

# **PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE**

## **Inquiry into the 2023–24 Budget Estimates**

Melbourne – Tuesday 6 June 2023

### **MEMBERS**

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Nicholas McGowan – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Paul Hamer

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Bev McArthur

Danny O’Brien

Ellen Sandell



**WITNESSES**

Ms Sonya Kilkenny MP, Minister for Outdoor Recreation,

Mr Tim Ada, Secretary, and

Ms Beth Jones, Deputy Secretary, Regional and Suburban Development, Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions;

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

Mr Graeme Ford, Chief Executive Officer, Game Management Authority; and

Ms Katherine Grech, Director, Fishing and Boating Infrastructure, Better Boating Victoria.

**The CHAIR:** I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee.

I ask that mobile telephones please be turned to silent.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2023–24 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.

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

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

I welcome the Minister for Outdoor Recreation the Honourable Sonya Kilkenny and officers from the relevant departments. Minister, I invite you to make a brief opening statement or presentation of no more than 5 minutes, and this will be followed by questions from the committee. Your time starts now.

**Sonya KILKENNY:** Thank you, Chair and committee members. I will start with the first slide, please.

**Visual presentation.**

**Sonya KILKENNY:** Thank you. I am pleased to be here this evening to update you on the important work being delivered by the Andrews Labor government in the outdoor recreation portfolio, which includes of course fishing, boating and hunting.

Go to slide 2, thank you. It is an exciting portfolio. Victoria, as you know, provides a really amazing variety of fishing, boating and hunting opportunities. We have over 1 million recreational fishers, helping to create over 27,000 jobs, with more than 440,000 recreational boating licence holders in Victoria contributing more than \$3 billion to the Victorian economy and 26,000 direct and indirect jobs across Victoria from boating alone.

To the next slide, thank you. This government is helping Victorians to spend more time outdoors with family and friends. Since 2018 we have invested a record \$81 million to improve recreational fishing opportunities across the state. We have increased the number of fish to catch by building a new native fish hatchery at Arcadia, providing over 600 tonnes of snapper, whiting, flathead and other species and stocking nearly 10 million fish each year throughout Victoria's rivers and waterways. We have also upgraded boating facilities right across Victoria, investing over \$30 million each year on recreational boating facilities, and we have worked with the Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations to develop a traditional owner game management strategy.

Next slide, thank you. The Golden Tag competition has been a huge success –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Seriously! That's offensive.

**Sonya KILKENNY:** in getting fishers and their families out to regional Victoria and supporting local businesses off the back of bushfires and floods.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** It actually was his idea, Minister, so fair cop.

**Sonya KILKENNY:** Over the life of the competition we have had 161 happy fishers catch a winning fish, sharing in \$442,000 of prizes, and pictured here is one of our happy winners. I think this was actually taken from his Facebook page where he was announcing the Golden Tag competition. So there is the Honourable –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** He will tell you that is a puddle at the front of his house that he caught that in because he is such a good fisherman.

**Sonya KILKENNY:** Right. Well, there you go. So you might recognise one of our winners here: there he is with his Golden Tag winning fish.

Can we go to the next slide, thank you. The 2023–24 budget allocates \$22.1 million to improve boating facilities across the state, and that is going to deliver 15 projects. We will open the Tarago Reservoir to motorised boats as well as recreational fishing, with a \$4.4 million investment, and we are also providing \$2.3 million to support the Game Management Authority to maintain local enforcement, compliance with regulations and of course stakeholder engagement and education.

The 2023–24 budget delivers a further \$32 million of projects to make fishing even better. Ten million dollars will expand Victoria's world-class fish hatchery at Arcadia. We are also expanding the Snobs Creek hatchery with a further \$5 million investment, and the Victorian Fisheries Authority will continue to stock Victorian waterways with almost 10 million fish each year, continuing our nationwide record. We are also providing \$1.5 million to deliver Little Anglers Kits to primary school aged children across the state, and there is \$5.25 million for grants to recreational fishing and aquaculture, including \$1 million for the Aquaculture Jobs Fund and \$250,000 for an oyster farm in Lakes Entrance. We are exempting our veterans from needing to get a rec fishing licence, and we are going to proudly continue supporting the Women in Recreational Fishing and Boating Network.

In closing, Chair, the outdoor recreation portfolio will continue to play a really important and significant role in getting more people from more backgrounds involved in outdoor recreation – getting them out to the regions, spending money and supporting those economies. The 2023–24 budget builds on our record investment across the outdoor recreation portfolio, delivering on every single one of our 2022 election commitments. I am very proud to be able to say that, and I think these are going to be tremendous additions to Victoria and Victoria's economy. Thank you, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. I am going to hand over to Mr O'Brien, and I want to get your time exactly right, Mr O'Brien.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Just let it go over; that will be fine.

**The CHAIR:** You have exactly 9 minutes and 30 seconds from now.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister. Minister, budget paper 3, page 70, lists the funding for the Game Management Authority. Can I start with: do you support duck hunting?

**Sonya KILKENNY:** Thank you for your question, Mr O'Brien. Sorry, what page was it?

**Danny O'BRIEN:** It is the GMA funding on page 70, but the question is a straightforward one.

**Sonya KILKENNY:** The budget provides \$2.3 million in this year's budget for the Game Management Authority to continue its important work of safe, sustainable hunting; stakeholder engagement; importantly, education; licensing; registration –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** With respect, Minister, that is not the question. The question was: do you support duck hunting?

**Sonya KILKENNY:** With respect, Mr O'Brien –

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me, Minister. Mr Hilakari on a point of order.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** On a point of order, Chair, the minister has been asked a question, which goes to page 70 of budget paper 3, chapter 1. I assume what you are going to is safe and sustainable recreational game hunting. You have asked that question, and I think the minister should be entitled to answer that in whatever way she sees fit.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Hilakari.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** On the point of order, Chair, which bit is a problem? 'Do you support duck hunting?' I have given you a budget paper reference, because I know you would have taken a point of order if I did not. It is relevant to the budget papers. The question is very simple: does the minister support duck hunting? That is what I am wanting an answer to.

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien, the questions need to be relevant to the inquiry at hand, which is the budget estimates for 2023–24. Could you please keep your questions relevant to the inquiry at hand.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** The question stands, Chair. I have given a budget paper reference. It is exactly relevant to everything that is going on in this portfolio the moment, including the budget papers.

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien, I have just made a ruling.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Are you ruling the question out of order?

**The CHAIR:** Yes, I am ruling the question out of order.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** On what basis, Chair?

**The CHAIR:** Could you please keep your questions relevant to the budget estimates at hand, please.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Are you serious?

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien, I am conscious about your time.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Seriously – protection racket. Minister, as the first Minister for Outdoor Recreation, are you actually tasked with reducing outdoor recreation by ending the duck season?

**Sonya KILKENNY:** Thank you for your question. As you can see, the budget includes funding for the Game Management Authority to continue its important work of stakeholder engagement, education, ensuring safe and sustainable hunting across Victoria, ensuring that our game hunters are appropriately licensed and that they have the skills to be able to conduct hunting in a safe and sustainable way.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Thank you, Minister. It does actually say:

... to maintain local enforcement, compliance with hunting regulations and stakeholder engagement – as you have indicated. But there is only one year's funding there. There is no funding for the out years beyond 2023–24. Is that an indication that you plan to end duck season this year?

**Sonya KILKENNY:** Mr O'Brien, the season has just ended, but of course the work of the Game Management Authority has not, and its work continues past the season. The Game Management Authority conducts important work – stakeholder engagement, education. With respect –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** If that is the case, then why isn't it funded beyond this year?

**Sonya KILKENNY:** With respect to your question about whether we are going to end duck hunting, as you know, the issue of native bird hunting has been referred to the select committee of the Legislative Council. That matter is taking place at the moment with, I understand, a record number of submissions that have been lodged, and I do not want to prejudice anything that might come out of that inquiry. They are scheduled to –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Again, that is the context, Minister, of why my first question is relevant. Do you support duck hunting?

**Sonya KILKENNY:** With respect, Mr O'Brien, I do not –

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me, Minister. Mr O'Brien, I have ruled that question out of order. Please do not ask it a second time.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Okay. I will try another one, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien, please move on.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** I am moving on.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Do you support fishing?

**Sonya KILKENNY:** Mr O'Brien, I am here as the outdoor recreation minister –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Exactly.

**Sonya KILKENNY:** and my job, or the task I have set myself, is to ensure that Victoria becomes the outdoor recreation capital of Australia.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Okay.

**Sonya KILKENNY:** We have so much to be proud of in our outdoor recreation space and so many more opportunities as well to really grow this sector. The financial contribution that it makes, particularly to some of our regional areas, can be quite significant. It is also about healthy communities. It is also about opportunities. It is about creating jobs in new sectors as well, and I see this as a really exciting time for outdoor recreation and for Victoria, and particularly regional Victoria as well.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Minister, on Tuesday 2 May the GMA published on its website compliance data for the first five days of the duck season, as it always does. Did you or your office direct the GMA to take that data down because it highlighted some poor behaviour by protestors?

**Sonya KILKENNY:** Thank you for your question. I have Mr Ford here, who is the CEO of the GMA.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** No, it is not a question to Mr Ford; it is a question to you.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** On a point of order –

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me, Minister. Ms Kathage, on a point of order.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** It is not for members to direct who is the most appropriate person to answer the question.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Sorry, did you hear the question? The question was: did you or your office direct the GMA to take that data down? There is only one person who can answer that question.

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me, Mr O'Brien. If you wish to speak to the point of order, I will rule on the point of order.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Stop wasting my time, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien, it is not up to you to direct who is to answer the question. You asked the question, and the witnesses relevant at the table, including the minister – and we have quite senior officials here from the department, who are willing to answer your question. If you are not interested in listening to the answer to the question, Mr O'Brien, can I suggest that you ask a different question.

**Sonya KILKENNY:** I am happy to answer it.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Thank you. Yes or no?

**Sonya KILKENNY:** No, I did not direct the GMA.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Thank you. That was not that hard.

**Sonya KILKENNY:** But what I was going to say is if you would like –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** No. We will come to that. In February the Premier erroneously said that last season there were:

... a number of incidents –

of bag limit breaches when in fact there was only one out of 979 checks. The GMA justified the announcement of a shortened season and lower bag limits this year in part based on:

... poor behaviour by some hunters ...

The GMA has now released compliance data for the whole season this year, which shows just two hunters breaching bag limits out of 981 checks. That is 0.2 per cent. But there were in fact 15 offences detected among 415 protestors engaged with – 3.6 per cent. So my question, Minister, is: on the government's past criteria, will you allow a duck season to go ahead in the future and in fact ban protestors?

**Sonya KILKENNY:** So a number of issues you have raised there, Mr O'Brien. One, I understand that the compliance data for the season has just been published on the website, so I can certainly ask Mr Ford to take you through those figures.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** I have given you the figures. It is a policy question as to whether you appreciate that the hunters have actually been better behaved than the protestors.

**Sonya KILKENNY:** I was not there; I cannot possibly answer for that. I mean, there is the compliance data to go off. You did ask me, though, about the shortened season, and I am happy to take you through the process for that if you like.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** No, I just gave the GMA's position on that. I did not ask the question about that at all. Maybe I will ask a question of Mr Ford. A number of ducks were placed at 1 Treasury Place by protestors on the same day, Tuesday 2 May, and surrendered to the GMA for post-mortem examination. Can you confirm that X-ray examination could not find any evidence of shot in about 50 per cent of those birds – that is, there was no evidence that they were shot by hunters.

**Graeme FORD:** We will have to take the exact percentage on notice, but you are right: some birds that we X-rayed did not contain shot. Of course, pass-throughs could have occurred. The condition of the birds we did try to examine, but keep in mind this is our own staff. Our researchers – these are not veterinary surgeons – did examine some of the birds by plucking and trying to determine the wound, but the condition of the birds made a definitive diagnosis very, very difficult.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Okay. I understand there was a report done. Will that report be released, Mr Ford?

**Graeme FORD:** We were not planning to, because it was not definitive. We could not actually stand by it and say that this percentage was shot or this percentage was not shot, and as we know –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** So many of the birds presented by the protestors may in fact not have been shot at all. They were just found dead.

**Graeme FORD:** For some that is possible, yes.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Okay. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr O'Brien. Your time is up. We will go to Ms Kathage for the next 12½ minutes.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you, Chair. I would like to take the minister to budget paper 3, pages 70 and also 81, which outlines the government's Go Fishing Victoria and fishing programs initiatives. I also want to take this opportunity to tell the minister that I did come across somebody making use of Yarrambat Lake, which we stock, and they were using for bait a hot dog – the bread and the sausage. We do things differently in the north. Can you please outline for the committee the total funding for these initiatives and what they will deliver for recreational fisherpeople and fish habitat improvement?

**Sonya KILKENNY:** Thank you for the question. As you can see, the 2023–24 budget delivers a really big catch for our fishers, with \$32 million for the Go Fishing Victoria program. It is going to include support for local fishing and angling clubs; upgrades to our two fish hatcheries, which we are working towards to make us fish sovereign, if you like, so that we will be growing and breeding our own fish to be able to restock all of our lakes and waterways; as well as of course \$26.5 million in boat ramp upgrades to improve access for Victorians right across Victoria. As I said, funding is being provided to increase production of Victoria's fish hatcheries and fish stocks by expanding Arcadia and Snobs Creek and maintaining that stocking level at about 10 million a year through the fish purchases so as our stock sovereignty increases we can reduce the number of fish that we purchase.

A series of programs are also going to be delivered to promote and really support recreational fishing in Victoria and of course grow Victoria's aquaculture sector as well, and that is a really exciting part of this world, aquaculture, so we are investing in there now to develop it and to support the expansion of that. As I said, \$10 million will go to expand Arcadia fish hatchery to increase production from currently 1.6 million to nearly 6 million fish per year; \$5 million will go towards the Snobs Creek hatchery, and that is to upgrade and to increase production of the special Macquarie perch and trout cod; and \$1.5 million is going to go towards the Little Anglers program, which is going to help to grow fishing participation in some of our youngest Victorians, and that is through the Little Anglers initiative; and \$5.25 million is for grants to enhance recreational fishing. There will be \$2.5 million to establish a habitat improvement fund; \$1.2 million to support local angling clubs with grants; \$1 million to invest in the growth of Victoria's aquaculture sector; and \$250,000 to support the establishment of a pilot commercial oyster farm down in the Gippsland Lakes, which is being run by the Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation, so a terrific little initiative going on down there. Of course this package, this \$32 million Go Fishing Victoria package, builds on our record \$47.2 million from the previous term.

I do want to draw the attention of the committee to one of the initiatives, which is the Little Anglers initiative. I am pretty excited about this one. We made a promise before the last election that we would provide 60,000 little anglers kits to school-aged children to really promote and support the take-up of fishing amongst some of our youngest Victorians. The budget is providing \$1.5 million towards this initiative, again to encourage a whole new generation of fishing enthusiasts – and I know Travis will be particularly keen for this. This program will give the next generation of Victorians recreational fishing opportunities to get hooked on fishing, with free little anglers kits for kids across Victoria. What this is doing is providing opportunities for kids who may not be able to afford a fishing rod or a tackle box. The other information that comes with it is educational as well: to value and enjoy our waterways and to learn more about them. It is also a time to be able to spend with family and with friends and really to just appreciate the beautiful outdoors.

Just this morning I was so delighted to announce the release of the tender for the supply of these Little Anglers Kits, and I want to encourage schools to get their registrations in early. I want to thank the VFA for all their work on this and also for working with the department of education to make this happen by the end of this year. The little anglers kits will be made available to grade 5 primary students in more than 1900 Victorian schools, and they are government schools and independent schools as well as specialist schools. It is going to set up these kids and families with everything they need to wet a line, including, as I said, the fishing rod and reel, the tackle box, some tackle and a *Kids' Guide to Fishing*. The kids guide will include information and links to educational resources to really learn the basics, such as fishing safety, knots and rigs. As I said, this is a really exciting program. I am delighted that we committed to this and that we are rolling it out. It will be rolled out by term 4 this year. We know we want to get more people, particularly kids, involved in fishing to be able to enjoy the benefits of this great pastime and really grow this industry even further in Victoria.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you, Minister. I am hearing comments about fish stocking in the room. You mentioned earlier funding for hatcheries in Arcadia and Snobs Creek. Could you tell me a bit about the government's investment in stocking?



**Sonya KILKENNY:** Yes, thank you. I actually went up to Arcadia a couple of months ago, didn't I, to check out what is happening up there. They are quite sophisticated hatcheries. The number of fish that you can breed in these hatcheries is quite extraordinary. It is also providing local jobs up there. The \$10 million to expand Arcadia fish hatchery is part of the Go Fishing Victoria plan. It is going to expand the scope of the hatchery up there from being able to produce currently 1.6 million to 6 million. It is also going to develop the visitor centre up there. We also employ, is it three Aboriginal –

**Travis DOWLING:** About 50 per cent of all staff.

**Sonya KILKENNY:** Sorry, 50 per cent of all staff will be Aboriginal, who are operating and managing the fish hatchery as well. So this is about tracking on our path to fish sovereignty and being able to produce the fish we need to be able to stock our record 10 million fish in waterways and lakes right across Victoria. We know that stocking with fish is actually good for the health of these waterways, but importantly it is making sure that these kids with their Little Anglers Kits are going to have a better chance of actually hooking something on their line as well.

I am delighted that our budget this year delivers on our election commitment of \$10 million to triple the size of the native fish hatchery up at Arcadia, and the government is pushing on with that. The Victorian Fisheries Authority has already completed its master plan and stakeholder consultation, and it commenced drafting the project plans just in May. We expect the Arcadia visitor precinct will attract around 10,000 visitors to the region annually – just terrific.

As promised, we are also investing in the upgrade of the Snobs Creek hatchery, with \$5 million. This will construct and upgrade facilities there to, again, increase production of fish, but this time it will increase the production of a threatened species. We call it the Mac perch, don't we – the Macquarie perch. It is looking to increase that – it is a threatened species – and really try to work to get that species back to numbers that are going to be able to support the various ecosystems and also provide a good catch up there as well. The Snobs Creek hatchery project will modernise aging infrastructure, construct more breeding ponds and build a dedicated fish-holding facility to assist the restock of the Mac perch as well as trout cod to re-establish wild populations. I understand the VFA has also completed its master plan and stakeholder engagement for Snobs Creek and has commenced drafting project plans as well. We expect to deliver the design tender package later this year and award the contract shortly thereafter, so we are really getting on with things and getting that all moving.

I mentioned the Macquarie perch and other at-risk threatened native species, and when I first became minister for fishing in the last term, back in August 2022, one of my first official engagements was actually to visit the Sea Life Melbourne Aquarium to officially open the new Macquarie perch display. This was about publicising the need to bring back from the brink the Macquarie perch. I do not think people realise just how threatened a species it is, so it is important work that is happening through Melbourne Aquarium with the VFA and of course with the expansion of the Arcadia hatchery as well.

We know that all of this work on expanding the hatcheries is going to be great for recreational fishing opportunities right across Victoria and of course, as I always say, really good for regional economies too.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you, Minister. You spoke about the government investing \$1 million in Victoria's aquaculture industry or sector. What impact are you expecting this investment to have? Is it going to help to secure other forms of investment? Will it help with jobs?

**Sonya KILKENNY:** Excellent. Thank you for the question. As I mentioned before, this is a pretty exciting emerging sector and one I am really proud that we are supporting. It is obviously about job creation. It is about innovation. It is about science and technology opportunities. In this budget, we are delivering \$250,000 as part of our \$1 million commitment over four years to promote our state's aquaculture sector. We want to help the industry to seek further investment and to really grow. There are so many opportunities here, and some of the aquaculture participants are already doing really phenomenal work on the world stage that many of us do not know about, but truly they are going out there and showcasing their capabilities and doing fantastic work.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you, Minister.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Minister. That is the end of –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** A point of order if I may.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, Mr O'Brien.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Sorry, Chair, I just need to place on record with respect to points of order taken before – I just want to place on the absolute record – that I asked a question: does the minister support duck hunting? I had a point of order taken. You ruled the question out of order. I immediately asked another question: does the minister support fishing? No-one took a point of order, nothing was said by the Chair and the minister attempted to answer the question. If you are going to try and waste our time and protect ministers, at least try and be consistent – and consistent, Chair, with the rulings of the Assembly – because it was clearly just a political tactic –

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien, it has been a very long day, and I appreciate that you may be tired. I would remind you to be respectful towards me as the Chair of this committee and witnesses and other members before the committee.

That is the end of questions for today, Minister.

Minister and witnesses, thank you very much for appearing before the committee. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within five working days of the committee's request.

I thank all ministers and officers, who we have seen a lot of today, who have given evidence to the committee, as well as Hansard, the committee secretariat and parliamentary attendants.

I also again thank the hospitality, security and cleaning staff who have looked after all of us today.

The committee will resume its consideration of the 2023–24 budget estimates tomorrow, Wednesday 7 June, at 8:30 am.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

**Committee adjourned.**