

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2026–27 Budget Estimates

Melbourne – Tuesday 19 May 2026

MEMBERS

Sarah Connolly – Chair

John Pesutto – Deputy Chair

Jade Benham

Michael Galea

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Aiv Puglielli

Richard Riordan

Meng Heang Tak

WITNESSES

Enver Erdogan MLC, Minister for Outdoor Recreation;

Matt Carrick, Secretary,

Georgina McCann, Deputy Secretary, Sport and Experience Economy, and

Sharn Enzinger, Executive Director, Outdoor Recreation, Combat Sports and Strategic Policy,
Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions;

Travis Dowling, Chief Executive Officer, Victorian Fisheries Authority; and

Graeme Ford, Chief Executive Officer, Game Management Authority.

The CHAIR: I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee. I ask that mobile telephones please be turned to silent.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2026–27 Budget Estimates. The committee's aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

I advise that all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, comments repeated outside of this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website.

I welcome the Minister for Outdoor Recreation the Honourable Enver Erdogan as well as officials from DJSIR. Minister, I invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 5 minutes, after which time the committee will ask you some questions. Your time starts now.

Enver ERDOGAN: Thank you, Chair. I might begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land and pay my respects to their elders past and present, the Wurundjeri people, where we meet today in Parliament House.

Visual presentation.

Enver ERDOGAN: If I can go to the next slide, I can talk about the state of the portfolio. In terms of the portfolio, there is obviously a lot happening. We know the importance of outdoor recreation activities as recreational fishing, boating and game hunting play a significant role in Victoria's outdoor recreation system. These activities are valued pastimes. It is a large contributor to our economy, particularly the regional economy: \$7 billion annually on nature-based outdoor activities, supporting over 71,000 jobs. The value of boating and fishing is estimated at over \$5.8 billion of value-add to our economy, and that is why our government is doubling down on this commitment of over 10 years investment.

We have one central location for this activity to take part in and for the promotion of this activity in Outdoor Recreation Victoria. And I know each of you is eagerly awaiting the debate in Parliament, possibly in the next sitting week in the lower house chamber and then the following week in the upper house if it goes to plan. I am sure all of you have a lot of questions about Outdoor Recreation Victoria. But today our focus is about celebrating some of our achievements.

Obviously we are continuing to deliver on a \$96 million go fishing and boating plan with \$15 million already in upgrades at the Arcadia and Snobs Creek fish hatcheries and an award of \$2.5 million from the Fish Habitat Improvement Fund to support projects and enhance marine and freshwater fisheries across the state. We will continue to support the stronger fishing clubs grants program and record-breaking numbers of fish have been stocked. One of the most interesting briefings I received was about the fact that no state even gets close to the amount of fish we have restocked across our waterways, which is just fantastic. I know all the recreational fishers out there are having a great time. I got to go out on budget day myself. When my lower house

colleagues were here I was out at Kennington Reservoir for some fly fishing, in Bendigo East, as the upper house was not sitting that day of course, as you would all understand. But I saw firsthand the amazing work that is being done and met with some of the local clubs. I had the honour and pleasure of releasing some Murray cod on the day as well, so it was an interesting experience.

Jade BENHAM: In Bendigo?

Enver ERDOGAN: Yes. Kennington Reservoir. It is beautiful out there. If you are ever out that way, please pay a visit. We have contributed a lot, but that is not the only species of fish we have introduced. I understand a number of different species we have introduced into the Kennington Reservoir, so a lot is happening across the board.

Can we go to next slide and talk a bit about game hunting. That is of great interest. We have got a couple of members here that were on the inquiry into game hunting. In Victoria we recognise that hunting is a legitimate recreational activity, with over 48,000 game licence holders. We have introduced mandatory online training in particular for those that are involved in duck and quail hunting. That has been an overwhelming success. That testing was done before the most recent season. We have continued to implement adaptive harvest management for game ducks in Victoria and *Victoria's Waterfowl Wounding Reduction Action Plan*. We continue to support sustainable and responsible game hunting, and over the past year we have remade a number of regulations, and we have remade conservation forest lands regulations as well, including in relation to infringement notices and enforcement powers. We want this activity to continue to be safe, responsible and sustainable. That is our goal and that is what is happening.

Next slide, please. 'Budget initiatives': we have got significant investments over a number of years, especially in previous budgets that are still rolling on. In terms of new investment, we have got the additional \$5 million to restock a further 10 million fish into our waterways. I think that will be a real game changer, but it builds upon our legacy of over \$200 million since we got into office going into our fisheries. In this year's budget there is an additional \$5 million to make sure another 10 million fish go in. Like I said earlier, no state even compares to the effort we have put into making improvements to physical infrastructure but also our waterways and nature. That is why I am proud to be here today. We will all have the opportunity to talk about the outdoor recreation portfolio. I know you are all eager. Let us get into it, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. I appreciate your enthusiasm for questions. Let us go straight to Ms Benham.

Jade BENHAM: I am glad you are enthusiastic, Minister. Here is a red-hot tip: next time you are fishing for Murray cod, when it is about to rain the best bait you can use is frozen dim sim.

Enver ERDOGAN: I will take that advice.

Jade BENHAM: Okay. 'Department Performance Statement', page 88: the funding for fishing, boating and game management has been reduced – acknowledging of course that it will become Outdoor Recreation Victoria. But the funding has been reduced from \$109.4 million in 2025–26 to \$93 million in 2026–27, despite additional funding being required after the 2025–26 budget was set at \$94.1 million. Does this represent an effective funding cut of \$16.4 million with the merger of fishing, boating and game management and the establishment of Outdoor Rec?

Enver ERDOGAN: The short answer is no.

Jade BENHAM: I like short answers.

Enver ERDOGAN: I think the variation can be very easily explained, Ms Benham. I think this is about making sure, driven by changes to boating projects and where they are at – and understanding that a major contributor to the shortfall is some of the delivery of projects, in particular that this is a new stable base level. Some projects obviously went into different financial years in terms of the delivery, and that is why there is a difference there. So previous commitments were being fulfilled in that financial year, but this is a new base level that I think is quite sustainable.

Jade BENHAM: So there are no functions or programs, apart from the projects that were being delivered, that we are going to lose?

Enver ERDOGAN: No.

Jade BENHAM: Are we going to lose any further staff, particularly from fisheries?

Enver ERDOGAN: No. I can understand your concern, considering the last financial year, but no – no staff. Outdoor Recreation Victoria is about merging the two organisations.

Jade BENHAM: Okay. So exactly how many FTE compliance and enforcement roles will be lost, maintained or increased under the new structure?

Enver ERDOGAN: I understand that there is going to be no change, but I might pass over to Deputy Secretary Georgina.

Georgina McCANN: Yes. I can confirm that all staff, including authorised officers in the VFA and the GMA, will transfer across to the new entity once it is established, on the same terms and conditions.

Jade BENHAM: Okay. There is no plan to increase those staffing levels?

Georgina McCANN: No. There is no plan to change them at this point.

Jade BENHAM: Okay. No plan to change them at all. Great.

Georgina McCANN: It will be exactly as it was.

Jade BENHAM: Excellent. Go Fishing Victoria funding – this relates to budget paper 3, pages 62 and 64, referencing \$5 million for Go Fishing Victoria, noting it is partially funded through the recreational fishing licence trust, which you would know about because you have a fishing licence, given your fishing on budget day – ‘This initiative is partially funded through the Recreational Fishing Licence Trust.’ Is that the full funding, or is that a proportion of the \$5 million that is drawn? How does that work?

Enver ERDOGAN: In terms of the \$5 million, of the \$5 million I can confirm \$3.5 million of it will be used to restock fish.

Jade BENHAM: Is that from the fishing licence?

Enver ERDOGAN: Yes. It is from the licence.

Jade BENHAM: And the rest is government funding?

Enver ERDOGAN: Yes.

Jade BENHAM: Okay. Terrific. I love short answers, Minister. We are doing very well in ripping through these.

Enver ERDOGAN: I think we need to slow down here, Ms Benham.

Jade BENHAM: If we can talk about the Victorian Fisheries Authority –

Enver ERDOGAN: Yes. Let us get into that.

Jade BENHAM: there was a reduction in fisheries officers. What modelling was done to ensure that it will not lead to an increase in illegal fishing activity – poaching?

Enver ERDOGAN: Obviously some of those changes happened before my time, but one of the first briefs I received from the department was about making sure we modernise the sector in relation to the changing contexts. As we know, there is no more commercial fishing in the Gippsland Lakes or in Port Phillip Bay. In relation to that, I think it is important that we change the way we do enforcement, knowing that there is a high level of compliance. Most mums and dads, people that are fishing recreationally, do abide by the rules. I know

one of the early statistics that took my interest was the fact that we know that the top 10 per cent of the offenders are causing about 90 per cent of the illegal fish being taken from our waterways. In that context I think it is just a more risk-based approach. Commercial fishing is not obviously as large as it once was, and so it is just about making sure we have an efficient regulator in place.

Jade BENHAM: Abalone poaching is becoming more prevalent, I understand. What is the plan there?

Enver ERDOGAN: We do have a major fisheries crime unit as well. That still has a big focus on this work, particularly abalone, where there is obviously a large illegal haul that is to be profited from. We need to work with law enforcement to make sure those people are held to account, because obviously they are really ruining it for everybody, to be frank.

Jade BENHAM: Okay. What assessment has been made of the impact of the reduced compliance capacity on the sustainability of the fish stocks?

Enver ERDOGAN: When we talk about compliance capacity, I do not accept that, because I think we have just changed the way of operating because of the changing sector. One thing I did want to say earlier, but obviously we are moving along so fast, is I think that Outdoor Recreation Victoria gives us an opportunity to actually increase enforcement, because with the merger a lot of these activities are seasonal, so we will have a greater surge capacity.

Jade BENHAM: You will have staff that can work across –

Enver ERDOGAN: Potentially, yes, we will. From speaking with the Game Management Authority and representatives obviously from fisheries as well, like Trav, I think what we do know is that for a lot of staff this is a values-based organisations. People that that work at these places are quite passionate about the great outdoors, so a lot of them are quite optimistic about opportunities to engage in other activities. I think long term – and not only long term but even in the short term – we will see greater surge capacity with more enforcement, because it is seasonal.

Jade BENHAM: Okay. Terrific. I have done abalone. Are there any species or fisheries that are now considered at an increased risk due to illegal fishing or poaching, to your knowledge?

Enver ERDOGAN: I might just go to Travis Dowling, the CEO of the Victorian Fisheries Authority, because Trav is an expert on these matters.

Travis DOWLING: Absolutely. Thank you, Ms Benham. I can inform the committee that our abalone stocks are booming. In our western zone, along the Portland and Polwarth area, they are increasing and our TAC has gone up. Our central zone is increasing. Our snapper fisheries are improving. There are 700 more tonnes of fish in the bay at the moment. We do not have any stocks at the moment that we are concerned about. Our eastern zone rock lobster plateaued out at 20 tonnes per annum, having dropped with impacts along the coast. But since our structural changes, in fact our focus on high-level offending has seen some really significant prosecutions. I think there have been something like – it is quite a considerable number. I can just refer to that. I think we have had 38 matters finalised in court since we have done that. So we are really happy with where our fisheries are at. If you look around Australia at the moment, you will see fisheries in a lot of trouble around the rest of the country, where they have not made the tough decisions we have made in terms of bag limits, size limits and commercial catch. We are really confident they are in good shape.

Jade BENHAM: Fish and chips for everyone. In the last 20 seconds I have got left, Minister: there are no plans to ban duck hunting?

Enver ERDOGAN: No. No plans – new minister but the same policy.

Jade BENHAM: Excellent. I might have a couple of –

Enver ERDOGAN: I am just going to say, in terms of us leading the way, Trav, I was speaking to Bob Baldwin earlier. He actually emailed me, and he just confirmed that in terms of recreational fishing we are the national benchmark. Bob Baldwin, who is actually the chair of the Australian Fishing Trade Association and a former LNP minister federally. So we are the benchmark leading the way.

Jade BENHAM: Excellent.

The CHAIR: Certainly fish and chips for everyone. We are going to go to Mr Tak.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Chair, Minister and officials. Maybe soon we will invite you to do a bit of outdoor fishing in Karkarook Park in Clarinda. Minister, in terms of funding and engagement, I refer to budget paper 3, page 64, and the government's ongoing investment in outdoor rec. Can you outline how the budget supports recreational fishing in Victoria and how this fits with the government's broader commitment to get more Victorians outdoors?

Enver ERDOGAN: Thanks, Mr Tak, for that really important question. On budget day I did listen to the Treasurer's announcement and her speech, and she made clear our focus on making life easier and more affordable, and these are central focuses that I, as minister, do take on board, especially in outdoor recreation. We know for many families, life is obviously becoming more expensive with the cost of living, and outdoor recreation is cheap and affordable, and we want to keep it as cheap as possible, and we have made it cheaper through our investments. Since 2014, \$175 million has been invested into boosting recreational fishing in our state. We are leading the way in this space, and this budget goes further with the Go Fishing Victoria investment. That includes fish stocking across the state and is supported by the operation of key hatchery facilities, including Arcadia and Snobs Creek.

These are practical investments that we are making. They are strategic, but there is also a practical benefit to people and families that engage in fishing. We have stocked 10 million fish in three of the past four years; since 2020 more than 48 million fish have been released into our waterways. That is an amazing statistic, and I know it is the envy of many other jurisdictions. It is something that we should be proud of, because like I said, it goes back to the high principles of our budget – making life more affordable, making it easier – and that is why we are making it easier to get out and fish and enjoy the great outdoors, whether that be in hunting activities or in fishing. That is what guides us especially in terms of this budget and going forward. I look forward to being able to talk about more of this during the passage of the Outdoor Recreation Victoria Bill. I know many of you will have questions in relation to those matters, but I think the objective is simple: Victorians should enjoy the outdoors safely, sustainably and affordably.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you. Can you explain the difference between the Go Fishing Victoria investment and the broader work to establish Outdoor Recreation Victoria?

Enver ERDOGAN: Yes, I think they are related but not exactly the same thing. Go Fishing Victoria is a targeted program on recreational fishing, and it supports practical initiatives like the fish stocking, hatchery operations and participation programs. The focus is really on putting fish into the water so that more people can enjoy fishing, whereas Outdoor Recreation Victoria is a larger structural reform. It will just change the way the government does business in this space. Subject to the passage of the legislation, it would bring together the Victorian Fisheries Authority and the Game Management Authority into a single dedicated authority for outdoor recreation. I think it is about making sure there is better coordination, clearer focus and stronger support for outdoor recreation across activities like fishing, boating, hunting, camping and four-wheel driving. I think it is important to have one voice as well, because sometimes they can be quite isolated, but we are bringing them all together because there is significant overlap. Really, I must say, I think it is appropriate that you have outdoor recreation and the Minister for Environment together, because I can see sometimes how there is potential for conflict, but there is also potential for great synergies and benefits to be extracted by us all working together, so I think this is an exciting time.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Minister. Given the previous investment in facilities like Arcadia and Snobs Creek, how is the government making sure that those investments continue to deliver benefits for recreational fishing?

Enver ERDOGAN: We have made major investments in fish production capacity, and they are continuing to deliver. I think the Arcadia native fish hatchery is now the largest native fish hatchery in Australia, and it has significantly strengthened Victoria's ability to produce native fish for restocking. Snobs Creek plays an important role too. I think these facilities are not about a one-time announcement – a sugar hit, so to speak. For us, this is about long-term investment. This is sending a signal not only across Victoria but across the nation that we are serious about recreational fishing, about the outdoors. This is a long-term commitment. I think we

are the first government to have a dedicated outdoor recreation portfolio and minister. It was the Andrews–Allan Labor government that was the first to have this kind of dedicated focus, and I think that was important, and I think we have built on that. We have backed it up with real investment in terms of resourcing to match that ambition. But I think it goes a long way to keeping delivering fish into our waterways, which is good for fishers, but it is really good for regional communities. A lot of the activity, we know, takes place not in our urban environment. I would love to come and visit Clarinda, but a lot of this activity is actually a bit broader, outside the metropolitan realm. It means we have got to drive out a little bit more. But I enjoy the great outdoors myself, so I can say, if you cannot tell, that I am enthusiastic about this portfolio and the opportunities it brings.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Minister. Also, fishing is not all about the seniors or older parents but those parents with young kids like me and you. Fish stocking is also a very fantastic activity and program that helps families and young people to get involved in recreational fishing, particularly during peak periods like school holidays. Can you talk more about that?

Enver ERDOGAN: Of course, yes. One of the programs is the little anglers kits. I know it is popular. Many of you have been out to your local schools, to grade 5s across the state. I guess I might just take this opportunity to congratulate the former minister Minister Dimopoulos on securing another round that we will obviously be delivering later this year, in the second half of this year, so we will get another opportunity. I know how popular they are. We do not just talk about making life more affordable and easier, it is about delivery. And that is what little anglers is about. It means more fish into waterways with the work that we have done with fish stocking. It means a young person – young or old, that is right in terms of fishing. We see that when you go visit piers around Melbourne and around our state. You see different age groups and different demographics. There are a lot more women participating in fishing than in the past. I think that has been a really good initiative as well. I think we have seen the demographics are changing. It is a lot more multicultural too. I think people have a perception of fishing being – I will be careful – for certain stereotypes, like what you might watch in Hollywood movies, but I think it is much more diverse than that.

Michael GALEA: What is your favourite fishing movie?

Enver ERDOGAN: I am going to be careful. My favourite movie is *Jaws*. In terms of fishing, I am not sure. It is overkill. It is probably the nature of this role brings me to that. We do not have too many great white sharks in our bays, thankfully.

But I think more broadly, basic equipment and information is crucial, so these investments are more than just about more physical fish. It is also about an education piece, about connecting people with nature. We know that our nature is precious, and the great outdoors is a good way of telling that story and connecting people, especially when we have got a digital age. As a young parent myself, you see the young people are drawn to technology, which sure has its benefits, but it also has its risks. I think getting people outdoors to enjoy the fresh air with the little anglers kits program is a great way, and I am pleased that there will be another delivery of little anglers kits in the second half of this year.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you. How are our fishing grant funding and club support programs helping local communities like mine in the south-east and Clarinda?

Enver ERDOGAN: That is right. There are a lot of clubs in the south-east. Fishing clubs are the heart of recreational fishing really, because they are the first kind of port or way for people to meet other people with like interests. I think that is key. We have got clubs for a lot of activities, and I think recreational fishing clubs play an important role. Being able to fund those fishing clubs is important, especially as we have seen a bit of a demographic shift. I know when I took the portfolio one of the earliest briefs was about the ageing demographic, so we want to introduce younger people, because fishing is really enjoyable, it is a great connection to nature and it is healthy for you. To help clubs grow their memberships and bring new people was a key goal and to engage them with, to be honest, a more diverse demographic. That is a goal. Melbourne is changing, our state is changing, so it is important that those clubs meet those needs, but they need support to do that work. We cannot expect them to do it all by themselves. I think we are the first government to really have that kind of direct engagement with these clubs in a long time, and I am proud of that record. As minister, I am hoping that we can build upon that work. When we support fishing, we are also supporting local jobs, businesses and regional tourism.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Minister. Some people may look at year-to-year budget movements and ask whether the government support for outdoor recreation is reducing. How would you respond to that?

Enver ERDOGAN: I think you need a holistic look. I have talked about our record over the last decade: over \$200 million of investment into boating and fishing, of which over \$170 million has gone into recreational fishing itself. Year to year budget line items change because many of the programs we are running are multiyear. The physical infrastructure investments are multiyear investments. It is not set and forget. These are multiyear investments that have made a real difference. And it does not matter to which part of the state you go, you will see improvements, whether it be on the peninsula or along the Great Ocean Road, whether you are up north, east or west, there will be investments in this space. I think the equity aspect is important too. This is not a partisan issue for me. This issue is just about getting more Victorians, irrespective of their views, outdoors so they can enjoy easy access and affordable access. That is the goal of these programs.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Minister. With the remaining time, I do want to ask a question about why the government is supporting the establishment of Outdoor Recreation Victoria. With the limited time that we have left, perhaps you might like to say a little.

Enver ERDOGAN: Yes. We will need more time to talk about Outdoor Recreation Victoria, because it is quite transformational, but I think we will get that opportunity during the debate in Parliament in the coming weeks.

Meng Heang TAK: I look forward to that. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Tak. I am going to go straight to Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good evening, Minister and officials. Minister, I refer to budget paper 3, page 62, the line item 'Boosting outdoor recreation', but also page 64, which talks about delivering 'policy priorities across fisheries, hunting, recreational boating and other outdoor recreation policy and legislative support.' It is those last two words I am interested in, Minister. What legislative support is this referring to? What legislation is changing?

Enver ERDOGAN: In terms of legislative support, obviously we will have Outdoor Recreation Victoria, so that will require legislation. It is a new act, and obviously we envisage initially it will be a merger of the two organisations, but long term it will be progressively improved to cover more outdoor recreation activities beyond camping: four-wheel driving – a wide array – rock climbing and many others that are topical. So the initial funding will just be to consolidate and get passage of that legislation.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Can I just clarify: as part of that you just mentioned four-wheel driving. My understanding is currently off-road driving is illegal in national parks, for example. Can I just confirm over the estimates we will not see legislative reform that seeks to change that. Can you rule that out?

Enver ERDOGAN: I am not going to hold a future government to that as it is part of the cycle, but there are no plans for legislation at the moment.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. But when you mentioned four-wheel driving, what were you referring to?

Enver ERDOGAN: The point is that Outdoor Recreation Victoria will have a broad remit. That was the point I was making, but of course the national parks and the protections in place – as you know, there are going to be new national parks commencing in October, and there are certain rules around that. But we want to make sure that people go outdoors and enjoy the outdoors.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Thank you. I might move on to another matter. Are you able to tell the committee what amount Victorian taxpayers are subsidising the kangaroo harvesting program?

Enver ERDOGAN: I understand that the program is having a \$2.2 million investment over two years to fund our government role in delivering the program.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: So that is this financial year and the next, is that right?

Enver ERDOGAN: No – 2025. So this year and the next year, a total of \$2.2 million.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Do you foresee the need for those subsidies to continue into the estimates?

Enver ERDOGAN: I will just clarify: there is an additional \$800,000 as well by DEECA, so a total of \$3 million from government. The one from DJSIR is \$2.2 million, and \$800,000 from DEECA – a total of \$3 million over those two years.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Why the two inputs? What is the difference?

Enver ERDOGAN: You can understand that there is some role overlap between the two government departments, so some of that responsibility falls to the environment, some of that responsibility falls to DJSIR.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Why is that? How does it, for example, relate to outdoor recreation?

Enver ERDOGAN: I might pass over to Graeme Ford.

Graeme FORD: With the funding for DJSIR, that funds the administration of the program as well as the compliance function and supply provided by the GMA. I believe that the \$0.8 million that DEECA spends is on the surveys and setting the quota.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Thank you.

Enver ERDOGAN: There is one based on the science and then the other on the delivery, if that makes sense.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Mr Puglielli. Minister and officials, thank you very much for appearing before the committee today. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses are required within five working days of the committee's request.

The committee will take a short break before beginning its consideration of the portfolio for the environment at 5:35 pm. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.