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Select Committee on Victoria's Recreational Native Bird Hunting Arrangements

Hearing Date: 3 July 2023

Question[s] taken on notice

Directed to: Game Management Authority

Received Date: 4 August 2023

1. Georgie PURCELL Page no. 25

Question asked to Paul Stevens:

On 26 April this year the Age published a story: 'In the article Mr Jane is photographed with a non-gundog breed standing at the water's edge at Lake Wooroonook, and it was pointed out to you in an email on 8 June that he was potentially in breach of state game regulations for having a non-gundog on a state game reserve. Are you investigating this complaint?

Paul STEVENS: I would have to look into that and give you an answer offline if that is okay.

Response:

An official complaint regarding Mr Jane purportedly being in possession of a non-gundog at a State Game Reserve was never provided to the GMA. However, based on information taken from The Age article, GMA Officers are making further enquires with Mr Jane. The matter is ongoing.

2. THE CHAIR Page no. 37

Question asked to Graeme FORD:

I have got a couple of things if you could take on notice: at the very top of the hearing, Mr Ford, you mentioned priority harms a couple of times. Could you on notice give the committee what those priority harms are?

Graeme FORD: In relation to the native bird hunters?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Response:

In general, the GMA has prioritised the following harms to guide compliance and enforcement effort.

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- Public safety (both hunters and non-hunters)
- Sustainable game harvesting
- Animal welfare
- Non-game protected wildlife

3. THE CHAIR Page no. 37

Question asked to Graeme FORD/Simon TOOP:

You mentioned 50–50 public versus private for duck hunting. If you have got any advice as to a change over time or trends over time for those figures, that would be –

Graeme FORD: We can do that. It is probably just not a long trendline – a few years.

The CHAIR: More than one data point is useful.

Simon TOOP: Since 2009, we have.

Response:

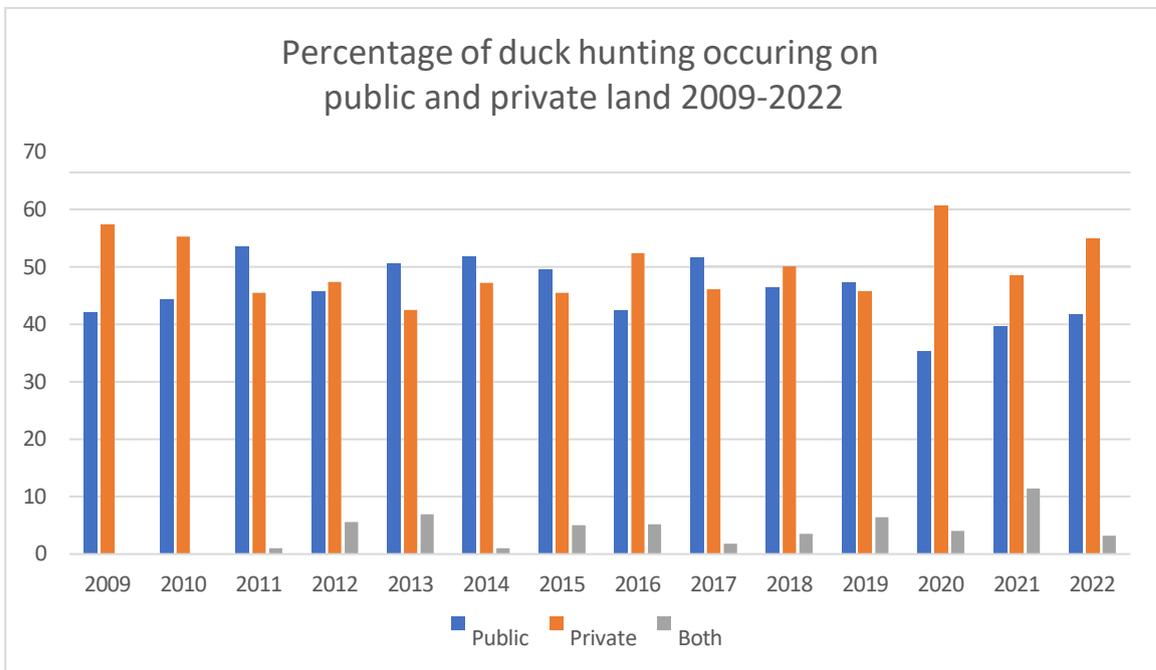
The following chart and graph show the proportion of duck hunting activity on public and private land, and on both land types where available. Data is sourced from the annual telephone surveys of hunters which has been collected since 2009. 2020 and 2021 years were impacted by COVID-19-related restrictions on movement.

In general terms, hunting effort is equally distributed on public and private land, but can be influenced by water availability and bird populations; in wetter years when natural wetlands hold good water, hunting effort on public land may increase. In drier years, more hunting occurs on private land where natural wetlands on public land dry and man-made storage water levels can be artificially maintained.

Year	% public land	% private land	% both public and private
2009	42.1	57.4	NA
2010	44.4	55.3	NA
2011	53.5	45.5	1
2012	45.8	47.4	5.6
2013	50.6	42.5	6.9

2014	51.9	47.2	1
2015	49.5	45.5	5
2016	42.5	52.4	5.2
2017	51.7	46.1	1.8
2018	46.5	50.1	3.5
2019	47.3	45.8	6.4
2020*	35.3	60.7	4
2021*	39.8	48.5	11.4
2022	41.8	55	3.2

* **Note:** 2020 and 2021 were impacted by COVID19 restricting movement and consequently access to public land



4. THE CHAIR Page no. 37

Question asked to Simon TOOP/Graeme FORD:

One question I did not get to was: we heard from Arthur Rylah about the contracting that you do of people to conduct abundance surveys. Can you give us the cost of that survey work?

Response:

The total cost of the game duck abundance survey can vary depending on how many wetlands have been identified by ARI that require survey. However, for the 2022 survey, the cost of the various components for surveying approximately 880 wetlands is as follows:

Cost of conducting the game duck population abundance estimates	
Activity	Cost
Aerial survey	\$330,000
Ground surveys	\$55,000
Wetland extent estimation, data analysis and report writing	\$38,000
Total	\$425,000

It should be noted that the benefit of the survey extends beyond its use to inform management decisions on duck hunting. The survey provides valuable insights into the relationship between waterfowl and key environmental drivers (e.g. wetland availability). The modelling explicitly recognises the importance of wetland area for waterfowl populations in eastern Australia and hence the impacts of major changes in that variable on the abundances and distributions of the various species.

For completeness, we also provide information on the cost of conducting the stubble quail abundance and distribution surveys, analysis and report writing. Again, there is very little research conducted into this species in Australia and findings from this study provide insights into the status of the population over time. Ground-dwelling gamebirds throughout the world are believed to be in decline due to changed land management practices, leading to habitat loss and degradation. The increased use of herbicides and pesticides in farming, intensive grazing regimes, expansive crop monocultures and predation by introduced predators are believed to be driving these declines.

Cost of conducting the stubble quail population abundance estimates	
Activity	Cost
Ground surveys	\$150,000
Habitat extent estimation, data analysis and report writing	\$35,000
Total	\$185,000

5. THE CHAIR Page no. 37**Question asked to Graeme FORD:**

And any of the stats that you have got about locals who view your educational videos that Ms Watt was referring to. That would be useful as well.

Response:

There are currently **56** GMA education videos hosted on YouTube, covering topics such as safe firearm use and storage, gamebird identification, effective hunting techniques and the humane dispatch of gamebirds. To date, these videos have received **587,730** views.

Four of the education videos relate to the humane dispatch of gamebirds, with these videos receiving **84,827** views, to date.

GMA also publishes a number of education pages on its website. For the education pages, between 1 July 2022 and 30 June 2023, **408,859** unique page views* were recorded, with 87.4% of the audience (or 357,343 views) occurring in Australia.

On **23 June 2023**, GMA launched 8 online education modules. This project fulfils item 1.3 of the Sustainable Hunting Action Plan 2021 – 2024, which states:

1.3 Enhance hunter education – by developing online video learning modules for game hunters wanting to increase their knowledge of hunting laws, responsible hunting methods and firearm safety

To date, these modules have been viewed **1,178** times. A communications strategy promoting these modules will commence in July 2023.

*A unique page view is how many times a user visited a specific page.

Additional Questions on notice from Committee members:**6. Question asked:**

More details of the ‘sustainability window’ research – background, progress, draft and expected completion date.

Response:

This project relates to action item 3.2 of the Sustainable Hunting Action Plan 2021 – 2024, which states:

3.2 *Develop a game duck adaptive harvest management framework and strategy – continue this important work by engaging technical experts to provide guidance on the identification of sustainable levels of harvest for reference during development of the harvest framework and strategy in consultation with key stakeholders.*

The Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions is responsible for delivering this action. The GMA understands that a document has been developed and is under consideration within the Department.

7. Question asked:

Summary of proposed training an assessment to support Waterfowl Wounding Reduction Action Plan

Response:

Knowledge test

To ensure hunters have a minimum level of knowledge of game hunting laws and good hunting practice, including ways to reducing wounding, the Waterfowl Wounding Reduction Action Plan (WWRAP) recommends the introduction of a once-off Game Licence knowledge test for all game hunters, including duck hunters. The test would be developed in consultation with hunting organisations and regulatory reform will be required to introduce the test.

Proficiency test

To further lift hunting standards, attaining and demonstrating proficiency in the skills considered necessary to reduce wounding is proposed. The WWRAP recommends the introduction of a once-off proficiency test for all prospective game hunters, including duck hunters. The test would have to be passed as a precondition to applying for a Game Licence to hunt game ducks. Regulatory reform would be required to introduce it.

Testing would be conducted by third-party providers and the timing of introduction would be such to allow the market time to respond in securing access to shooting ranges and recruiting and training staff. The test would be developed, administrative processes put in place and functionality built in to the Game Licensing System to accommodate the changes.

The GMA would accredit and conduct performance audits of providers and publish annual performance information (the number of participants and the percentage who pass) for each accredited provider on the GMA website.

The test would be designed in consultation with key stakeholders. Important elements would include hunters being able to hit a minimum number of clay targets simulating the flight angles and speed of ducks commonly experienced in the field. Hunters would also be required to show they can correctly estimate distance and whether silhouettes of different sized game ducks are within or outside the recommended 30-metre range for ducks. Other elements could also be required.

It is proposed that proficiency testing would initially apply to all prospective game hunters as a precondition to receiving a Game Licence. Existing licence holders would not be required to pass the test. This is due to the capacity constraints in the number of venues where testing can occur and the availability of suitably qualified testing instructors.

While only prospective hunters would be required to successfully complete the proficiency test, it is desirable for as many existing licensed hunters as possible to also complete the testing. Incentives could be introduced to encourage licensed hunters to successfully pass the test. For example, these could include access to hunting opportunities (in time and space) not available to hunters who have not passed the test. Incentives would be developed in consultation with the hunting community.

As capacity in the testing system increases, the requirement for only prospective hunters to undertake proficiency testing should be reviewed. This should be done as part of the review of this action plan at the end of its five-year period, if not earlier depending on the progress of establishing the system.

Mandatory training

The introduction of knowledge and proficiency testing creates opportunities for hunting organisations and other third-party providers to develop training programs to educate hunters in how they can improve their shotgunning skills, develop retrieval and dispatch strategies, accurately estimate distances and how to select effective choke and load combinations suited for different hunting situations in addition to attaining the necessary level of skills to pass the proficiency test. GMA would work with hunting groups to develop minimum standards for inclusion in training programs.

Some stakeholders on the Wounding Reduction Working Group (both hunting and animal welfare) advocated for the inclusion of mandatory training to complement knowledge and proficiency testing. In presenting the WWRAP to

government, the GMA Board considered the issue of mandatory training but did not support it, instead believing that hunters should be able to seek training based on their own particular learning needs and level of skill. The GMA Board believed that over time, if research and monitoring indicate that wounding rates are not decreasing, then the proposed arrangements included in the Action Plan could be reviewed and expanded as required.

8. Question asked:

Outline of pilot introduction to duck hunting course.

Response:

Item 1.2 of the Sustainable Hunting Action Plan 2021 – 2024, states:

1.2 Educate and train new hunters – by starting introductory education sessions for new or aspiring game hunters.

In accordance with the above action, GMA in partnership with industry delivered its first *Introduction to Victorian Gamebird Hunting* education session.

This was a one-day practical course, developed to educate new hunters on relevant laws and hunting equipment, how to improve their shooting skills and, implement hunting strategies and techniques to address animal welfare issues.

Participants received practical instruction and tuition, including hands-on target shooting and skills assessment.

Specific topics covered included:

- Seasons, species and bag limits
- Where to legally hunt
- Shooting skills coaching (practical)
- Matching choke and load to target species (practical)
- Pattern testing shotgun (practical)
- Gamebird retrieval strategies
- Safe and ethical hunting techniques

Further sessions were scheduled to be delivered throughout the year.

9. Question asked:

Correspondence with Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting re Quail abundance.

Response:

The email trail below, and Attachments 1 and 2 include correspondence between the GMA and Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting regarding stubble quail abundance. Attachment 1. Is a document prepared by the GMA answering a range of queries from RVO DS. Attachment 2 is the study report that was included in the below email trail.

Graeme D Ford
(GMA) [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Sent on: Tuesday, February 28, 2023 9:50:30 PM

To: Tim
Haddad [REDACTED]

CC: Gayle Tierney
(ARL) [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]; Ingr
(PARL) [REDACTED];
Sonya Kilkeny
(PARL) [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]; Simon J Loop
([REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Subject: RE: OFFICIAL: RE: Native Stubble Quail - what restrictions?

Attachments: Moloney et al 2022.pdf (2.11 MB)

OFFICIAL

Hi Tim

My apologies, I forgot to attach the mentioned report from Moloney that helps explain the hunter survey results.

Regards

From: Tim Haddad [REDACTED]
Sent: Tuesday, 28 February 2023 3:23 PM
To: Graeme D Ford (GMA) [REDACTED]
Cc: Gayle Tierney (PARL) [REDACTED]; Ingrid Stitt (PARL) [REDACTED]; Sonya Kilkenny (PARL) [REDACTED]; Simon J Toop (GMA) <[REDACTED]> [REDACTED];
Subject: Re: OFFICIAL: RE: Native Stubble Quail - what restrictions?

Graeme,

With respect, the GMA's requirements according to the GMA Act, are to 1. promote sustainability and responsibility in hunting, and to 2. make recommendations to Ministers about hunting season arrangements.

Why are you not doing so?

What you are saying below, is that you have seen no reason to even consult regarding our native Stubble Quail let alone make any recommendations about amending the full three month, twenty birds a day limit. This is absolutely appalling and completely unacceptable given:

- there is clearly public concern about the species
- the evidence of the extent of toxic lead contamination in our environments
- the poor knowledge test results of bird shooters and the fact quail shooters don't even have to sit an ID accuracy test
- the first ever count of quail seeing such low numbers and since then, the floods and fires (with respect we have provided information on this numerous times - please read our submissions. It is entirely GMA's responsibility to be across such research - and your own Simon Toop in fact is to a degree.)

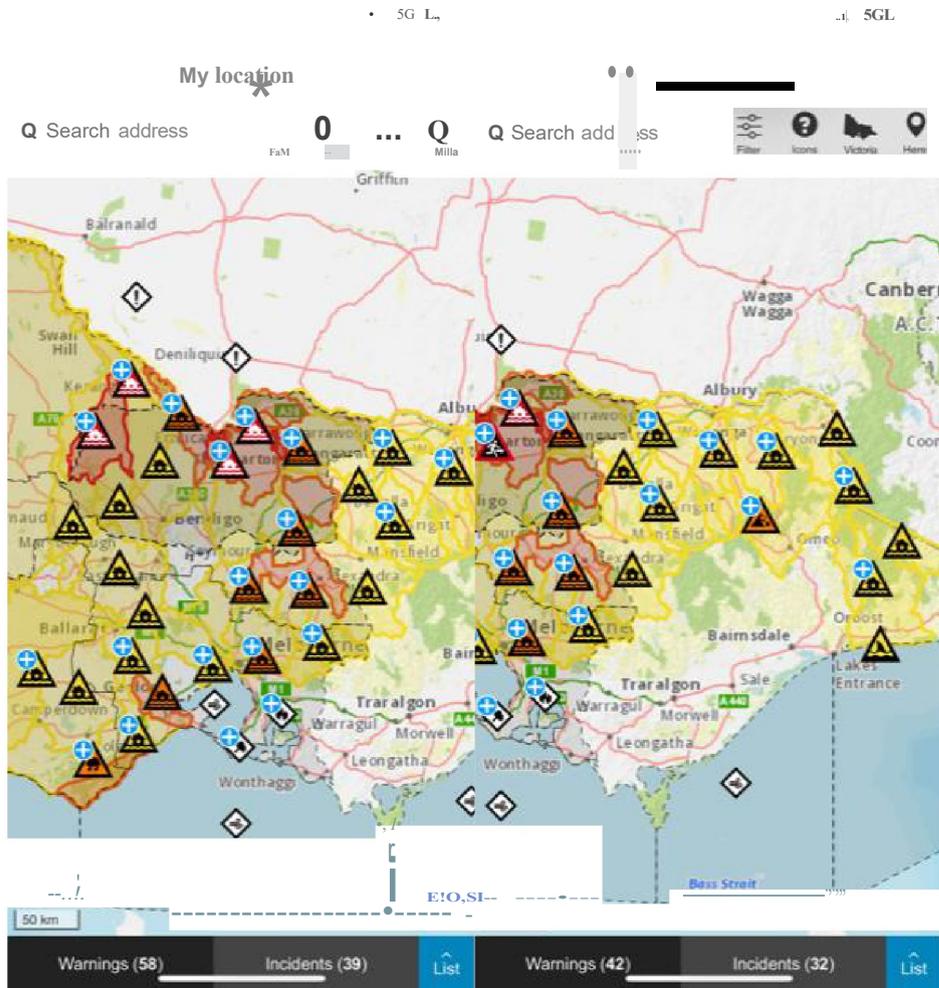
- In the email from Simon Toop to Karen Mander of RVOTDS of September 28, he (and ARI) confirm long term harvest data can be "used as proxy to monitor abundance trends". Clearly the long term data shows a decline in the birds abundance.

All these points at the very least call for caution under the precautionary principle. It is unacceptable you have not seen fit to even make a recommendation for restrictions.

The Victorian government real-time sms flood alerts sent to regional Victorians during the floods show far greater expanses of flood waters than your "flood impact" diagram.

We are aware (thanks to FOI docs which GMA failed to block release of despite twelve months of trying) that staff and management of GMA have been long-time holders of bird shooting licenses themselves. But to continue to seemingly twist "science" to suit shooting, to not do the right thing by our struggling native wildlife or regional communities which is what your organisation is taxpayer funded to do, is sickening and frankly a matter for IBAC.

Regards



• i!GL

My location

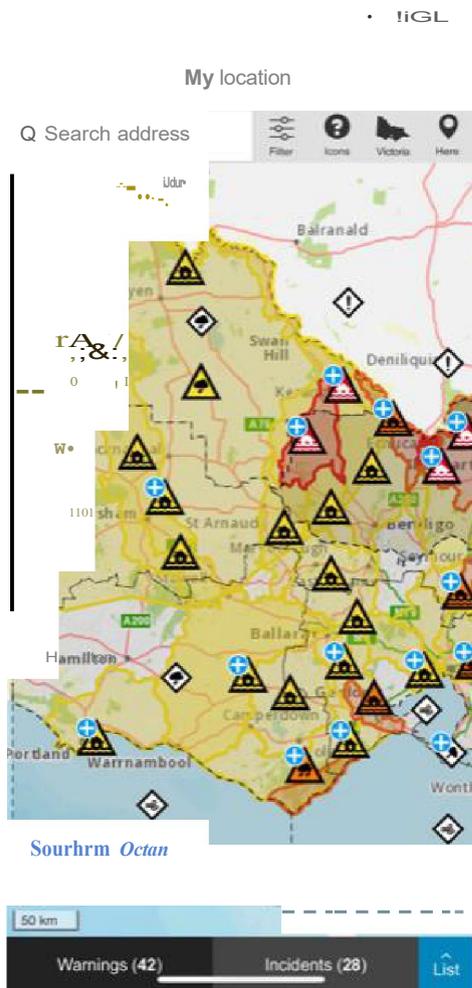
Q Search address



Warnings (66) Incidents (42) Map

Type Updated

-  Emergency **Warning** • 5 hours ago
Riverine Flood - Evacuate Immediately
Ghuca and Echuca Village
- Emergency Warning • 3 hours ago
Riverine Flood • Move to Higher Ground
Loddoo Rwer Loddon a ID Kell'ing
- Emergency Warning - 5 hours ago
Riverine **Flood** . Move to Higher Ground
Campaspe Riller Downstream of RochB'sLM
- Emergency Warning - 6 hours ago



On Tue, Feb 28, 2023 at 9:54 AM Graeme D Ford (GMA) <[REDACTED]> wrote:

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Hi Tim

Have provide answers to your questions below.

Regards



Graeme Ford

Chief Executive

M: [REDACTED] | **E:** [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

www.gma.vic.gov.au



We acknowledge Victorian Traditional Owners and their Elders past and present as the original custodians of Victoria's land and waters, including their connection to country and culture through hunting, and commit to genuinely partnering with them and Victoria's Aboriginal community to progress their aspirations.



From: Tim Haddad <[REDACTED]>
Sent: Sunday, 26 February 2023 9:05 AM
To: Graeme D Ford (GMA) <[REDACTED]>
Cc: Gayle Tierney (PARL) <[REDACTED]>; Ingrid Stitt (PARL) <[REDACTED]>; Sonya Kilkenny (PARL) <[REDACTED]>

< [REDACTED]
Subject: Native Stubble Quail - what restrictions?

Graeme,

We note any comment regarding the upcoming shooting of native quail has been completely absent. Does this mean GMA have not seen fit to prevent a full quail shooting season of 20 birds a day per shooter (though who checks) from the first saturday in April to the end of June??

Victorian hunting arrangements are prescribed in the Wildlife (Game) Regulations 2012. As the GMA has noted on a number of occasions, it does not have the power to regulate any hunting seasons. It can only provide recommendations to government.

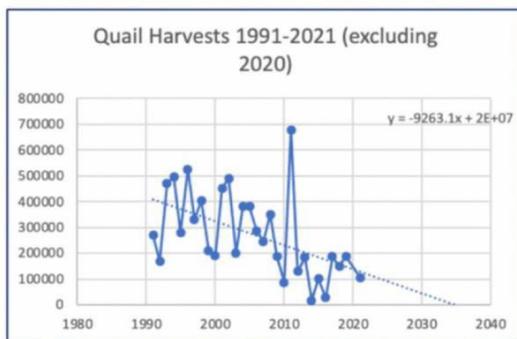
It is appalling and unacceptable for a regulator tasked with ensuring "sustainability", to not even run a consultation on this matter, and totally disregard the content in our submission.

If the GMA saw a need to deviate from the current arrangements for the forthcoming quail hunting season, it may wish to consult. If you are concerned with the current hunting arrangements, you should raise that in the Regulatory Impact Statement public consultation process during the review of the sunseting hunting regulations.

- You will be aware the government's own data shows unambiguously a serious and alarming decline in the Stubble Quail numbers, and that your own staff and ARI advised in writing last September, that this harvest data is a reliable measure of what is occurring with the bird's abundance.

As advised on 18 October 2022 in an email to Karen Mander, hunter harvest can provide an index of population size. However, indices are generally based on the risky assumption that the sample represents a constant but unknown proportion of the population. Relative methods provide no understanding of the actual size of the population but can provide information on trends (Cassey, P. (1999) *Estimating animal abundance by distance sampling techniques*. Conservation Advisory Science Notes No. 237, Department of Conservation, Wellington). In light of this, indices of quail abundance must always be considered with caution. In the case of hunter-reported total harvest statistics as a proxy for quail abundance, this can very much be influenced by hunter participation and effort, among other things. Catch per unit effort (or hunter efficiency) is therefore a more appropriate index to consider as a measure of relative abundance.

The graph generated by RVOTDS (below) combines data derived from two different survey techniques used to estimate hunter harvests of stubble quail – mail surveys and telephone surveys. Each adopted very different approaches to surveying, in frequency, intensity and timing. Therefore, it is **not valid to combine the two data sets to generate a trend line**. In 2009, government moved to conducting telephone surveys to monitoring harvests as a more robust approach to the previous mail surveys which were more subject to recall and non-response bias in particular based on the methodology adopted.



In a recent review of 11 years of telephone survey data from 2009, Moloney *et al.* (2022) (copy attached) found in relation to stubble quail that “The harvest per active hunter changed little over time, but there was some evidence that harvest per active hunter was greater under La Nina conditions” and that “Hunting efficiency (birds harvested per hunting day) remained steady after accounting for environmental conditions.” Further “After accounting for environmental conditions, the annual total harvest changed little.” Therefore, the suggestion that harvest estimates show “a serious and alarming decline in the Stubble Quail numbers” is not supported by the data published in this peer-reviewed and published study.

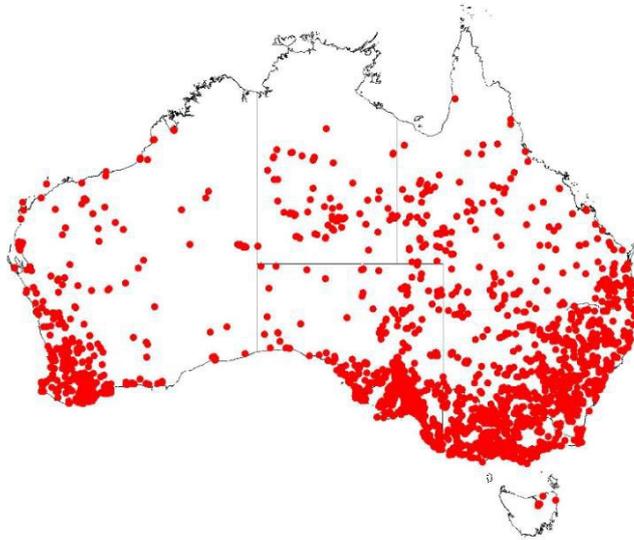
- You will also be aware our native Stubble Quail numbered just 101 in the first ever "count" last year and that since then, unprecedented flooding would have all but decimated the species. (Your own Simon Toop is aware of the research by Firth and Carpenter 1980 regarding impacts of fire and flood on quail -it was referenced in his own research paper).

We would welcome any data on you have to show the impact of spring 2022 flooding has had a significant detrimental impact on stubble quail populations.

Flooding can have a short-term impact by flooding nests, destroying eggs and chicks that can't escape flood waters. It can also have a short-term impact on food availability. However, after flood waters subside, there can be a substantial benefit through a flush of plant growth, providing food and nesting cover. Mature quail can readily find areas of refuge away from floodwaters.

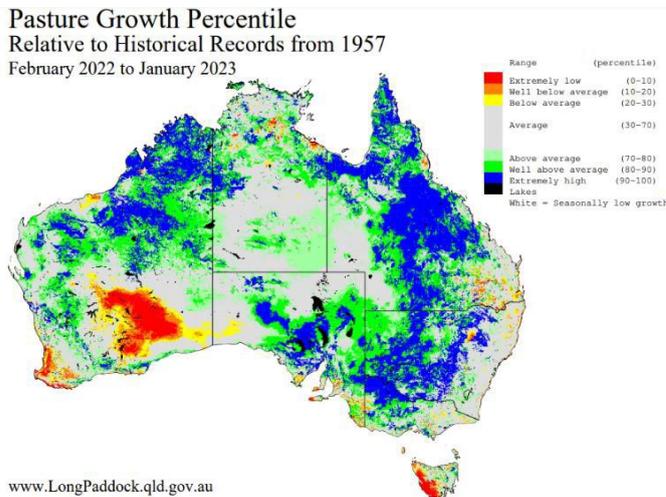
While the floods in Victoria had a significant impact on northern Victorian communities along the Campaspe, Goulburn and Murray Rivers including the towns of Shepparton, Rochester and

Echuca, the extent of land affected was not so great (see flood impact map below) that it could be considered to have a significant impact on stubble quail populations given how common the species is and its widespread distribution (see distribution map below {apologies for the different scales}).



Stubble Quail

Habitat conditions for Stubble Quail in eastern Australia are currently very good. La Niña and other drivers have influenced Australia’s climate for the last three years, resulting in significant rainfall throughout parts of eastern Australia. November 2022 was Australia’s, NSW’s and South Australia’s wettest November on record. It was also Australia’s wettest spring since the La Nina of 2010 and the tenth wettest since records began in 1900. As seen in the figure below, pasture growth (used as an indicator of habitat availability) across almost all of eastern Australia was average to extremely high in 2022.



- Finally, you would be aware of the serious issues of toxic lead (also well known by your own Simon Toop who was part of [this research](#) recently yet still allowed a full quail shoot to proceed) being pumped into our environments including food producing fields through quail shooting, and that it mobilises and enters the food chain. Further, that quail shooters are not required to sit any ID accuracy tests to tell one species of bird from another.

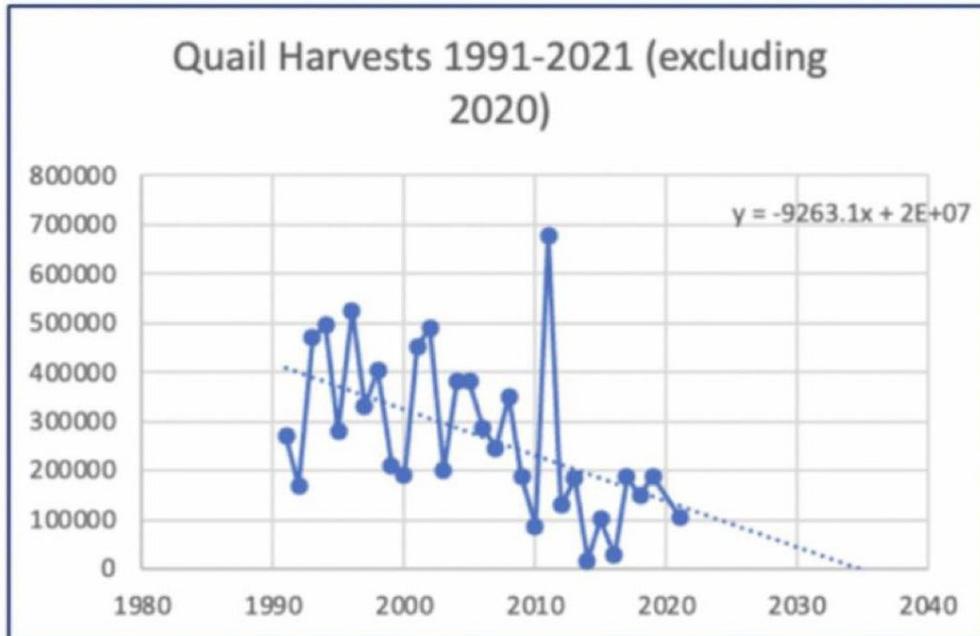
GMA is aware of the issues with lead ammunition and has provided advice to government on its use. As you are aware, the Wildlife (Game) Regulations will sunset in September this year. The Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions is leading the review of the regulations and I am advised that a Regulatory Impact Statement (RIS) will be released this year. I would encourage you to make a submission to the RIS on the lead ammunition and quail identification issues.

In the knowledge of the above, if GMA has allowed another shooting season of Stubble Quail to quietly roll on in any way, it is entirely irresponsible and just another indication of an incapacity/unwillingness to do the job taxpayers pay handsomely for you to do. It is also setting GMA up for negligence claims.

If you could please confirm. We will be relaying this to Ms Plibersek's office.

Regards

Tim Haddad



source: government data : GMA harvest data and RIS

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10. Question asked:

Management alternatives to wetland closures.

Response:

When considering the presence of significant concentrations of threatened waterbirds, migratory species or breeding waterbirds, a number of management responses are considered to mitigate the impacts of disturbance or direct mortality as a result of duck hunting. These range from:

- Full closure of the wetland to duck hunting
- Partial closure

- Further regulation of how hunting occurs (e.g. regulating hunting methods. As an example, hunting from boats has been prohibited where concentrations of birds that prefer deep water occur. This only allows hunting from the shoreline and the birds can refuge away from hunting in the deeper parts of the wetland)
- Raising hunter awareness of the presence of these species of concern via various communications platforms (e.g. signage at wetlands, messages on social media platforms and websites, messages in print media, including media releases, media interviews)
- Increased enforcement presence

A range of matters are considered when selecting the most appropriate approach and these are discussed with hunting and conservation stakeholders. Things to take into consideration include:

- The number of individuals of the species of concern
- The ecology of the species and how it responds to disturbance
- The risk that the species could be mistaken as a game species and shot
- The size, shape and characteristics of the wetland in question (e.g. does the shape of the wetland allow for preferred habitat in a portion of the wetland to be closed to hunting while allowing other parts to remain open)
- The wetland's proximity to other areas open or closed to hunting that may act as refuge
- The amount of hunting that is likely to occur

Where non-regulatory approaches fail to provide adequate protection, partial or full closure to hunting is recommended to government.

The GMA has also recommended to government that the hunting season should open mid-week (Wednesday) with later start times until the first Sunday to reduce hunter density and any associated behavioural issues with large concentrations of hunters. It can also increase bird wariness and encourage them to seek refuge away from hunting areas prior to the first weekend of hunting and for the remainder of the season. This 'soft' start to the season can also help to manage the risks to significant concentrations of notable bird species.