIAMS: Yes. We do think, as you say, it is the thin edge of the wedge. I mean, what are people in these regions going to do? If you lose all those activities and there is a void created, what do you fill it with?

Melina BATH: Thank you. We asked the RSPCA about their position on fishing, and they actually could not say outright, 'We don't want it banned'; they went, 'We'll go back and look at our policy.'

The CHAIR: All right. Thanks, Ms Bath. Mr Bourman.

Jeff BOURMAN: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, gentlemen. I believe the union had an important vote last week and it all went the way you guys wanted it to. You are now a union in your own right, so congratulations.

Trevor WILLIAMS: I think it has got a little bit of process to go.

Jeff BOURMAN: Yes, but the vote is done.

Trevor WILLIAMS: But the vote is done.

Jeff BOURMAN: That is always the hard bit, believe me. Particularly in this job, I know that.

Trevor WILLIAMS: Over 98 per cent.

Jeff BOURMAN: Yes, that is excellent. Your union represents workers in the power industry, amongst other industries of course. I know you are a statewide union, but you are based in Morwell. Is it fair to say a large proportion of your membership lives and works in the Latrobe Valley?

Mark RICHARDS: Yes.

Trevor WILLIAMS: Yes, definitely.

Jeff BOURMAN: The valley has faced significant changes with employment going back to the mid-90s that have been turbocharged, for want of a better word, over the last six years, not only with the closure of Hazelwood but with other industries such as the Carter Holt Harvey mill going at the same time. We are also seeing the Opal paper in Maryvale problem, and obviously the wider native timber industry will be gone at the end of this year. Can I invite you to talk about what you think is a growing importance of outdoor recreation, such as duck hunting, to your members in light of the increasingly precarious work situation in this area?

Trevor WILLIAMS: I am not sure how I would answer. I mean, some of the observations I have made and some of the people who have come to me about this issue have been very upset about it because they can see all the other stuff coming around them. Like, for instance, their employment – you know, the future of their employment. There seems to be at this stage nothing on the horizon that is going to fill the closure they had in the power industry. I think Australian Paper is under significant pressure now since the banning of native logging. I think that their time is limited – you would have to be very nervous there. Then you have got all the timber workers. I mean, how the timber workers have been affected – without getting completely off the track – where there was supposed to be an eight-year transition, which some of us thought was a bit short anyway to try and deal with it, then for that to be tried to be condensed into six months in any real, meaningful way.

You know the issues that that is going to cause when we have fires and stuff in the future. I mean, who is going to do that work in the future? You talk about state game reserves not being properly managed – when there is a major fire, of course you have got the departments to do it, but a major part of that work is done by the contractors that have the equipment and the manpower and the knowledge to be able to do that work. When that industry is finished, that is going to be another issue. One day there will be another committee like this that will be sitting here talking about what went wrong because we were not properly managing the bush, so to speak, as far as access tracks if there is a fire – you know, controlled burns and a whole range of things. I actually own a property up in East Gippsland, and there was a fire that came within 400 metres of our place. When they pushed the track – and it was a gazetted track, it was a gazetted road – wider so they could take trucks down there, they let it just grow back and it was not rehabilitated. So even those types of things are currently not being managed properly. I do not know whether that has answered – it has probably answered part of your question but not all.

Jeff BOURMAN: We kind of did go a bit wide there –

The CHAIR: A bit wider than our remit. Let us try to bring it back.

Trevor WILLIAMS: You got me on the soapbox.

Jeff BOURMAN: I agree with you, yes.

Melina BATH: I like the soapbox.

Jeff BOURMAN: Well, it is one of my soapboxes too. At the risk of getting the Chair's wrath for going into it, trees grow, and trees – you can cut down trees, you can grow trees. I do not get it, but no-one asked me.

The CHAIR: Let us get back to the birds.

Mark RICHARDS: Mr Bourman, you did not mention Yallourn closing in 2028. That is another –

Jeff BOURMAN: No, well, yes, that is right.

Mark RICHARDS: say 1000 jobs plus some contractors around that as well. So with the economy, I mean, I hate to say it – I do not shoot, so I did not know. But I have certainly heard during this process that, with things like shops having trouble to stock – maybe you could talk further about that, with the shops.

Trevor WILLIAMS: I mean, if I was asked a question –

Jeff BOURMAN: If I may interrupt actually – I am really on limited time. The Chair has also asked me to get back to the thing, but I think maybe we will have a chat about this later.

Your submission was prepared at the behest of concerned members. How does that come about? Is it like that someone picks up the phone to their delegate? Is it done over lunch? How did a bunch of concerned unionists get you guys to put in a submission and appear here?

Trevor WILLIAMS: I can give you a basic outline. Some of our members saw that the ETU had taken some action down in the city, and so I was approached by some of our members. They said to me, 'Well look, the ETU's getting involved in this. We think this is an important issue to us.' The union has got a history of involving itself in things that are important to its members, so I said, 'Well look, really you need to come to me with some sort of petition with a number of people to make it legitimate that you are approaching the union about an important issue.' So the group of people got themselves together. They took up the position basically directing me because that is what they do. When you take up a position, you direct your executive to do things. They directed the executive to take issues. It was a bit wider than just native duck hunting. It was about the thin edge of the wedge as well and how they think the other activities are vulnerable. That actually then went to our board. The board voted on it as an important issue to our members, and then I was directed to write the submission and do whatever else I had to to try and influence the decision-makers. And I have got to tell you we have written to every parliamentarian. You would have got something. All the members had something sent to them by us. So that is basically how that went. I hope that sort of –

Mark RICHARDS: It is very rare that that happens, so obviously they are pretty fired up about it.

Jeff BOURMAN: But I am just saying it was not Trevor and Mark going off privately on their own, so that is the bottom line. Thank you, gentlemen.

Trevor WILLIAMS: I would not be in my job very long if that was the way I conducted myself.

Jeff BOURMAN: I am out of time. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Ms Watt.

Sheena WATT: Thank you for being here today but also for the work you have done, clearly for a very engaged membership on this. I actually wanted to talk more about the worker impacts of the season and seasonal changes. It is probably the first submission that I have read that talks to working people as hunters and their experience of hunting. I particularly note on page 3 you have set out a series of recommendations about

notice periods and annual leave times and other things. Can you talk to me about: what is the average notice period that your members need to give to take leave? That is the question. Because when there are last-minute changes, that would certainly affect your members and their ability to engage in this. I am keen to understand a very fundamental working person's experience of participating in this.

Trevor WILLIAMS: Look, as you can imagine in the power industry, we have positions that have to be filled or things just do not happen and then the lights flicker or may even go out. Sometimes you are also competing with others that want leave and that might be doing something else, so sometimes you might have to plan months ahead. Basically, as an employee you put in an application for leave and it is either granted or it is not.

What our members told me this time around is that because there was such a short time frame – everybody expected there would be an announcement earlier, and I think that is pretty common and that was the expectation of most – a lot of our people did not get the opportunity to get their leave in early enough, so they were competing against others and they were not able to participate.

If I can also expand, when I talk about the participation of working people, I do not know where the recommendation came for the Wednesday start. We absolutely do not agree with the Wednesday start. People that are not shiftworkers, that are nine-day fortnight workers, can attend the opening of the season, for instance, without having to be granted leave. If you have a Wednesday start, most of the nine-day fortnight people are not going to be able to participate, because they will not be able to be freed up – pretty much the majority of those people. A lot of the people that work for the earthworks groups in the Latrobe Valley are nine-day fortnight workers, and I know that a lot of them do attend the duck opening.

Mark RICHARDS: Plus family members.

Trevor WILLIAMS: Including family members of course.

Sheena WATT: Have members expressed to you that participating in the opening weekend is really important to them?

Trevor WILLIAMS: It is. Putting aside the duck shooting per se and the pursuit of hunting native game, there is a big cultural side of the opening. People that do not participate do not realise the cultural side of it, where generations of families get together along with friends that you may only see a couple of times a year, because that is where you have got a common interest. People go away, they camp the weekend, they sit around the fire and they talk about openings of old and all the funny stories that might happen. So there is a big cultural thing, and when you bring the next generations in, you are also bringing them into a group that have been doing it for a long time, who have got a healthy respect for the game that they hunt and a healthy respect for the areas that they camp and do those activities in. They pass that attitude on to the younger generations that are coming in.

Sheena WATT: One of your other recommendations there was around the starting time –

Trevor WILLIAMS: Yes.

Sheena WATT: and about starting half an hour after sunrise.

Trevor WILLIAMS: Yes.

Sheena WATT: Were there worker impacts due to the changed time that you can talk to us about, or is that just a preference?

Trevor WILLIAMS: No. I am not painting myself as an expert in any way, but that is more the ideal time in the morning to be hunting. It is more conducive –

Sheena WATT: It is not that it impacted people wanting to, say, do a shoot and then go start their shift?

Trevor WILLIAMS: No.

Sheena WATT: It was not about that?

Trevor WILLIAMS: Look, to be honest, no. It is more about it being a more ideal time of the day to do it. It is already light enough to be able to adequately identify the waterfowl that you are shooting, but it is generally around the time where the ducks are more moving before they go off. If it is later in the day, they might go out and sit on the surf, for instance, or out in the middle of Lake Wellington. It is more about it diminishing the opportunity to actually hunt the game birds.

Sheena WATT: Okay, it is more around that.

Trevor WILLIAMS: It is a bit of a mixture.

Sheena WATT: Yes. Are there any other things about how working people in particular have been impacted by the changes? You talked about missing out because of having to apply for annual leave. I thought that perhaps the start time had affected folks that might want to do a shoot before starting their shift – that is something that we have heard I think in a previous hearing – but that is not actually the rationale behind that one.

Trevor WILLIAMS: No.

Sheena WATT: Are there any other particular working people's perspectives on that that you wanted to share that we might not hear from other witnesses before the inquiry?

Trevor WILLIAMS: It is also the length and the timing of the season as well. I am pretty sure I said in my submission that wherever possible it should be at least a three-month season. People that are shiftworkers and workers cannot go every weekend; you do have other things that you have to participate in. But what we also said is it should always include the Easter break, because that gives people an opportunity to spend a bit more time in the wetlands to be able to do those activities. It is about the timing and including enough public holidays so you can actually participate. For instance, because quail season and duck season run concurrently, if you cut it down to a month, then if you actually want to participate in both, one is competing against the other. Then you are left with having to make the choice: do I go and hunt quail or do I hunt ducks? Because it is not practical.

Sheena WATT: That is actually my time. I am so sorry to cut you short. That is my time, but thank you very much for appearing.

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, gentlemen. What a fantastic job you obviously do representing your membership. I want to also go to this thin edge of the wedge concept, because clearly you are operating on the thin edge of the wedge, having your mining and power industry decimated and then the timber industry as well. Is hunting seen as a working man's sport?

Mark RICHARDS: Definitely.

Trevor WILLIAMS: Well, it is in this country, by my observation. I have hunted overseas and I am well aware, through what I read, about what happens over there. That has been the great thing, particularly in Victoria and other states where they make public land available to everybody, because if you are from the working class, you are less likely to own a farm or own a large tract of land or be in control of a stretch of river. So it really has lent itself to the working man in Victoria. I think that is a thing that governments should be proud of – particularly, I would have thought, the Labor government, for instance. I understand that might offend some around the table, but –

Bev McARTHUR: No, the Labor government should be standing up for the working man.

Trevor WILLIAMS: I would have thought that they would be more mindful that they are making that available to the everyday Joe that goes to work instead of people that are more privileged. That is not a shot at people who are more privileged – I mean, I actually do own a property where I can hunt as well, but there are many people that do not, and a lot of our members do not privately own land.

Bev McARTHUR: So you do not imagine that your members that go duck shooting will end up birdwatching.

Trevor WILLIAMS: No.

Bev McARTHUR: No. Well, that is the end of that. What about fishing? If we are going to start down this track, surely fishing is cruel, because that is the reason why the opponents to duck hunting want it banned – because it is cruel and they are decimating numbers. So why isn't fishing under threat, do you think, or will it be? Are you frightened of that?

Trevor WILLIAMS: It is not at the fore at this stage as far as being under threat, but it is the view of the people that I have spoken to and I represent that at the moment you have got people that have got a view that you should not hunt native game birds, but they believe that if that was to be stopped and we lost the freedom to be able to do that, that same group will turn their attention to something else, and that will be fishing, deer hunting and maybe camping and all of that. When we say the thin edge of the wedge, we do not believe that the people that are currently saying, 'You shouldn't hunt ducks, you shouldn't hunt quail,' are going to stop there if they get their way. They will just turn their focus to the next thing that our people enjoy. There will be a lot of people for whom hunting game may not float their boat, but they might be keen fisherman. Some of those people are starting to become concerned about it.

Bev McARTHUR: Yes, getting nervous.

Trevor WILLIAMS: And our people do not believe that it is right to take away the freedom that people have basically had forever just because the numbers of the people that do that have come down to the vulnerable few and people think, through political interference, that they are really not going to feel the brunt of that if they interfere in that.

Bev McARTHUR: So this is an issue about freedom and culture as well, would you say?

Trevor WILLIAMS: Absolutely.

Bev McARTHUR: We heard from an ethnic group who are very passionate about hunting, and that was how they started in their own home country. It is a very important cultural tradition as well. Is that how your workers see it as well – it is something, as you say, handed down through generations and something that they feel passionately about?

Mark RICHARDS: I have had relatives that have hunted deer, and they would always put meat in the freezer for people that did not even hunt. I know we received some a long time back, many, many decades ago. I would say with fishing, as you did originally ask, you can fish off a pier, but if you ever go out in a boat, you will get a lot more fish, and boats are a lot dearer than it is to go hunting for meat with deer. I do think it is the thin end of the wedge eventually. There are some people that say that fish have feelings as well. We might not be there in 10 years, but I think eventually in 20, 50, 30 years, who knows, if we start progressing down that path. I mean, there are people who say fish have nerves, so I do think it will be on the agenda one day.

Bev McARTHUR: I am sure that is quite prevalent. They are all sentient beings. I have heard that people think plants are sentient beings as well. Anyway, do you think that the fabulous Heart Morass wetlands here would have existed without the volunteer contribution of Field and Game?

Trevor WILLIAMS: Well, no. If you had time to go and tour some of the other wetlands around the place that do not have that involvement through Field and Game – I believe there are others involved, so I am not sure it is Field and Game completely, but I think they do the lion's share there – I have made the statement that they are being mismanaged. I think that would tell you, I mean, that there is anecdotal proof there of that.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, we have got this wonderful document here that does give us the before and after picture of what it was like, just a salt plain, so it is a miraculous provision, a water feature that obviously encourages birdlife. Do you ever see any of the people that oppose duck shooting doing anything, going out and looking after the environment, in those areas where the tracks are impassable? You know, the activists that do not support duck shooting – do they go and volunteer to do all this work?

Trevor WILLIAMS: Certainly not in this area. I mean, I cannot speak for other areas. Truthfully, I cannot speak for other areas, because I do not go into other areas. But from what I have seen over my last 50 years here, I cannot actually remember seeing anybody, bar duck hunters, going down there and planting trees and

dealing with the vermin, fixing tracks and all that. I have not seen it. I cannot say definitively it does not happen, because I cannot. But I do not see much evidence of it.

Bev McARTHUR: Fifty years of anecdotal evidence will do me. Thank you.

The CHAIR: All right. Thank you, Mrs McArthur. Ms Purcell.

Georgie PURCELL: Thank you, Chair. Thanks for appearing today. Mr Richards, I know you said in your opening comments that you are not a duck shooter. Are you a duck shooter, Mr Williams?

Trevor WILLIAMS: Yes, I am. I thought I had made that pretty clear so far.

Georgie PURCELL: Yes. I just wanted to –

Bev McARTHUR: Yes, we heard.

Georgie PURCELL: Thank you, Mrs McArthur. So, Mrs McArthur asked you questions around whether you think this is a working man's activity. I know myself as a former union official for many years, as I am sure that you know as well, that women hold the union movement together in Victoria. The average union member in this state is a woman over 50, and that is also coincidentally the demographic that has consistently shown support for a ban on duck shooting across this state. Do you think that your views are representative of the broader union movement and working people or are more of a niche issue on behalf of your membership?

Trevor WILLIAMS: Well, it is certainly the view of our members, and it is certainly the view of the group that they refer to as BIG, which is basically in my understanding the ETU; the construction general branch of the CFMEU, which is one of our divisions; the metalworkers; and the plumbers – so I think that actually throws a fairly wide net. All of those people have the same view as us, and they have actually put their – sorry, and the Transport Workers Union – bona fides on the table.

Georgie PURCELL: Sorry just to interrupt you there – I just acknowledge that they are largely male-dominated unions. I am talking about what the average union member is in this state, which is a woman over 50. Do you think that your view is representative of the broader union movement?

Trevor WILLIAMS: Well, I cannot speak for the other ones, I can only speak for the unions that have involved themselves. The other unions I cannot speak for.

Georgie PURCELL: You spoke about this being the thin end of the wedge in terms of recreational pursuits. New South Wales, Western Australia and Queensland have all banned duck shooting. To put it in context, Western Australia banned duck shooting the year that I was born, and we still have not done that in Victoria. There is no evidence of any changes to outdoor recreational pursuits in those states. I am just wondering where you are getting the information from that it could be different here.

Trevor WILLIAMS: Well, it is done in a different way, because I have actually shot in New South Wales, and you can legally shoot ducks in New South Wales.

Georgie PURCELL: Yes, they are total –

The CHAIR: Let the witness finish, please.

Trevor WILLIAMS: What happens is: if you have recreational shooting that is managed similarly to how we manage it now in Victoria, all that happens there is that goes, and you do it on destruction permits and mitigation permits and people do it in a de-facto-type way in the other states. And I know for a fact that they shoot – about the only one I am not aware of at this stage is I do not know what they do in Western Australia; I have not hunted in Western Australia. But I have hunted in every other state in Australia, even where there currently is not a duck season per se. But duck hunting still goes on and it is generally done by people that treat it as a recreation, but it is done under mitigation permits, under agricultural circumstances.

Georgie PURCELL: We actually have that same system here in Victoria. It is called an authority to control wildlife permit. It is similar to a mitigation permit, and that is not what this inquiry is considering – but thank you for that perspective.

You are talking a lot about public land, but we have heard consistently throughout this inquiry that the majority of duck shooting is actually happening on private land here in Victoria. So, can you please explain to me the issues with access to public land, specifically for native bird hunting, that you have received feedback on – not fishing, camping or four-wheel driving.

Trevor WILLIAMS: Well, it is mainly about access. I mean, like I said in my opening, it should be reasonable for people if it is still a legal activity that is sanctioned by the state law, and to do it, there should be an expectation that you should be able to get into those places. I would make the same observation if you were a birdwatcher – if you want to go and watch birds in those areas, you should be able to get into those areas as well. There are tracks there, and some have been gazetted roads over the years. They should be maintained by the departments that are responsible. That is the observation and the concern we have. It is mismanaged, but not for just duck hunters; it is mismanaged for anybody that wants to use that public land.

Georgie PURCELL: So a big issue that we have been looking into is concern with conservation and sustainability when it comes to native bird shooting. Is this a concern of yours as a union, particularly the population decline of native birds?

Trevor WILLIAMS: Well, like I said in my opening and in my submission, I do not profess to be a scientific expert as far as duck populations and that. I would not be able to quote you any figures –

Georgie PURCELL: Sorry, I have just got 1 minute left. Do you mind if I just – it relates to your answer just then. In your submission you actually said that you believe that decisions being made by the government are not based on scientific information, and you have just said that you are not a scientist. I guess I am keen to hear what your view on the science is.

Trevor WILLIAMS: My view on it is that over the years when duck shooting was done, what will I say – without the political interference, they relied on evidence from science, from bona fide people that can give those facts and figures, and over the years duck hunters have accepted that there might be a shorter season and there might be a reduced bag limit. I think there might have been over the couple of years where there was no duck hunting at all, but it was based on science. We do not believe that it is now being based on science, because we believe the recommendations that were made by the experts and the stakeholders this year were that there should have been a full season and there should have been a 10-bag limit. That did not happen. So we see that as political interference that is not based on science, and that is what I say in my thing – a lot of decisions, we believe and our members believe, have not been made on the science like it had been in the past and like it should have been and is supposed to be.

The CHAIR: All right.

Mark RICHARDS: Referring to the four-bag limit –

Georgie PURCELL: Thank you.

Trevor WILLIAMS: I do not know whether that answered it adequately.

The CHAIR: Mr Mulholland.

Evan MULHOLLAND: Thank you. Thanks for your submission and for appearing today. We certainly appreciate it. It was quite insightful. You note in your submission the importance of a work-life balance, and we have seen I think in the past decade a fantastic and increasing awareness of men's mental health and a focus on that from governments around the country with things like expanding and funding of men's sheds and things like that. How important a role do you think native bird hunting has to play in that focus on men's mental health and that work-life balance?

Mark RICHARDS: I will just quickly jump in and say there that as a union we have maintained that we have done reduced working weeks. We have always been a keen believer in work-life balance. Whenever a company pushes people to do a lot of overtime we generally get in and say, 'Hire someone else', so you are definitely right on that track about work-life balance and mental health. People need to get away from these industries. I mean, we are in an industry where if something goes wrong, everyone gets called in – 'All hands on deck, you've gotta fix this'. You cannot do without it. There is not enough excess fat in the grid nowadays to

keep the system going if people do not drop what they are doing and have their leave cancelled and turn up at work as required. And some of these contractors generally will not be rehired again if they do not do as they are asked – or told – so probably going from that, I suppose. Trevor can answer last.

Trevor WILLIAMS: Look, the people that we work with work often in a 24-hour environment, seven days a week, 365 days a year on often very stressful jobs. People that run power stations and have to deal with spot pricing and keeping everything going, it is a pretty stressful job. What a lot of people do not understand about hunting, if you are not a hunter and you do not participate, is there are that many facets when you are hunting that you have to think about that that is all you think about.

There are a lot of things that you can do, and while you are doing them you will always revert back to the stresses of work and other things. But hunting, because it has got so many facets, it is almost – I tell people it is like meditation, because if I am out fishing or I am out hunting, I do not think about anything else; I think about the activity I am doing. I do not think about the job I do as the president of the Victorian district. I go there, and I think about that, and I clear my mind, and that is what our members do that are in very stressful jobs – they clear their minds. It might sound strange to some people, that it is like meditation, but that is how I feel.

Evan MULHOLLAND: Just getting back to a discussion we were having before, I will note the Electrical Trades Union, the CFMEU and the TWU have all put in submissions. That seems like a wide cross-section of the union movement for me. Did you receive any, I guess, criticism for your submission or alternative views from any other unions in Victoria?

Trevor WILLIAMS: No. No-one has contacted me, and none of our members have contacted me either and said, 'Look, I don't have that view. You shouldn't have done that submission because it's not my view', because even the people that do not participate in it appreciate the fact that it is a freedom that people have, and they do not see that it should be diminished.

Evan MULHOLLAND: So it seems pretty supported to me.

Trevor WILLIAMS: There has been no criticism at all, no.

Evan MULHOLLAND: In your submission you speak about specific examples where hunters have volunteered time, machinery, materials to help improve things like gravel roads, basic maintenance tasks and the like. Am I correct in thinking that, like in many instances that we hear of, hunters and your members have probably done those sorts of things quietly, without any expectation of recognition?

Trevor WILLIAMS: Yes. Absolutely. We have got people that participate – they do the nesting boxes. I mean, I have participated at times when I have had more time on my hands to be able to do those things. They do that because they think that is for the benefit of the game they hunt. If you look after the game you hunt, they are going to keep surviving; it is more likely to be sustainable. So they do those things – but they do not do those things and go around crowing, 'Look what I've done.'

Evan MULHOLLAND: So none of your members have turned around demanded half a million from the government to keep doing those sorts of things?

Trevor WILLIAMS: No. Anything that our members would do in relation to that would be done in their own free time.

Evan MULHOLLAND: You state that the handling of the 2023 season's announcements and the restrictions imposed were unsatisfactory. Could you expand on that and how we can improve that in the future?

Trevor WILLIAMS: Well, some of the basic steps I have put in my submission. But, one, there should be a minimum time where a decision is made about the season and notification. That is for a number of reasons. We talked about the leave problems, but it is also the problems like – you talk to the local outlets that supply us with our equipment, our waders, our cartridges and, for instance, our steel shot, because you have to use steel shot to hunt native ducks. In most cases, you would not use steel shot in other situations; if you shoot rabbits and foxes or other vermin, you do not use steel shot. So steel shot is curious to shooting ducks. The problem is, if you are a retailer and you do not know whether there is going to be a season or not, you do not want half a dozen pallets of steel shot sitting out the back of your shop, not knowing whether you are ever going to be able

to move it on. So what happened, because there was not enough notification, it did not give enough time to people to bring the steel shot into the country and distribute it.

Evan MULHOLLAND: Great. If hunting was banned today, what do you think would happen to Heart Morass and other wetlands around this area?

Trevor WILLIAMS: My view, and it is only my view: I think over a period of time it would look like Jack Smith Lake and Lake Coleman. Rightly or wrongly, I think that eventually people, if they were not able to hunt ducks in those environments, over a period of time would lose interest in that area and it would slowly go back. It would be interesting to see whether others that purport they would go and pick up the slack would do so – it would be interesting to see that – but that is a crystal ball, and really none of us can properly answer at this stage.

Evan MULHOLLAND: There is no evidence that they have. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Mr Williams, Mr Richards, thank you very much for coming along and giving your evidence before the inquiry today. You will shortly get a draft transcript of today's proceedings for you to check to make sure everything you have said has been accurately transcribed. You will be able to do that before it is published on our website. So thanks very much for coming today, and the committee will take a short break.

Trevor WILLIAMS: Thank you for giving us the opportunity today.

Mark RICHARDS: Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.