

TRANSCRIPT

SELECT COMMITTEE ON VICTORIA'S RECREATIONAL NATIVE BIRD HUNTING ARRANGEMENTS

Inquiry into Victoria's Recreational Native Bird Hunting Arrangements

Melbourne – Thursday 29 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

Ms Elizabeth McCann, Campaign Director (*via videoconference*),

Ms Kerrie Allen, Spokesperson, and

Ms Sue Williams, Project Officer, Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting.

The CHAIR: Welcome. All evidence taken 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 this 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 Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. 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, can you please state your name and any organisation you are appearing on behalf of.

Kerrie ALLEN: I will start. Kerrie Allen. I am the Spokesperson for Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting.

Sue WILLIAMS: And I am Sue Williams. I am the Project Officer for Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting.

Elizabeth McCANN: I am Elizabeth McCann. I am the Campaign Director for Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting.

The CHAIR: Thank you all for joining us. We will invite you to make an opening comment – you can figure out amongst yourselves how you want to do that – and then we will introduce the committee and start asking questions. Over to you.

Elizabeth McCANN: Okay. I have an opening statement that I wish to read. Thanks for having us here today. Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting Incorporated represents farmers, business owners and residents and is supported by over 90 organisations, including First Nations clans. Our purpose is to support each other and make known the serious concerns we have regarding the environmental and social harm that we witness and experience as a result of native bird shooting. We have got no agenda other than to make Victoria a better place to live, work and visit. Many of our properties were settled by our ancestors and have been handed down through generations. Other residents have chosen to move to regional areas to experience a more peaceful way of life and enjoy a closer connection with nature. We are not all vegan animal activists, but we are individuals who are linked by our livelihoods, ancestral heritage and our desire to protect the natural beauty that surrounds us.

We experience the bird shooting without a choice. We are often the ones who are witnessing what goes on when the hunters think no-one is watching. As individuals, many of us are too afraid to speak up given the disturbing hunter behaviour we are privy to. The gunfire occurs close to our homes, on and adjacent to our properties. That in itself is quite disturbing and destructive enough, but we also contend with armed trespassers, the distressing sight of dead and injured birds, theft of firewood and the aftermath of rubbish and contamination strewn around our properties in the wetlands. We have to console our scared and worried children, take measures to manage petrified pets and move horses and other stock to agistment. The resultant heightened anxiety levels leave some residents legitimately fearful of their safety. Furthermore, the shooting encroaches onto areas where other outdoor pursuits normally take place. Activities such as cycling, bushwalking, horseriding, birdwatching, fishing, school nature excursions and kayaking are all unwillingly deterred by the shooting. This not only curtails the freedom and ability of others to enjoy the outdoors, but it impacts negatively on the tourism potential of these unique and beautiful places.

Whether we like it or not, our population is expanding, and more people live in the regions and in closer vicinity to the shooting areas than they may have 100 years ago. We can agree that change is the one constant.

Change is also seeing our environment under greater pressure. To evolve and adapt, our thinking, our values, our past practice and our traditions will have to be challenged. Change can be an opportunity for better practice and innovation. Scientists agree there is a lack of data, but they feel Australia is one of the most vulnerable countries to climate extremes. We are learning that small measures when carried out collectively can make a difference, but unless there is buy-in from all stakeholders the efforts can be wasted.

We stress today that our focus lies solely on native bird shooting as distinct from other outdoor recreational activities or hunting practices employed by professionals for feral species control in remote bush. We address the specific issue at hand, which is the largely unmonitored shooting of birds with shotguns in close proximity to residential areas, frequented public spaces, food-producing land and ecologically sensitive environments. We have growing concerns about safety, unmonitored and unfettered hunter behaviour, contamination and pollution, humane treatment of animals and threats to native fauna.

Freedom of information documents have revealed an astonishing allocation of government funds towards supporting native bird shooting and monitoring its activity. However, the vast nature of the hunting areas renders monitoring largely ineffective. Our experiences coupled with the survey results expose the inadequate resolution and documentation of most reports of illegal hunting, which fosters a reluctance amongst the public to report such incidents. The provision of taxpayers money to hunting groups for conservation works while at the same time granting them the right to exploit and damage the very environment they should be safeguarding does not sit well with most people. Our survey shows Victorians believe the government would be better to redirect those abundant resources towards essential sectors, reducing living costs or true conservation efforts that foster respect for native heritage and animals.

It is important to note that many landowners themselves currently undertake restorative works at their own expense to preserve the environment they call home. It is disheartening for them to have their efforts thwarted by bird shooters who trample their foreshore and adjacent areas, kill native fauna and contaminate the environment with lead and plastic. The immense rehabilitation work undertaken by organisations such as catchment management associations, Landcare and numerous not-for-profit conservation groups must not be overlooked, and once native bird shooting is banned these organisations will readily fill any void left by hunters.

Positive outcomes of bird-shooting bans have been witnessed in other states, with an upswing in ecotourism following the cessation of bird shooting. As the GMA have failed to adequately assess the negative social and economic effects of native bird shooting, we urge you guys to consider the rational concerns presented in our survey and submission. Our voice represents a growing number of people living in our regions who feel they have been overlooked, as they are fearful to speak out due to retaliation and intimidation by hunters. These are people with firearms. That is it from me.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. I will ask the committee to introduce themselves.

Katherine COPSEY: Katherine Copsy, Member for Southern Metropolitan.

Georgie PURCELL: Georgie Purcell, Northern Victoria.

Sheena WATT: Hello. Sheena Watt, Northern Metropolitan.

Jeff BOURMAN: Jeff Bourman, Eastern Victoria Region.

Bev McARTHUR: Bev McArthur, Western Victoria Region.

The CHAIR: I am Ryan Batchelor from the Southern Metropolitan Region and Chair of this committee. I will start. Thanks for coming along today. Your submission goes to a lot of amenity impacts of hunting on residents in regional communities. What do you think the biggest amenity impact is? What is the feedback from the people you talk to?

Kerrie ALLEN: I will start. The latest survey that we ran, which had over 800 responses, including some duck shooters, was very clear in what it came back with. People felt there was a loss of amenity, and that involved residents that live near it. The noise is an issue, and I will talk to that a little bit later, I hope. Noise is a massive issue. People feel afraid to use their local amenity. People feel unsafe, and when shooting is going on it

is certainly not very conducive to other forms of outdoor recreation. So kayaking, fishing, bird watching – people are put off doing that sort of thing.

The CHAIR: I was going to ask: what are the sorts of activities that people feel excluded from? You would have specific examples of people who are unable to undertake recreational activities because they are unable to, prohibited or unwilling. Where would that land?

Kerrie ALLEN: I would say probably more unwilling. Feel free to chip in, colleagues.

Elizabeth McCANN: I think it is both. I think, yes, who wants to go and paddle a canoe in amongst shotgun fire? Plus they are also unsure if they are breaking the law, because they are unsure if there are allowed to go to those areas while the shooting is happening. Where I live we have got a good view over the wetland area, and during the shooting season we do not see any people fishing or kayaking around because they just do not know if they are supposed to be there, plus they are not going to take their children out where the shotguns are blasting.

The CHAIR: One of the things in your submission that I found surprising was that the government was unable to provide a list of where hunting was permissible, which seems to me curious. Why have they said that they are unable to do that?

Kerrie ALLEN: That is one of our biggest bugbears as well. Apparently the maps are incomplete. GMA have said to us that not all public foreshore areas are showing up on the hunting maps because they are not yet at a standard of accuracy, I think was the wording used. They have got no idea. We have been bandied between GMA and DELWP in terms of even getting an estimated range of the number of public waterways open to shooting. Nobody seems to be able to give us an answer or even tell us whether it is closer to 8000 public waterways or 20,000. I agree with you: it is really perplexing – it is scary – that we do not have any oversight of where these shooting areas are.

The CHAIR: I assume that most of the people you engage with are not holders of game licences.

Kerrie ALLEN: Correct.

The CHAIR: How do they know where they can and cannot be during a season?

Kerrie ALLEN: It is really difficult. Only a very small number are signposted as shooting areas. They are largely at the state game reserves. There are only about 200 of those. The vast majority of public shooting areas are not signposted, and the maps are incorrect. It is not possible to know for sure where shooting can and cannot take place.

The CHAIR: Another part of the submission is obviously issues that you have observed with game licence holders – I will not say ‘doing the wrong thing’ – having possible infractions against the hunting regulations and wildlife regulations. How do you go about making complaints, and could you take us through how they are received, investigated and resolved?

Kerrie ALLEN: I will jump in again.

Sue WILLIAMS: Sure.

Kerrie ALLEN: There are two ways that people can make a report. One is through the Game Management Authority directly. GMA is only available by phone during business hours, so Monday to Friday, 9 to 5.

The CHAIR: So you cannot report something that is occurring outside of business hours to the GMA directly?

Kerrie ALLEN: Not by phone. You can make a report online, but typically what happens then is that people get a response back in an email saying, ‘Thanks. We’ve got your report. We’ll pass this to an internal panel,’ which usually happens in about five days, ‘and then we’ll make a decision as to whether we investigate this complaint.’ Usually by the time GMA get to that report or that complaint the activity has stopped by then and it is not able to be investigated. The other way people can make a report is to police, but we find most people are reluctant to do that. The police force is already pretty stretched, and also there is a feeling that not all

police are cognisant of all the hunting rules. And the police unfortunately do not keep a record of reports that get made to them about hunting. So the real issue is, not only do most reports not get investigated, but the compliance reports that go to the minister are grossly incomplete.

The CHAIR: In what areas do you think they are incomplete?

Kerrie ALLEN: Well, most reports do not get investigated.

The CHAIR: So you think it is an understatement of the complaints?

Kerrie ALLEN: Hugely.

The CHAIR: Okay. And how frequently do you see the GMA out during the season?

Kerrie ALLEN: Personally, very rarely. Sue?

Sue WILLIAMS: I have never seen them.

Elizabeth McCANN: I have never seen them. I have got fantastic view. It is a 180-degree view over the wetland where the shooting happens, and I have never seen the GMA here. I have reported illegal shooting – there has never been follow-up – both to the police and the GMA. I have never seen them.

The CHAIR: All right. Mrs McArthur.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, ladies, all, for appearing. Full transparency – given that you have said on page 47 that I did not declare that I was a member of Field and Game, I am sure that you would have gone on my register of interest to see that I am a member of Field and Game, and in any other posts that I often make it is quite transparent. So are you a member of any political organisation?

Sue WILLIAMS: No.

Elizabeth McCANN: No.

Bev McARTHUR: And you said you represent 90 organisations. Can we have that on notice, that list of 90 organisations that you are representing?

Kerrie ALLEN: They are on our website.

Bev McARTHUR: You conducted that survey in April and May. Did somebody conduct the survey for you?

Kerrie ALLEN: No, it was an online survey.

Bev McARTHUR: Did you use a research company, or did you do it yourself?

Kerrie ALLEN: No, we did it ourselves.

Bev McARTHUR: Okay. How did you find the respondents for that survey?

Kerrie ALLEN: They found us.

Bev McARTHUR: So you promoted the survey using Facebook with, I would have thought, leading ads saying, 'Concerned about the adverse impacts of native duck and quail shooting? Please help stop it by taking our short survey.' Would you agree that this is a leading way to conduct a survey, so it is hardly representative?

Kerrie ALLEN: Where we got the idea from, Mrs McArthur, is the government survey. So the DJPR survey of shooters was only to shooters; it was a closed group and the same thing. The shooters that responded knew that they were making a response to sway policy. So our survey was aimed at being a balance to that.

Bev McARTHUR: Your submission is big on accountability and leans on publicly available information about hunting organisations and members of Parliament, yet your organisation is very secretive. I have seen you claim before that this is due to safety concerns, which, frankly, I find to be a little offensive and a very

convenient excuse. Laurie Levy gave evidence a week and a half ago, and it was clear that he interacts with duck hunters regularly and without incident. Do you disagree with the way Laurie Levy goes about his activities?

Kerrie ALLEN: We are very different organisations. When you are dealing with – sorry, Elizabeth, you can jump in after me.

Elizabeth McCANN: No, we live where the shooting happens. It is a little bit different. We do not live in the city; we live where the shooting happens. We live in small communities where privacy is not as easy. We run businesses where we have employees. You know, we have been subjected to the bullying. We have experienced it, so that is why we are secretive. The bullying is real; we have experienced it.

Bev McARTHUR: So on page 11 of your submission to this inquiry, you claim that, in many cases, answers to the WIT are even provided to test participants. This test is administered by government employees, and the accusations that you make here are serious. Do you have any evidence of this accusation that you can table here today for the committee, or will you provide evidence on notice or withdraw that claim?

Kerrie ALLEN: We will not withdraw it. We can provide evidence. We know people that have sat that test.

Bev McARTHUR: Okay, so that evidence is coming on notice. On page 23 of your submission you state:

RVOTDS' submissions to the regulator each year are all but ignored.

Has it ever occurred to you that that is because your submissions are not accurate?

Kerrie ALLEN: What is not accurate?

Bev McARTHUR: Well, whatever you are suggesting. If they are ignored, why are they ignored?

Kerrie ALLEN: Well, that was our point. They should not be ignored.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, obviously they are not taken seriously.

Kerrie ALLEN: Exactly, which is an issue.

Bev McARTHUR: So on page 26 of your submission you make accusations about Trust for Nature making some sort of exemption for the Heart Morass to, in your words, 'shoot native ducks and quail including with toxic lead'. The WET trust's Heart Morass property is not used for quail hunting and does not have anyone hunting there with lead shot, and the covenanted areas with Trust for Nature have no recreational hunting on them at all. What is the basis of your claim?

Kerrie ALLEN: Wow, there are a few things there to unpack. So we actually have a spreadsheet, which we would be happy to send through after this. This spreadsheet lists over \$1 million just over the last decade of grants and taxpayer contributions that have gone to the WET trust, of which Field and Game Australia is a trustee. The Trust for Nature component of that – there was a \$100,000 donation which was listed in the *Field and Game Australia: Annual Report 2011–12*, page 17. There was another \$504,000 over 10 years from Trust for Nature. That was listed in FGA's 2013–14 annual report, page 11. We have seen through freedom of information the document that outlines how that agreement works, and we are happy to send that through. I might just say, sorry –

Bev McARTHUR: Go ahead.

Kerrie ALLEN: Field and Game fought the release of that document. It nearly went to VCAT. They fought for nearly a year and pulled out the night before the VCAT hearing, and we got the document.

Bev McARTHUR: You also state that you have got 5900 supporters. Are these financial members?

Kerrie ALLEN: It is over 6000 now. Some donate financially; I could not tell you how many. Some donate more than others.

Bev McARTHUR: Do you get any government funding at all?

Kerrie ALLEN: I wish we did.

Bev McARTHUR: You have also said that Geelong Field and Game receive grants. Which grants?

Kerrie ALLEN: Where did we say Geelong Field and Game?

Bev McARTHUR: Well, you accused me of saying they did not receive any grants. You obviously think they did. So what grants did they receive?

Kerrie ALLEN: I am not, off the top of my head, aware of Geelong Field and Game, but we can look into that.

Bev McARTHUR: Exactly.

Kerrie ALLEN: What I can tell you is that on page 47 of our submission – so I have outlined the government donations that have gone to WET. The government donations that have gone to Field and Game are outlined on page 47 of our submission. They total just over \$2.3 million.

Bev McARTHUR: Yes. So I was talking about Geelong Field and Game. You accused me of suggesting that they were lying – I was lying. Do you retract that accusation?

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mrs McArthur. Your time has expired.

Kerrie ALLEN: No, we do not – well, none of us said that you were lying, so we are not –

Bev McARTHUR: Okay, so an inaccurate accusation you made in your submission is not being retracted.

The CHAIR: You are at time, Mrs McArthur. Mr Bourman, you have the call.

Jeff BOURMAN: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for your presentation. This goes to everyone. I am not going to anyone in particular. In a Facebook post on 31 May you referred to the ETU as bullyboys, and then referred directly to the elected secretary of that union, Mr Troy Gray. What do you mean by calling unions bullyboys?

Kerrie ALLEN: Can you bring up that post?

Jeff BOURMAN: Not right now.

Kerrie ALLEN: It is not ringing a bell with me. I do not know if my colleagues can remember.

Jeff BOURMAN: Well, I am happy to do it later. I do not have it handy with me.

Sue WILLIAMS: Yes, for sure. It is not coming to me either. Was this during the election?

Jeff BOURMAN: 31 May, so it would not have been. Well, I do not know exactly what was going on around that time other than what we are doing at the moment.

Sue WILLIAMS: Okay.

Jeff BOURMAN: In your submission to the review of the wildlife regulations, point 5, you state that:

Shooting should only be allowed ...at least 750 metres away from residents, the road or the public.
That is fair.

This is the distance shotgun pellets can travel, potentially causing blindness if they were to land in eyes or other injury. So far so good. The current public safety regulations that stipulate that protesters have to stay at least 10 metres away from duck hunters are part of the consideration, I believe, of the committee. Based on what you as an organisation have said, perhaps protesters should not be allowed any closer than 750 metres for their own safety. What do you think about that?

Kerrie ALLEN: The problem we have got with that is that unfortunately many people live within 60 metres of shooting, so they cannot not be there. Our survey actually found that there were nearly 40 per cent that lived within 3 kilometres, and the noise of a shotgun can travel that distance. About a quarter lived within 1 kilometre; 16 per cent lived within 350 metres; 5 per cent lived within 60.

Jeff BOURMAN: But still, there is a safety aspect in that you guys seem to think that it will go 750 metres, and yet protesters are allowed at 10 metres. I would have suggested from a safety point of view – and I have already tried to move this in Parliament –

Elizabeth McCANN: We are not protesters. We have never protested. It is not an issue we [Zoom dropout] –

Jeff BOURMAN: We will agree to disagree. Protesters are allowed to get within 10 metres of someone with a loaded firearm. I am an ex-police officer. I understand what firearms can do. I have never understood that. So I would hope that if duck hunting was allowed to continue, I would get at least some support to get people away from other people with a loaded firearm. It seems to be very counterintuitive to allow people that close – maybe not 750 metres, but I would expect at least 30 metres, which is what the GMA reckons for a clean kill on a duck.

Kerrie ALLEN: So, coming back to I guess our main focus, which is regional Victorians and the impact to regional Victorians, the number of people that live within that zone is huge, and we cannot tell them to move.

Jeff BOURMAN: If I may interrupt, because we are on limited time, that is not really the point. I am not disputing that people live within zones, but within 10 metres is 10 metres, and you said 750 metres from a safety point of view. Clearly, I would never agree with the 750 metres, because I do not think shotguns can go that far, but anyway. We will ask a ballisticsian about that one day. I would expect at least support from you guys to at least increase the distance from protesters – whether you are or not – for their own safety.

Elizabeth McCANN: Sure. I do not have a problem agreeing that 10 metres is too close.

Jeff BOURMAN: Excellent.

Elizabeth McCANN: We do not protest.

Jeff BOURMAN: In this instance I am not accusing you of protesting. I am just saying you are –

Elizabeth McCANN: I think 10 metres is too close. I think the shooters should be further away.

Kerrie ALLEN: I might add to that if I can. The *Firearm Safety Code*, which as an ex-policeman you would be familiar with, actually states the danger range is between 250 metres and 750 metres of a shotgun. Now, add wind to that. So, if you add 50-kilometre winds to that, you need to add another 500 metres to that range.

Jeff BOURMAN: I know the answer to this – but do you know the ballistic efficiency of, say, number 4 steel shot in a 50-kilometre-an-hour wind or something like that? And also –

Kerrie ALLEN: I have just read the *Firearm Safety Code*, as we all have.

Jeff BOURMAN: At 750 metres it would probably sprinkle. A rifle is a completely different story. It may go that far, but lethal distance is very unlikely. We are going to end up arguing about a point neither of us can really prove at the moment.

The CHAIR: As fascinating as my ballistics lesson is –

Jeff BOURMAN: I will send you a video one day. On page 26 of your submission you write that:

... it may alarm the public to know there are shared Directors between GMA, TFN –
being the Trust for Nature –

and Catchment Management Authorities –

which have influence over where water flows are going. You have privilege here, so there is no need for innuendo. Can you name the people that you are making accusations of impropriety about and detail those accusations? You have parliamentary –

Kerrie ALLEN: They are not accusations.

Jeff BOURMAN: Well, the accusation is that they are sharing directors. So, if you can name those directors, you have parliamentary privilege. As long as you abide by that, you can fire away. I am inviting you to fire away. Pardon the pun.

Kerrie ALLEN: There is no innuendo at all. It is a fact. One that comes to mind is Dr Sandra Brizga. There are possibly more, but that is the one that comes to mind now.

Jeff BOURMAN: Okay. It does say plural, but I am not going to labour the point. I am going quickly, because we have only got 6-and-a-bit minutes. On page 26 of your submission you write that the wounding reduction action plan suggests that the wound rate is 80 per cent. Even the RSPCA's boldest estimate does not even get close to that. I do not even think under the wildest reading of that wounding reduction action plan it actually says that. Can you explain that statement – why you think it is 80 per cent – or at least support that statement?

Kerrie ALLEN: Sure. So, with the latest WRAP document, the wounding reduction action plan, the GMA methodology that is stepped out in section 5 – I am just going to refer to my notes, because I wrote this down.

Jeff BOURMAN: No, no. That is fine –

Kerrie ALLEN: They talk about the wound rate being the percentage of birds X-rayed with pellets embedded in their bodies – so this is their definition. Then they talk about the crippling rate, which is the wound rate over the harvest rate. If we just look at these simple calculations and take 7.5 per cent, which is what GMA found when they tracked those 596 ducks – so if that is the wound rate – then you look at 262,000 harvested birds divided by 2.9 million birds, which is what the helicopter survey counted –

Jeff BOURMAN: If I may interrupt, because my timer has just gone off, I have one other question. You are extrapolating that from data?

Kerrie ALLEN: Yes.

Jeff BOURMAN: You have not actually had any research done; you have got other people's data and you are extrapolating from that.

Kerrie ALLEN: This is GMA's data.

Jeff BOURMAN: Yes. I am not disputing that. Okay. One last thing: you have talked about tonnes of lead shot going here, there and everywhere – and plastic wads, and I agree plastic wads are a problem. Lead shot was banned for duck hunting in 2002. I am unable to understand the constant referral to lead shot. It does happen in quail, but quail happens on private land, and if people do not want the lead on their land, they just say no. Why the obsession with lead shot when it is not a thing anymore?

Kerrie ALLEN: Two things: unfortunately, there is illegal use of lead for shooting ducks reported most years, so even though it was banned, there are still shooters using it for ducks; secondly, quail, where lead is still legal, is not just on private land, it is on public land as well.

Jeff BOURMAN: Predominately. And if anyone uses lead shot, I do expect that they get charged. There is no excuse for it, except for quail of course.

The CHAIR: All right. Ms Watt.

Sheena WATT: Hello. Thank you all for being here. In the opening remarks – I think perhaps it was you, Elizabeth – you mentioned that you represent some First Nations clans. Can you talk to me about who that is? Is that publicly available? Are you able to share that with us?

Elizabeth McCANN: I believe they are listed on the website.

Kerrie ALLEN: Yes, they are. I am trying to remember; the website is so huge. It is in 'Information' and the '2022 Alliance Open Letter'. You will see there is a list of 90 organisations, and I think there are about 15 First Nations clans.

Sheena WATT: About 15, okay. I think there was an earlier question on notice, from perhaps Mrs McArthur, about your membership, and perhaps I can pick that up as part of that piece earlier. I want to go to page 11, I think it is, where you mentioned the shotgunning education program and it being voluntary. This is something I have not heard much about. Can you talk to me a little bit about this program, this test and any other additional information? Who is this run by? What is it about? Thanks.

Kerrie ALLEN: I think it is run by GMA, maybe in conjunction with FGA. I am not sure. We can come back to you on that. But it is sort of the next level of shooter proficiency testing. So you have got the WIT –

Sheena WATT: Yes, which is the identification test.

Kerrie ALLEN: which is the basic test that they all have to pass, and then the SEP, the shotgunning education program, is the next one up, which is more a practical test. But unfortunately it has had very low take-up.

Sheena WATT: Low take-up, okay. All right. I just did not see any reference to that. I will have to find more information about it. I am just trying to get to it now. But that is all right. Thank you. I will perhaps look that one up. On page 20 you are talking about the biases of the GMA with respect to shooters and their complaint mechanisms. There was quite a lot of information in there, which I found particularly interesting, particularly around the delay of time for action. Do you have any particular recommendations about how to improve GMA's complaint mechanisms, apart from –

Sue WILLIAMS: Not being needed.

Sheena WATT: Yes. Those that are stated.

Sue WILLIAMS: Do you want me to speak to this?

Kerrie ALLEN: Go for it.

Sue WILLIAMS: Well, being out of hours, which is when most of the problems would occur, I think – before office hours – it would be good if GMA had people available. If opening time is at 5 am, at sunrise or prior to sunrise, then that is when there should be people available for people like us to ring and say, 'Listen, this is happening at such and such a place right next door to me; is there an officer available to go and check it out?' But there is not anyone there when the problems are happening.

Sheena WATT: So not just that it be available during the legal times of the season, which is, as I understand, 8 am, but I am assuming people might want to make complaints about actions and activities outside of those hours.

Sue WILLIAMS: Yes. The other thing is that –

Elizabeth McCANN: Sorry, Sue. A lot of the illegal shooting is out of hours. That is part of what a lot of the complaints are.

Sheena WATT: So apart from hours of operation to take complaints, are there any other specific recommendations?

Sue WILLIAMS: Increases in compliance monitoring. They would just need oodles of people to be across all of the places people shoot.

Elizabeth McCANN: I do not think they have got enough people to cover vast areas.

Kerrie ALLEN: It is not possible.

Sheena WATT: The resourcing capacity of the GMA. I understand you received a GMA board paper released under FOI – in 3–A6 – which states that 2.2 million shells and wads are pumped into our environment each year from duck shooters. That was quite a surprising fact. Can you talk to me about that number. Is that those that are not collected? Or is that the number of actual shots taken? I just need some clarification around that.

Kerrie ALLEN: I will grab this one. That was the figure that was in that board paper, and it was referencing all the plastic wads and half the plastic cartridges because they were assuming about half the cartridges would be picked up. It is too difficult to pick up the wads. The alarming thing though is that that figure did not include the plastic shotgun components from quail shooting, so that is just duck.

Sheena WATT: Okay. It is only ducks. Does anyone in your group do any clean-up activities or restoration efforts around that in particular? We have heard that that is something that other groups have participated in.

Kerrie ALLEN: Constant. Elizabeth, do you want to kick this off, and I will jump in?

Elizabeth McCANN: Yes. I think our most recent newsletter has a little bit of information about our supporters and the work that they do for restoration work and rehabilitation work in the environment. As a landholder myself I do a lot of tree planting works to revegetate along the waterways and provide some wildlife corridors, and my family – and my ancestors also – do a lot of tree planting works. Yes, as I think it said in our newsletter our Facebook page, there are examples of a lot of groups that team up with Landcare and catchment management associations to do conservation works.

Sheena WATT: Okay. Lovely. I still have probably enough time for one more question, which is that you reported about the growing number of birdwatchers and that that is an increasingly popular pursuit for outdoor recreation enthusiasts. Do you think there is any additional infrastructure that we need to consider investing in to make outdoor birdwatching – I assume indoor birdwatching is not a thing – a very attractive tourism and ecotourism venture? Or is how it is right now perfect?

Kerrie ALLEN: This is the beautiful thing about birdwatching – that the assets are already here. We do not need thousands of dollars in infrastructure going in. They are here already. So the more natural it is, the better.

Sheena WATT: Okay. That is my time.

The CHAIR: Ms Copsey.

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you. Thanks very much for being here today and sharing your insights with the committee. The reports that you have relayed of failure to act when evidence is being provided directly to GMA are concerning. From the feedback you get from your members, I am interested to understand how big a gap you think there is between what is reported in compliance activity versus what is actually happening out there on the wetlands.

Kerrie ALLEN: The survey picked up on that specific thing. So anecdotally, yes, we hear it all the time. The stats that came in from the survey of those 821 respondents, about a quarter said they had witnessed what they believed was illegal behaviour. Of the ones that actually reported that to authorities – and a lot do not; they just feel there is no point – just over 10 per cent felt that those reports were handled appropriately, so that was a bit of a red flag.

Katherine COPSEY: And by ‘handled appropriately’, that would not necessarily mean that there was an outcome; you mean in that sense just that it was accepted and taken seriously?

Kerrie ALLEN: That was probably part of it.

Katherine COPSEY: Okay. Thank you. I am interested also in your perspective. We have heard a fair bit about varying perspectives on the economic contribution of duck shooting as a recreational activity or a tourism activity. I am interested in your personal reflections – you mentioned being business owners in your communities – and also in those conveyed by members of your organisation on the impact of duck shooting in that way, and also whether there are substitution activities or other activities that are impacted during duck-shooting season.

Kerrie ALLEN: I will jump in first again.

Katherine COPSEY: Big topic.

Kerrie ALLEN: So again, the survey showed that over 90 per cent of respondents did not believe that shooting helped their local economies, which is huge. The PBO, the Parliamentary Budget Office, I think the latest report put the net impact of bird shooting at \$12 million. Our concern is that that is still based on the RMCG report. There are some questions around that, which have been fleshed out during this process. One thing that that RMCG report did not account for were the costs, so costs of law enforcement; compliance; lost tourism; lost productivity – people cannot work from home, shiftworkers cannot sleep; grants to shooting clubs et cetera, et cetera. Chances are the real economic impact of shooting is in fact negative.

And then if you look at what we could replace it with, getting back to birdwatching, we have got a pastime in birdwatching that had in the first year the data was collected 1.4 million international and domestic tourists having birdwatched in our country, and they spent \$3 billion. So the opportunity is huge. Victoria has stunning wetlands – Loch Garry, beautiful; Kerang, stunning; Boort. We have just got the best opportunity, and what I was saying before: the assets are here; we do not need to throw money at it.

Katherine COPSEY: And the other topic I am interested in – do you have a sense of where your members are located geographically, in a broad sense?

Sue WILLIAMS: I actually went through all of the postcodes of our respondents, and I was pleasantly very surprised to see they were everywhere – every border, all throughout the whole of Victoria. I was expecting to see, you know, a pocket here, pockets there, where there are big wetlands, but that was not the case at all. In fact I did a little test with myself last night and I just looked at a place on the map, got the postcode, did a search on my spreadsheet, and three times out of probably 10 I found it. So for that smaller number of people to be spread across our state, it says a fair bit about how far concerns are spread.

Kerrie ALLEN: That was the survey, and then if we also look at supporters outside the survey –

Katherine COPSEY: The membership, yes.

Kerrie ALLEN: there are probably pockets, to be fair. The west, we have got quite a lot in Geelong, Ballarat, but they are sort of all over the shop.

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you. One thing that has been raised in evidence before the committee is claimed mental health benefits, you know, for those people who engage in shooting of native wildlife. I wonder if you could comment on the impact that the activity has on the wellbeing of your members.

Kerrie ALLEN: Over 50 per cent of our survey respondents said they felt stress and anxiety because of bird shooting nearby, and outside of the survey, which was fairly recent, we hear that a lot. We hear that people are really troubled hearing the gunfire, knowing what that gunfire represents, seeing birds fall out of the sky, seeing the dead and injured birds near where people live. It is not pleasant. Elizabeth, you might have something to add on that.

Elizabeth McCANN: Yes. Look, it is pretty horrible. I do not feel comfortable approaching someone who is trespassing on my property who is armed with a gun. I feel a little bit like I am being invaded. I do not feel safe. As Kerrie mentioned, when you hear the shots going out you know it is killing these native birds that you have watched during the year and that you have tried to create habitat for. They are just getting slaughtered, and anything else that gets in the way gets slaughtered.

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Ms Purcell.

Georgie PURCELL: Thanks, Chair. Thanks very much for appearing here today. As a regional Victorian myself, born and bred, and who still lives in regional Victoria, I just want to thank you for representing the voices of those who do not want duck shooting in their communities. This is obviously an inquiry into native bird shooting. We have heard a lot from people on either side of the duck-shooting debate. What we have not

heard a lot about is quail shooting, and I know that as an organisation you focus heavily on that as well. Could you talk to us a little bit more about the issues with quail shooting?

Kerrie ALLEN: We have been fighting the quail fight for a while. One of our biggest issues was that up until very recently there were no population counts. Lead was still being used. The stubble quail, which is allowed to be shot, looks very similar to the other species of quail which are not allowed to be shot and the plains-wanderer, which is a threatened species. There did not seem to be any rigour around protecting quail or the protected species. It just was flying under the radar until we started making an issue of it.

Georgie PURCELL: Thank you. No-one else wanted to add to that? We are often hearing a narrative that the push to ban native bird shooting is an inner-city leftie issue, and as we all know, that is certainly not the case. Could you give us an example of the people that you hear from – who they are, what they do, where they live and what their concerns are when it comes to recreational duck shooting in their communities?

Kerrie ALLEN: The main themes seem to be around the safety aspect. People are living close to it; they are scared for their kids and their animals. There is the noise that we have been mentioning and loss of amenity. You might find one here and there that is not fussed, maybe because they do not come across it – they are not near it – but most people have an issue with it these days.

Sue WILLIAMS: I do not know anybody that does not in my town – and my neighbours. I can speak about my family, and we all from country Victoria. I was born in country Victoria as well. I have grown up with this stuff, and I have always hated it. Over the last few years it has been absolutely distressing, until I found Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting. Since then I have had support from the other members of our group and certainly a lot of support from our supporters, who we support as well. It has helped to be able to channel that negative, horrible sound of gunshots outside my window into fighting to have those birds protected and all of our wetland animals indeed – all of them, not just the ducks. I am sick of seeing all of the other creatures that are killed ‘by accident’ or just because someone is a bit excited with their shotgun. It is just not on. No more duck shooting, please – please.

Elizabeth McCANN: My neighbours on both sides of me would like duck shooting banned. One neighbour has horses that he has to move off the property. They have put up signs along their boundary to keep shooters off their property. The other neighbour suffers post-traumatic stress as he is a war veteran. The shooting is pretty unpleasant for him. He is also a farmer and has problems with trespass on his property.

Georgie PURCELL: Thank you very much. The other thing that we often get told is that a ban on duck shooting would be an attack on country Victorians or regional Victorians. In your experience is it the people that live in these towns going duck shooting or is it people coming into these towns and going duck shooting?

Kerrie ALLEN: My experience, it is more people coming in.

Sue WILLIAMS: From the area that I am from it is possibly more locals than visitors, because we are further from the big smoke.

Elizabeth McCANN: Yes, mine I think would be about 50–50.

Georgie PURCELL: Thank you. I know you have spoken a little bit about the impact that shotgun noise associated with duck shooting has on regional Victorians. Can you tell us more about that?

Kerrie ALLEN: We have looked into that. So a typical shotgun is about 155 decibels. We have spoken to an acoustic engineer who said, based on our survey results of where people live, that at 60 metres that noise level is still going to be around 100 decibels. Now, there are a lot of variables – wind, whether it is open country or whatever – but 100 decibels is way over the guidelines. The guidelines are 35 to 50 decibels. Coming into 350 metres, and I think, what was it, 16 per cent of our survey respondents lived within 350 metres, the decibel level was still – I have got to look at my notes, sorry – 85 decibels, so well over. Its noise is shocking. Now, EPA actually has restrictions on the use of gas guns. Gas guns are quieter. They are about 122 decibels, and you are not allowed to use them within 300 metres of a dwelling. So noise is an issue.

Georgie PURCELL: Did you need to add something else?

Kerrie ALLEN: Yes – thank you, Sue. So rifle ranges have very, very strict regulations in place – noise, safety, all of that – and yet duck shooters seem to have free rein over all this public land close to where people live.

Georgie PURCELL: I have 13 seconds. Could you tell us briefly what your views are on the conservation efforts by shooters, or the so-called conservation efforts?

Kerrie ALLEN: We would be happier if they practised conservation without shooting native bird life and putting lead and plastic into the environment.

Georgie PURCELL: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you all for coming along today and for giving us your evidence in this inquiry.

Sue WILLIAMS: Thank you for listening.

The CHAIR: You will shortly receive a copy of the transcript to review before we publish it on our website. The committee will take a short break before we get our next witness ready. Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.