

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2025-26 Budget Estimates

Melbourne – Tuesday 10 June 2025

MEMBERS

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Nicholas McGowan – Deputy Chair

Jade Benham

Michael Galea

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Aiv Puglielli

Meng Heang Tak

Richard Welch

WITNESSES

Steve Dimopoulos MP, Minister for Outdoor Recreation;

Matt Carrick, Secretary,

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

Sharn Enzinger, Executive Director, Outdoor Recreation, 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 2025–26 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.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and is broadcast live on the Parliament's website. The broadcast includes automated captioning. Members and witnesses should be aware that all microphones are live during hearings and that anything you say may be picked up, even if you say it quietly.

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.

As Chair I expect that committee members will be respectful towards our witnesses, the Victorian community joining the hearing via the live stream and other committee members.

I welcome the Minister for Outdoor Recreation Steve Dimopoulos as well as officials from DJSIR, the Victorian Fisheries Authority and the Game Management Authority. Minister, I invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 5 minutes, after which time committee members will ask you some questions. Your time starts now.

Steve DIMOPOULOS: Thank you, Chair. Thanks for the opportunity. I want to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land upon which we meet, the Wurundjeri people. I pay my respects to their elders past and present.

Visual presentation.

Steve DIMOPOULOS: Victorians appreciate the outdoors and take time to discover their local surroundings. And I am really pleased to be before the committee today. Victoria offers a wide range of outdoor activities for people of all interests. Our goal is to help more Victorians experience and appreciate our unique natural surroundings. Spending quality time outdoors is good for our health and good for our economy. Recreational fishing, boating and game hunting make significant contributions to the Victorian economy, directly and indirectly supporting tens of thousands of jobs, particularly in regional Victoria.

Nature-based outdoor activities bring in more than \$7 billion in annual consumer spending to Victoria according to historical estimates. Outdoor recreation also helps contribute more than \$720 million to the Victorian economy annually through cost savings from the increased health and wellbeing outcomes attributed to outdoor activities.

Recreational fishing and boating in Victoria have never been better. Victoria provides world-class recreational fishing and boating opportunities, with record numbers of people going fishing generating strong social and

economic outcomes across our regions and towns in both freshwater and marine waters. The government is proud to be making it cheaper and easier for more Victorian families to enjoy a day on the water. We have abolished fees across Victorian public boat ramps, and it is now free to launch and retrieve vessels and to park your boat trailer at the boat ramp.

Building on the significant Labor government investment over the past decades in recreational fishing through its previous Target One Million and Go Fishing Victoria initiatives, the government continues to support exceptional recreational fishing and boating opportunities through the Go Fishing and Boating Victoria plan. Through its \$96 million investment, the government has completed its election commitment to deliver 95,000 fishing kits to grade 5 students in primary schools and to all primary-age students in specialist schools across Victoria.

We have committed \$15 million to expand the Arcadia and Snobs Creek fish hatcheries to increase their production, efficiency and sustainability. We have strengthened fishing clubs and helped them attract new members, improve their facilities and promoted participation amongst all ages and abilities through the Stronger Fishing Club grants program. Through the Better Boating Fund, more than \$100 million of recreational boaters licence and registration fees have been reinvested into projects and programs to make boating easier, cheaper, safer and more accessible for all Victorians. Last year the government was able to beat its native and salmon fish stock target by 15.4 per cent, for a total of 11.5 million, more than 1.5 million over target.

Recreational hunting is an activity that matters to thousands of Victorians. The government continues to support recreational game, duck and stubble quail hunting, but it is implementing some common-sense changes to ensure it continues to be safe, responsible and sustainable. Since the government's response to the recommendations of the select committee inquiry, changes implemented so far include banning the use of lead shot for quail hunting, implementing the *Waterfowl Wounding Reduction Action Plan* to reduce risk of wounding and using the science-based approach of adaptive harvest management to guide annual duck season settings. To further support safe, responsible and sustainable game hunting, the government remade the Wildlife (Game) Regulations 2024.

In the budget initiatives for Go Fishing Victoria, \$5.2 million has been provided over one year to meet the government's commitment to stock 10 million fish in Victoria's waterways each year and to operate the expanded Arcadia and Snobs Creek hatcheries, which I have touched on. \$2.2 million has been provided over two years to continue the kangaroo harvesting program to support the management of kangaroos, and of course with that program we work well in the harvest settings put together by DEECA and the Arthur Rylah Institute after a kangaroo population count. The harvest program and the tagging is administered by the GMA, the Game Management Authority, and both the GMA and the VFA are with us today here, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Minister. The first 8 minutes are going to go to Mr Welch.

Richard WELCH: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister. Minister, in regard to the reduction of fisheries enforcement officers, there is going to be a reduction of 44 per cent. What impact will these cuts have on crucial data and scientific operations of the VFA?

Steve DIMOPOULOS: The fisheries officers have a role to play, and that role is not about science. It is about enforcement. And I am –

Richard WELCH: But they do support scientific data collection, don't they, as well?

Steve DIMOPOULOS: I can ask the CEO in a minute, but I just want to –

Richard WELCH: That is what I want answered actually.

Steve DIMOPOULOS: What is your actual question, Mr Welch?

Richard WELCH: What is going to be the impact on data collection and scientific observation that form part of the –

Steve DIMOPOULOS: There will not be any.

Richard WELCH: No impact at all?

Steve DIMOPOULOS: No.

Richard WELCH: Considering the issues regarding abalone poaching in Altona, how will the closure of the Altona office impact enforcement in that area?

Steve DIMOPOULOS: Particularly for abalone, there is a major fishing crime unit within the VFA that has statewide remit.

Richard WELCH: But there are less of them now you have closed the local office.

Steve DIMOPOULOS: No, in fact we have not. We have augmented the resources of the major fishing crime unit, and they have a statewide remit. So regardless of where they are based, they work across the state, and in fact there –

Richard WELCH: There are 54 of them, is that right?

Steve DIMOPOULOS: Hang on. Mr Welch, sorry. The combined statewide compliance rate for abalone is currently 74 per cent.

Richard WELCH: But are there 54 fisheries officers now, enforcement officers?

Steve DIMOPOULOS: I might throw to the CEO.

Travis DOWLING: Thank you for the question. No, there is not. Under the change proposal we have got in place there will be 36 enforcement officers, but getting back to your point, Mr Welch –

Richard WELCH: Thirty-six?

Travis DOWLING: That is right, 36 enforcement officers. So getting back –

Richard WELCH: Sorry, down from what number? What was it previously?

Travis DOWLING: Well, there were 51 active, so we have lost 15 current fisheries officers from that.

Richard WELCH: Thank you.

Travis DOWLING: Sorry, if I could just add to the minister's point about the major fisheries crime unit, we have got 13 senior investigators that are within that unit, and that has not been in any way impacted by the restructure. In fact we are looking at providing additional resources in that space, so things like technological improvements, whether that is drones, whether that is updates with other sorts of compliance activities –

Richard WELCH: Have they been budgeted for?

Travis DOWLING: We are going to work within the existing VFA budget to reallocate resources to ensure that that can be delivered. But I will just say it is a very small minority, the number of people that are committing major fisheries crime, because overwhelmingly we know that Victorians are over 90 per cent compliant.

Richard WELCH: Well, let us just qualify that a little bit. There are roughly, I think it would broadly be, about a million fishers, and you reckon there is about 90 per cent compliance.

Travis DOWLING: That is right.

Richard WELCH: That is 100,000 noncompliant.

Steve DIMOPOULOS: No, Mr Welch, compliance does not work that way. It is not about number of fishers, it is about number of offences and what the VFA picks up on. Is that correct?

Travis DOWLING: That is right, absolutely. So it could be things like a fishing licence being expired for three days, or someone has one undersized snapper or they have taken one too many calamari. We triage how the offences are.

Richard WELCH: Excuse me, but we are already seeing a high level of noncompliance. I think you would have all seen social media and other things where people are showing off their noncompliant hauls, exceeding over 50 per cent in some cases. So your capacity to police this now with less onsite staff – surely that has got to be compromised, unless this technology comes on immediately –

Steve DIMOPOULOS: No, Mr Welch. That is not correct. I do not mean to be disparaging, but I will be about Facebook. You cannot take your facts from Facebook – you just cannot. You cannot say to me at this hearing you have seen examples of noncompliance on Facebook and then somehow that is a proof point for VFA’s work. It is not at all. I will tell you what the proof point for VFA’s work is, Mr Welch – and it is important for the committee to understand this: we are in a position in Victoria which most other states would love to be in, because we have grown the recreational fishing community and we have removed commercial netting from Port Phillip Bay, a 700-tonne operation. That is where the biggest focus of compliance is across the rest of the country, because they have to because their –

Richard WELCH: I do not think the majority of fishers agree with you because –

Steve DIMOPOULOS: Mr Welch, can I just finish this sentence. The rest of the country is focused on compliance when it comes to commercial fishing operations because that is where the massive noncompliance has traditionally been. We are in a situation –

Richard WELCH: Thank you, Minister. There is currently a petition with 21,000 signatures that disagrees with you about this. The majority of fishers do not agree with you that we are in the best place in Australia, and the majority are suggesting there are going to be dire environmental consequences from it. This cut of \$9.3 million – did you recommend it?

Steve DIMOPOULOS: On your own numbers, 21,000 out of a million fishers is hardly the majority. But I have got to say –

Richard WELCH: Feel free to dismiss it.

Steve DIMOPOULOS: No, I am not dismissing it, but let us not pretend it is a majority. Can I just say to you, though, that I am absolutely conscious of the difficulty for any staff member, whether it be VFA or any part of government or the private sector, transitioning, either having to reapply for a job or being exited. The VFA board went through a change proposal. The change proposal has now landed and been finalised, and I am confident, because of the assurances the board has given me, that the VFA has the resources it needs to do the job that both the community expects of it but is also required to by statute. So if your question is ‘Am I comfortable with the change?’ I am absolutely comfortable with the change, because we are not in New South Wales or Queensland, where there are megatons of commercial fishing operations, and that is where a lot of the illegality is. We are in a situation where we have changed the landscape in Victoria.

Richard WELCH: Okay. Thank you, Minister. In regard to the enforcement powers and the restructuring of some of these roles, can you list which enforcement powers and responsibilities are being removed from the fisheries officers under this modernisation?

Travis DOWLING: There are no powers being removed.

Richard WELCH: Pardon?

Travis DOWLING: No powers are being removed.

Richard WELCH: And warrants, surveillance – all the same?

Travis DOWLING: Yes. All powers remain as they are.

Richard WELCH: Court prosecutions?

Travis DOWLING: All powers remain the same.

Richard WELCH: Okay. And how many of the fisheries officers need to reapply for their jobs?

Steve DIMOPOULOS: We are going to land on 36, so I do not know what –

Travis DOWLING: Yes, sorry. It is a spill within the Port Phillip Bay region. It is 27, within that region, to 12. Of those 27, those that decide that they do not want to take a package and move out of the organisation – and we do not know that yet – will be the pool that will be reapplying.

Richard WELCH: Do you have any sort of modelling on how many years of service and experience you may lose in that process?

Travis DOWLING: Well, it is hard to determine, because we do not know who is going to take the packages.

Richard WELCH: Minister, is it true that under the new model an officer catching someone with an illegal catch is going to be more likely to offer education than issue a fine or prepare a prosecution brief?

Steve DIMOPOULOS: No, Mr Welch, the operating procedures have not changed one bit. The VFA has always done both compliance and education. That is why we have such a high compliance rate, because of the education over the last 10 years.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. We are going to go to Ms Kathage.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Chair, Minister and officials. Minister, I do note you did say not to take your facts from Facebook, but the fact is my most popular Facebook post ever – and I do not know if this reflects on me or on you – was around the stocking of fish in our local Yarrambat lake, so I know it is certainly a very, very popular initiative. The 10 million target figure is there in the DPS – page 89, I believe. But in your presentation, you said there was \$15 million towards local hatcheries. It was Snobs Creek, which is a great name, and Arcadia. What is going on there? How are we supporting them, and how do they contribute to this?

Steve DIMOPOULOS: I think this is what I love about – and I get the points that were raised earlier, but the VFA under our government over the last 10 years has grown to be a big and compelling organisation across multiple functions, so we should be very proud. In fact most other states are looking to us for leadership on how to run fisheries, and part of that is exactly the hatcheries that you talked about. You cannot stock 10 million fish a year if you do not breed them. The hatcheries are fundamentally important because they breed the fish – the golden perch and trout and others – that we need to stock the 220 waterways across Victoria. And it is fair to say – and I can throw to the CEO of the VFA – some of the most extraordinary third-party endorsements, so to speak, Ms Kathage, come from regional Victorian businesses who say that they have had an uplift in customers and patronage because people know they are going to catch something in Victoria, so they actually literally have a fishing holiday, as they would have a camping holiday, where they go and they get the supplies from the local shops, whether that be on the Surf Coast or anywhere else in Victoria, and then go and fish. The hatcheries are effectively the factories in breeding the fish that then get stocked in the 220 waterways. What they also do, though, just to give you a bit more of an explanation, is they not only increase the production capacity – we have invested in them to do more of that, with Macquarie perch, trout, cod, golden perch, Murray cod – but they produce approximately 6.5 million fish annually. It currently costs around \$4 million to \$4.5 million each year, which is extraordinary value for the 10 million fish we get a year.

I was in a town in Victoria recently where a caravan park adjacent to a waterway that we stocked with fish has seen, since we started stocking it a few years back, an uplift in people staying at their caravan park. That is a consequential impact that we have had. But you cannot do that, Ms Kathage, if you do not remove commercial netting from the biggest bay, Port Phillip Bay, and other inlets and if you cannot provide room for recreational fishers to go and spend time with their family and loved ones. But the hatcheries are fundamental to that entire system.

The other thing that I love about the hatcheries is we have got a partnership with the Albanese Labor government in Canberra on supporting the populations of 10 threatened fish species, and we use the hatcheries to be able to do that important work. Over 50 native freshwater species are threatened in Victoria and they face

further declines due to threats, so stocking helps to recover those populations. But also the hatcheries provide an insurance population should the populations be subject to storms or fires or any kinds of life-ending events, effectively. I have said a bit there. I do not know if you want to add anything.

Travis DOWLING: I would love to. I would just say it is quite incredible. With the fish hatcheries that the government has invested in at Snobs Creek and Arcadia, we are growing more fish in Victoria now than the rest of Australia combined, in terms of growing and stocking fish. Some people say, ‘How many is too many fish?’ Well, what we are doing is we are actually displacing some of the invasive species like carp and redfin from a lot of our inland waterways, and we are seeing this recovery of iconic native species like Murray cod, golden perch, trout, cod, silver perch and catfish. Just recently we worked with the local community at a place called Lake Lascelles up near Hopetoun. I think that is up near Mildura.

Jade BENHAM: That is my patch. It is a beautiful spot.

Travis DOWLING: Yes, absolutely, up in your patch.

Nick McGOWAN: It is nowhere near Ringwood Lake.

Travis DOWLING: It is an absolutely lovely spot. We did not know that Lake Lascelles is like a Jurassic Park for catfish. We found this iconic population there that we were able to then relocate to places like the Loddon, the Campaspe and the Goulburn rivers to rebuild these populations.

But I do just want to say it has been incredible, what we have been seeing in terms of the change in Victoria. In the 1980s there was a fair bit of negativity and doubt. We were in drought. We had invasive species coming through. If someone caught a Murray cod, it would probably have been on page 3 of the *Herald Sun* at that time because they were so rare. Now I have an anecdote from a bloke who is a really lovely Wangaratta individual and very big on social media, Robbie Alexander. He said he has kids complaining to him when they go down into the Ovens River in the middle of Wangaratta and they only catch five cod in the evening. So we are really fortunate to have had the investment we have had in fishing in Victoria and to be where we have got to now, which is leading the rest of the country. Any search of social media would show we are the envy of the rest of the country when it comes to recreational fishing.

Lauren KATHAGE: And it is great to see kids fishing. I think we are about four weeks out from the next round of school holidays. We have got those fishing rods that went out. Are there plans to ramp up stocking again ahead of these coming holidays?

Steve DIMOPOULOS: Yes. We are looking to do them, at this stage, by the end of the calendar year for kids, so they have them over summer. That is the current plan. We think they are invaluable.

Can I add a couple more, Ms Kathage. Joe from the Bellarine Pirates Angling Club said:

Queenscliff is now one of the best ramps around. It’s safe, it’s quick and it’s easy.

With the hypothecated boating fund, effectively, which our government has instituted, both the fishing licence fees and the boating licence fees go back into a fund that then is spent back in the fishing fraternity and boating fraternity.

Then you have got John Hotchin:

What they’ve done here at Point Richards boat ramp is absolutely fantastic. They’ve improved it enormously with the car parks, marina, ramp and breakwall.

You have got, at the Metung Hotel, David saying:

With the removal of the netting I’ve noticed a huge impact. The fishing’s been fantastic. The whiting are in the lake. The Australian salmon are in the lake. People are fishing all the time and that’s got to be great for business.

This is the story of the Andrews and now Allan governments’ investment in fishing in Victoria over 11 years. I do not claim to be the father of it. Good people like Jaala Pulford before me and Sonya Kilkenny have created something here – and Travis Dowling is correct – that the rest of the country looks at with absolute awe. Therefore the remit of the VFA has to change to meet that new landscape after 10 years.

Can I also say, and I do not want to go to colleagues, that not only was there a 60-FTE cut to the VFA in 2013 under then Liberal–National government – a 60-person cut – the –

Nick McGOWAN: You are not going to start talking about Gough Whitlam are you, Minister?

Steve DIMOPOULOS: No.

Nick McGOWAN: We have already had that today.

Steve DIMOPOULOS: It is important context. Not only that, but today, Ms Kathage, the Victorian community can be assured that the budget of the VFA is, even after the change proposal, more than double what it was when we came to office. It is now more than double. The fish stocking is about eight times what it was when we came to office, and that is fundamentally important because it provides not only mental health and family benefit to people who want to be out in nature – and Mr Tak and I have done fish stocking – but it is also beneficial for regional economies. It is just extraordinary.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you. It has become a real part, more and more, of the community. My kids and I went to the Northern Suburbs Fly Fishing Club day, the come-and-try day that was organised by Alan and the crew there, who are a really great group, and I know they have received grant funding from the government before. Is there continued support for those local fishing clubs?

Steve DIMOPOULOS: There is. The fishing licence fees, when you pay your \$39 – I think it was \$38, \$39 when I paid last year to get my fishing licence – that goes back into a fund, then the fishing licence trust, effectively, has an advisory committee that gives the VFA and me advice about how to utilise that funding. We provide grants to over 300 fishing clubs around Victoria, and I have visited many of them. They are the most incredible clubs. The fraternity have a drink after or before and share problems, share stories of catches. It is just extraordinarily beneficial and multigenerational, and gender balance is increasingly incredible. We have got women in fishing. There are a whole bunch of things we are doing for recreational fishing, which is extraordinary. In fact the first round of the program was offered in 2023–24, Ms Kathage, and saw 32 clubs receive funding of a total disbursement of \$300,606. A further \$900,000 will be allocated through subsequent rounds, with round 2 scheduled to open later this year. It is really important work, because we love our fishing clubs, but also they, I think, appreciate the investment this government has made. You do not have to pay to park your car and your trailer to go and launch a boat to go fishing. You do not have to do that anymore; we have wiped that with the hypothecated funds we get from those licence fees.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you very much, Minister.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Ms Kathage. We are going to go to Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, Minister. Following the Inquiry into Victoria's Recreational Native Bird Hunting Arrangements, the government committed to mandatory shooter education and proficiency testing by the 2025 season, noting existing hunters are still able to shoot birds having not done this training. The inquiry heard serious concerns about bird wounding. Can I ask: when will this testing be mandatory for all shooters?

Steve DIMOPOULOS: Thank you, Mr Puglielli. We have implemented a bunch of the other recommendations, and I will take you through those quickly. I got some sound advice about the proficiency training that we have. It is not as easy as it sounds. We are effectively doing a bit of a pilot to understand what that would mean with a group of hunters right now. At the conclusion of that pilot we will have the information we need to be able to then take the next step in terms of educating all hunters. So that is why that was not part of the 2025 season arrangements.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: When you are saying not easy as it sounds, what do you mean by that?

Steve DIMOPOULOS: Well, proficiency training is practical training. I will throw to the CEO in a moment to give us a bit more detail, but you literally require people to go on a shooting range or in some context where they are actually improving their shot, because we understand, we know from the science and from the parliamentary report, that the better the shot, the less wounding. We all subscribe to it. But that is not the only element that influences wounding. I might throw to Graeme.

Graeme FORD: With the proficiency training, the minister is correct, we are doing a pilot program. We have three groups of hunters. There is a control group, and there is one level of training and a more intense level of training. They have been through one cycle, and we will put them through another cycle very shortly, within the next month, because we want to see not only does the training have an effect on the day, we want to see: is the training going to have an effect continuing on? That will be done in the next month, I think, and then we will prepare a final report that shows: does the training provide value, given that there is a significant regulatory burden on hunters?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Right. Can I just query, though: should we expect this testing to be in place for the 2026 season?

Steve DIMOPOULOS: That is my expectation, but I would be prudent to wait for the outcomes of the pilot that the CEO has just taken you through. But can I just say, we have not sat on our hands. The adaptive harvest model is in. That is groundbreaking. It has come from the science, not from us ourselves, about the sustainable number – all of the inputs from wetlands to climate change to everything that affects bird population counts. That is now in, as of this season, and that is really important. There are many other things, like the lead shot ban and a whole range of other recommendations from the parliamentary committee that have been already implemented.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Regulatory burden for hunters – I am just trying to get my head around that at the moment.

The CHAIR: Mr Puglielli, we are out of time.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thanks.

Steve DIMOPOULOS: I get it.

The CHAIR: Minister and officials, thank you very much for taking the time to appear 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 is going to take a short break before beginning its consideration of the portfolio for the environment at 4:10 pm. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.