

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2022-23 Budget estimates

Melbourne—Friday, 27 May 2022

MEMBERS

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Danny O'Brien—Deputy Chair

Mr Rodney Barton

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr Gary Maas

Mrs Beverley McArthur

Mr James Newbury

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Nina Taylor

WITNESSES

Ms Melissa Horne MP, Minister for Fishing and Boating, and

Ms Katherine Grech, Director, Fishing and Boating Infrastructure, Department of Transport; and

Mr Travis Dowling, Chief Executive Officer, Victorian Fisheries 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.

I begin by acknowledging the traditional Aboriginal owners of the land on which we are meeting. We pay our respects to them, their elders past, present and emerging as well as elders from other communities who may be with us today.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2022–23 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 this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

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

We again welcome Minister Horne, on this occasion in the fisheries portfolio. We invite you to make a 5-minute opening statement, and this will be followed by questions from the committee.

Visual presentation.

Ms HORNE: Thank you very much, Chair. I am pleased to advise that work has continued at pace to deliver on this government's unprecedented investment in boating and fishing. Every year recreational fishing and boating contribute around \$6.8 billion to the Victorian economy, and as a major driver of regional tourism, it is as critical as ever to our post-COVID economic recovery. More than 150 boating projects are being delivered, together with major infrastructure investment for our lakes, rivers, bays and inlets, combined with the stocking of a record 10 million fish. Chair, it really makes us the envy of the country.

If you have a look at the Better Boating Fund slide, last year the Victorian government collected \$33.2 million in revenue from the registration of more than 217 000 vessels and from more than 173 000 marine licences. Boating stakeholders have an expectation that the government is transparent in how money raised from marine licensing and vessel registration is spent. That is why we established the Better Boating Fund to facilitate urgent upgrades and the continual maintenance of facilities. We continue to provide free launching across Victorian boat ramps, making it cheaper as well as easier for Victorians to get out onto the water.

As part of the establishment of the Better Boating Fund the *Victorian Recreational Boating Strategy* was developed to guide future priorities for investment. The strategy is a Victorian-first document establishing the vision for the state's boating facilities through to 2030. It was developed, as the head of Better Boating Victoria here next to me knows, with several rounds of in-depth consultation with boaters from across the state throughout 2020 and 2021. This consultation saw eight key boating regions identified in the strategy and demonstrates the way that recreational boating experiences can be improved across all of them.

Another key element of this strategy was the formation of a ministerial boating round table, which brought together industry leaders to help guide the strategy's development. The strategy will be implemented via annual action plans, which detail how the Better Boating Fund will be invested. A key part of our strategy is the progress of a pipeline of shovel-ready boating projects. In the last year planning has progressed at Altona, Cowes, Werribee, St Leonards, Inverloch, Cape Conran, Avalon, Limeburners, along the Murray and lakes in the Wimmera, Laanecoorie and Howqua Inlet to name a few. Under this government our boating infrastructure

is seeing massive transformation and reform thanks to our commitment to establish a dedicated boating fund and strategy.

If we turn to fishing, though, the Andrews Labor government committed to improving recreational fishing through its \$35 million Go Fishing Victoria plan, which is aimed at getting more people fishing, more often and in more places. I am pleased to advise you that the Go Fishing Victoria plan, which commenced in 2018, has been fully implemented. We have stocked, as I said, a record 10 million fish into Victoria's rivers, lakes and inlets. We have built a new \$7 million fish hatchery in northern Victoria to focus on species such as Murray cod and golden perch. We have invested \$27 million into the removal of 35 netting licences from Port Phillip Bay and \$8.5 million into the removal of commercial fishing from the Gippsland Lakes, which is an important step to rebuild fish stocks. We have invested \$600 000 to upgrade eight recreational fishing platforms and installed or replaced 12 fish cleaning tables at key fishing locations, including four at our busiest boat ramp, the Patterson River. We have opened Crown land riverfrontages for recreational fishing and camping, with 29 sites currently open to the public.

Chair, the Victorian government is continuing to invest in our valuable fisheries and boating to support the needs of Victorians. We are committed to ensuring that all Victorians have affordable and ready access to well-stocked rivers and waterways so we can foster the growth of this sector.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Mrs McArthur.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you. Minister, can you tell me what is the expected revenue from boating and fishing licences in the 2022–23 financial year? And can I remind you of your election promise to recreational fishers that the Better Boating Fund would return every dollar of marine licensing and boat registration fees to improving boating safety and facilities. The fund was made operational in July 2021—every dollar going back to it.

Ms HORNE: Thank you very much for your question, and it is a really important question. I have got to say, I really appreciated that there was bipartisan support to establish this Better Boating Fund, because it is a key commitment, which is why it is enshrined in legislation that this fund exists. It goes back—as I mentioned in my presentation, last year there was \$33.2 million, which has been directly invested back into this massive pipeline of work that we have got going. Whether it is upgrading boating facilities, whether it is improving safety, whether it is education or promotional material, every single cent of that has gone back into that Better Boating Fund. But we know that people expect that transparency, so that is why in October this year we will allocate the fully acquitted Better Boating Fund out to the public so people can see exactly where every single cent has been spent.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Minister. You say in your presentation you have got 29 sites approved for camping on private land which has riverfrontages, but you are reducing the number of officers, so how can you possibly guarantee to the public that these camping sites are going to be properly regulated in the interests of safety of farmers and property owners, with reduced numbers of staff?

Ms HORNE: There are a couple of points that I would not mind just making there. Firstly, this is Crown land riverfrontage, so it is not private property, and—

Mrs McARTHUR: You have to enter private property usually to get to the Crown land.

Ms HORNE: Well, no, those sites are being excluded. It is only Crown land that is available for camping that can be accessed through public access points. On top of that, if you go through the budget papers you will actually see that there are more fishing officers, so I think there are two points that you have made that are not quite accurate.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Minister. Can you tell us what fish stock assessment led to the reduction of secondary catch in Port Phillip Bay from a proposed 18 tonnes to 3 tonnes?

Ms HORNE: Thank you very much. This is work that has been carried out by the VFA. It was part of an important commitment to remove nets from the bay, and that again had bipartisan support, because we know that it is so important not only to have supported the commercial fishers with a significant buyout scheme but also too to support recreational fishers. It has ended up delivering approximately an extra 600 tonnes of fish to

the recreational sector. There were countless rounds of consultation that the VFA undertook with the sector, and that was the decision that was finally landed on.

Mrs McARTHUR: So, Minister, how does the reduction in the catch of local seafood, sustainably caught, properly regulated, support positive outcomes for Victorians who would like to consume freshly caught fish? Aren't you depriving Victorians of locally caught seafood at an affordable price?

Ms HORNE: Not at all. In fact, as the Member for Gippsland South knows too well, having Corner Inlet in his electorate, the fisheries down there are absolutely producing first-class product that is available across not only all of Victoria and Melbourne but also is going to Sydney and to export markets. We have got a range of really viable fisheries across all of Victoria, whether it is your crayfish down at Warrnambool or in Apollo Bay through to sardines, pilchards and prawns and other fantastic seafood out at Lakes Entrance or that really high-quality product that is being harvested out of Corner Inlet. Victorians, I think, have got enviable access to some of the best seafood industry in Australia.

Mrs McARTHUR: Farmed fish. Minister, can you explain why commercial net fishing is banned while charter operations make unlimited catches without any questions over the size and quality of their catch?

Ms HORNE: Travis, I might get you.

Mr DOWLING: Absolutely.

Mrs McARTHUR: I asked the minister.

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur, it is entirely inappropriate if the minister would like to ask her officers to supplement her answer, but I will hand it to the minister.

Ms HORNE: Look, I think in relation to your question, fisheries are very complex. There are commonwealth waters that have got some trawling going on there at the moment and we have got licences that exist in Victorian waters. Whether it the eight longline snapper licences that are existing in Port Phillip Bay or it is the new set of licences that have been created that allow people to sell directly from their boats or it is the recreational sector, it is made up of different things. But these are regulated by the VFA, and the enforcement of those is appropriate for the VFA to talk through.

Mrs McARTHUR: Okay. Minister, can you explain—

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur, I am sorry, you put a proposition that the minister has indicated is appropriate for the VFA to respond to.

Mrs McARTHUR: Excuse me, you are using up my time. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur, could you please not talk over me. You put a proposition, which the—

Mrs McARTHUR: You have interrupted me.

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur!

Mr NEWBURY: That is okay.

Mrs McARTHUR: That is okay?

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur!

Mr NEWBURY: That is okay because we are part of the opposition.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, you do not have the call. The VFA is the appropriate person to which to direct the question. The minister has informed you of it—

Mr NEWBURY: Here we go. This is just nuts. This is just embarrassing.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury!

Mrs McARTHUR: Chair, the minister has answered the question. I will move on to my second question.

Mr NEWBURY: No, you cannot.

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur, your time has expired.

Mrs McARTHUR: Because of you taking our time up.

Mr NEWBURY: This is so embarrassing.

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur, you put a proposition to the witnesses in front of you—

Mr NEWBURY: Which she finished.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury!

Mrs McARTHUR: The minister answered the question, Chair.

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur, the minister said that it was appropriate, given that the enforcement issues are a matter for the VFA, that the VFA have the opportunity to respond to the proposition—

Mrs McARTHUR: Well, then I will ask my next question.

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur, please stop interrupting me—that it is appropriate that the VFA have the opportunity to respond to the proposition you put. Perhaps the VFA would like to take that question on notice, because they have not had the opportunity to put forward the information that you requested.

Mrs McARTHUR: Please do not take up my time with your interruptions.

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur, you are out of order and your time has expired. I will pass the call to Mr Richardson.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister and department officials, for joining us today. Wow. Can we drop a line into budget paper 3, page 351?

Mr NEWBURY: He has been working on that one.

Mr RICHARDSON: Here we go. You might learn something about Brighton. There has been a stack going on in the fishing portfolio. Recently we were out in my patch with the Member for Carrum on some improvements. But I am wondering if you can outline what has been achieved and what is left to do that is outlined in budget paper 3, page 351.

Ms HORNE: Thank you very much. It was a great day, wasn't it, down there seeing those new fish cleaning tables at our busiest boat ramp. It was absolutely wonderful. As I have mentioned, we have banned commercial net fishing in Gippsland Lakes through a compulsory buyout of a number of licences, and this was done under an amendment to the marine and fisheries legislation. We promised to build a new fish hatchery up in Shepparton. That facility has now opened, and I think it was delivered in almost record time. If you get a chance to go up there, take it, because it is absolutely incredible. The innovation that has gone into the thinking of how we actually turn around what was an old dairy farm that is next to the Goulburn River—there are a series of ponds that have been dug out, and there are pipes in place so that fish, whether it is brood stock or it is the little fish that are grown but are hatched out there, can then be moved and then put into trucks to be released into our rivers and waterways—is fantastic. What they are hatching up there is both Murray cod and golden perch.

We have also given fishers and boaters access to more waterways across the state. So there are non-petrol-motor small boats that are now allowed on the Upper Coliban, Lauriston, Malmsbury and Barkers Creek reservoirs, giving those boats more access to them. And also Barkers Creek and Upper Coliban have got those boat launching facilities and new car parks, which is quite exciting up there too.

What else are we doing? We are continuing to work—and I think with a change of government federally it might give us more opportunity—to seek further protection of our southern bluefin tuna with the federal government and review the current arrangements for recreational and commercial fishers. We have put three reefs into the bay, with the latest kingfish reef going in off Point Nepean just last week, which is incredibly

exciting. Also too the VFA have restarted the Fishing For All program. All of these things were election commitments that we have delivered.

Mr RICHARDSON: I take you now to budget paper 3, page 352. You mentioned the 10 million fish that have been stocked in Victorian waterways over the last 12 months, which I understand is a national record. Are you able to outline for the committee's benefit how these fish have been shared across the state?

Ms HORNE: Thank you. It is pretty cool to have a nation-first fish stocking event. Not only is it encouraging more people to get out and fish more often but it has also been incredibly pleasing to be able to grow and then stock some of our threatened species. It is so important to be able to support the health of these in our rivers and waterways. So fish are stocked in 210 waterways across the state, and there have been a number of regional fish stocking consultations with the VFA along with VRFish. It has been things like Murray cod, golden perch, Macquarie perch, trout cod and Australian bass. I do know that out at Metung we are in our second year at the moment of a trial with dusky flathead stocking out there, which has been done with some of the traditional owners out there. That is a three-year trial, and it will be interesting to see how that progresses, because I do not believe that dusky flathead have ever before been grown in commercial quantities and then released, so that will be great. We have got our two fish hatcheries—Snobs Creek and Arcadia—that are pumping out these fingerlings.

Mr RICHARDSON: I take you to a really important topic for anyone who is on Port Phillip Bay or Western Port, and that is the removal of nets out of the bay. I am wondering for the benefit of this committee if you could outline what that means for recreational fishing.

Ms HORNE: What that means for recreational fishing, as I mentioned, is it is basically about 600 tonnes of additional fish that are out there in the bay which are now available to recreational fishers. We know that more people are going fishing than ever before. Not only has the removal of the nets been important but also getting that recreational sector back, and we have approached that through a number of different strategies. The VFA runs these awesome clinics that teach kids how to fish, and it combined that with our Women in Recreational Fishing program, of which I believe there has been a chapter set up in Queensland because ours has been so successful. It is really exciting. But I was down in Williamstown a couple of weeks ago where the VFA was running one of those clinics along with our fishing ambassador Bachar Houli, a passionate fisherman. Now he is retired he goes out fishing four times a week out of Altona. It is fantastic.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Is he retired or is he a fisherman?

Ms HORNE: You can do both, can't you?

Mr D O'BRIEN: I think he retired from football. Anyway—bygones. Move on. Sorry.

Mr RICHARDSON: You mentioned the Arcadia fish hatchery. What are the benefits of the recently opened Arcadia fish hatchery, if you could outline that for the committee's benefit?

Ms HORNE: Well, it focuses on native fish predominantly. That is that key part in the stocking of those 10 million fish. There are those important ponds, but also too we will be building a visitors centre up there as well to be able to encourage a bit of local tourism.

Mr RICHARDSON: Outstanding. Staying on budget paper 3, page 352—taking you to the Better Boating Fund in your presentation, Minister—it refers to some of the better boating initiatives. Given this is the first year that the fund has been in operation, I am wondering if you could outline for the committee the details of how this is making boating better.

Ms HORNE: Thank you very much. As I mentioned, the Better Boating Fund needs to be allocated through four different areas. In this current financial year if you look at the infrastructure investment, for example, we have spent more than \$10 million improving facilities at, say, Lake Bullen Merri and Warrnambool's Lady Bay boat ramp. We have spent more than \$13 million on boating safety. Now, that includes education to support our waterway managers and improve navigation aids. Those navigation aids have pretty much gone all across the state—from Yarrowonga to Williamstown—and they are so important to be able to protect people when they are out on the water. We have spent more than \$5 million to improve access, maintain facilities and on ongoing fee removal and more than \$2.2 million on access, and that includes dredging work. There has been

\$1.5 million on creating boating destinations, boating promotion and better data. In addition there have been a series of grants that have been made out of the Better Boating Fund. In March this year we made getting out on the water much more accessible. As you would know, you have got your all-access pontoon down at Mordialloc, and how fantastic is that?

Mr RICHARDSON: Yes, it is excellent.

Ms HORNE: Not only is it great to be able to see people getting out there, but making sure that it is accessible is so important so that people of all abilities can enjoy everything that we have got. We have got grants that will improve boating access not only at Tootgarook and Half Moon Bay but Kananook Creek in Frankston—it is just happening all over the place. There is work going on down at Paynesville on the Eagle Point boat ramp, the City of Geelong has got a 25-year dredging maintenance plan—you name it. There is an unprecedented increase. There was previously \$5 million a year, now it is \$33.2 million in just this last year alone, and as more people get out boating more often, the return to boaters will be so much greater.

Mr RICHARDSON: Fantastic. Thanks, Minister.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Richardson. Mr Barton.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister. Boating safety in marine rescue Victoria—this question is very important to our volunteers. How does the Better Boating Fund support the volunteer marine organisations? And is that support—guaranteed—going to continue into the future?

Ms HORNE: Thank you very much for that. There is \$1.9 million of ongoing and indexed funding for Emergency Management Victoria for that fulfilment of marine search and rescue services that are being provided. That is out of the Better Boating Fund. And a bit of a shout-out. This is a volunteer network, and a bit of a shout-out to all the volunteers that are out there doing that important work to keep so many people safe. We heard overwhelmingly from people, as we co-designed that fund, that safety was paramount, so making sure there is that ongoing safety function is not only in the legislation but it is a commitment to continue to do so.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Minister. If we can go to budget paper 3, page 352 refers to 'Recreational boating and fishing infrastructure improvements delivered'. I note the target number of projects for the next year is three. That is correct?

Ms HORNE: Yes.

Mr BARTON: Currently there are no opportunities for recreational fishing within the City of Whitehorse. It has been suggested that Blackburn Lake would be an ideal opportunity to introduce recreational fishing into that community. Will any of these fishing infrastructure projects deliver a recreational fishing opportunity to residents of the City of Whitehorse?

Ms HORNE: Thank you very much for your question. You and I have spoken at length about the City of Whitehorse and wanting to actually get fish into that lake. That has been subject to a number of discussions with Whitehorse council by the VFA, but what I would like to do is come out there and have a conversation with you and the City of Whitehorse to see what we can do to understand if they have got any barriers in the way, because we are now at the prime time for particularly suburban stocking of fish as we are coming into the colder seasons where there is the option to get trout in particular into a number of different suburban lakes. So to be able to help support your local community and get fish into there would be fabulous.

Mr BARTON: It would be a good thing, I would think, Minister. Could you tell us what other suburban fishing opportunities there are across Melbourne?

Ms HORNE: Sure, and there are heaps actually. There is Albert Park Lake; there is, out in Cranbourne, Casey Fields Lake; up at Ferntree Gully there is quarry lake; there is Lillydale Lake; Melton Reservoir—there are a couple of different places out in Melton as well; there is a lake up in Sunbury; and Roxburgh Park lake, just to name a few. Some of the species that we have been putting in there are, as I mentioned, rainbow trout as well as brown trout. There are golden perch, Murray cod, silver perch, Australian bass and estuary perch. So this is a real opportunity. I understand there are about 36 000 catchable rainbow trout in 80 different family

fishing waters out there, and they range from little ones to those big stonkers, which I can just imagine as a small child would be enormously fun to catch.

Mr BARTON: Yes, it is a pastime that people are going back to.

Mrs McARTHUR: Not Mr Meddick.

Mr BARTON: Maybe not. Are you stocking for year-round fishing now?

Ms HORNE: Things like rainbow trout and brown trout do not like the hot weather. Travis—sorry, this detail escapes me—what are sort of the temperatures that they like to actually inhabit, and what are we putting in our suburban lakes?

Mr DOWLING: Absolutely. Thank you, Minister. We are stocking year round, and one of the great things about our suburban lakes is that we would stock all those at school holidays and put trout in there so kids could go down there—ride their bikes down there and go fishing. Unfortunately the trout do not seem to survive during the summer. They do not like temperatures above 22 and 23 degrees, and you have some of these lakes that are quite shallow getting warm over summer. But as a kid I am sure going down in summer and being able to fish when you have got daylight savings, you have got warm evenings, is something that is really enjoyable, so we stock natives so that they can fish for them in summer. I have just noticed the time.

Mr BARTON: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Dowling. Thank you, Mr Barton. That concludes the time we have available for consideration of the fishing and boating estimates today. We thank you for appearing before the committee in this capacity. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within five working days.

The committee will take a short break before resuming consideration of the consumer affairs, liquor and gaming regulation portfolio.

Witnesses withdrew.