

# **PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE**

## **Inquiry into the 2024–25 Budget Estimates**

Melbourne – Monday 27 May 2024

### **MEMBERS**

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Nicholas McGowan – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Bev McArthur

Danny O’Brien

Aiv Puglielli

Meng Heang Tak



**WITNESSES**

Steve Dimopoulos MP, Minister for Outdoor Recreation;

Tim Ada, Secretary,

Beth Jones, Deputy Secretary, Regional and Suburban Development,

Rachaele May, Executive Director, Emergency Management and Outdoor Recreation, Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions;

Travis Dowling, Chief Executive Officer, Victorian Fisheries Authority

Simon Toop, Acting Chief Executive Officer, Game Management Authority; and

Tammy O'Conner, Chief Executive Officer, Safe Transport 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 2024–25 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 Steve Dimopoulos and officials from DJSIR. Minister, I am going to invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 5 minutes, after which time committee members will ask you some questions. Your time starts now.

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Thank you, Chair. I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting, the Wurundjeri people, and pay my respects to their elders past and present and the elders of other communities who may be here today.

**Visual presentation.**

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Victorians from all backgrounds love getting outdoors and exploring our backyard. Thank you, Chair and committee, for the opportunity to present to you today on the important work being delivered through the outdoor recreation portfolio, which includes fishing, boating and hunting.

Next slide, please. Victoria provides an amazing variety of outdoor opportunities for everyone. We want more Victorians to be able to enjoy our unique environment and spend more time outdoors with their families and friends. There are over 1 million recreational fishers in Victoria who helped to create over 20,000 jobs. We have over 417,000 recreational boating licence-holders, who support over 22,000 jobs directly and indirectly across the state.

Next slide, please. There are over 55,000 licensed game hunters in Victoria, who contribute more than \$356 million to our economy and support around 3100 jobs at the last count. Deer hunting makes up the greatest proportion of this economic contribution, providing over \$200 million, with duck and quail contributing almost \$90 million to the economy based on the latest figures.

Next slide. This government has invested \$232 million in the past decade to improve recreational fishing and boating opportunities. Boaters can now enjoy better experiences in more places with thanks to boat ramp upgrades completed at 13 locations across the state, including ramps at Rhyll, Hastings, Mordialloc and Avalon. More are on the way at Mahers Landing, Lake Burrumbeet, Clifton Springs, St Leonards, Lake Boga and Inverloch.

We are working on the \$10 million upgrade to triple the size of the Arcadia native fish hatchery, which will produce 6 million fish annually once it is completed. I was very happy to visit one of the engine rooms of our fish stocking operation, Snobs Creek fish hatchery, where our \$5 million expansion will increase the number of fish stocked across Victoria, in particular threatened species such as Macquarie perch and trout cod. We officially opened the new conservation hatchery, which will also work on rebuilding populations of threatened fish species.

Next slide, please. We have increased the number of fish by stocking 10 million fish each year in our waterways. Earlier this year I visited Lake Wendouree to celebrate hitting the 10 million milestone. I am proud to report to the committee that we stock more fish every year than every state and territory combined. We have completed our election commitment to deliver 95,000 fishing kits to grade 5 students across Victoria. We want more kids to be able to discover a lifelong love of fishing, and we are proud to be helping families to get out and spend a day on the water.

Next slide, please. The government has committed to a range of initiatives to support safe, responsible and sustainable recreational hunting through the *Sustainable Hunting Action Plan*. We want to ensure that people with game hunting licences are able to enjoy their time hunting in the great outdoors lawfully and responsibly. Led by the Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations, we have developed a traditional owner game management strategy that sets out our partner approach to traditional owner participation in hunting, land management and conservation. The GMA continues to proactively monitor hunting activity across the state and has completed 89 investigations and conducted already more than 517 patrols so far this financial year to make sure that hunters are doing the right thing. The GMA also renewed over 24,000 game hunting licences, indicating that recreational game hunting continues to be a popular outdoor hobby for many. And with the patrols of the wetlands, it is GMA, Parks Victoria and other agencies all together.

Next slide, please. The budget includes \$11.6 million over three years to help ensure that recreational game hunting is conducted safely, responsibly and sustainably: \$6.9 million will support the compliance and enforcement work of the Game Management Authority, and \$4.7 million will go towards a review of our game hunting regulations and to support the government's commonsense changes to ensure hunting remains safe, sustainable and responsible, including mandatory education and training for hunters, implementing the adaptive harvest model to inform annual duck hunting seasonal arrangements and implementing the waterfowl wounding reduction action plan. Chair, I will now pass back to you and thank you for the opportunity.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. The first 8 minutes is going to go to Mrs McArthur.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister. I am actually going to the Secretary. The government's response to the inquiry into native bird hunting stated that the department will complete the remake of the Wildlife (Game) Interim Regulations by September 2024. Will this deadline be met, Secretary?

**Tim ADA:** Thanks for the question, Mrs McArthur. We are making good progress. I might just ask Ms Jones to add to my comments, but I understand that we are going to be starting a public process shortly and that we are broadly on track to that deadline. I will throw to Ms Jones.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Will that include engaging with both hunting and environmental stakeholders?

**Tim ADA:** That is the expectation, Mrs McArthur. I might just ask Ms Jones to add to that.

**Beth JONES:** Yes, Mrs McArthur. Further to what the Secretary said, there is already some informal consultation happening with all sorts of stakeholder groups –

**Bev McARTHUR:** Like Field and Game?

**Beth JONES:** Correct. Field and Game, both hunting and non-hunting organisations and all wildlife groups. And, as the Secretary said, we expect to soon be opening a public consultation on the regulatory impact statement for those regs, and we are on track to meet the September timeframe for those regs sunseting.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Excellent. Thank you. Minister, in responding to the inquiry, the government stated that from 2025 hunters will be required to complete Aboriginal cultural heritage awareness training and testing. Given that this training is mandatory and imposed on hunters by the state government, will a cost cap be introduced?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** I do not think it is mandatory at the moment.

**Bev McARTHUR:** It is going to be voluntary, is it?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Mrs McArthur, are you talking about right now or when we move to the new regime in 2025?

**Bev McARTHUR:** From 2025.

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Sorry; apologies. When we move to the new regime in 2025 – we are going through a process right now of consultation, a regulatory impact statement, as we are required to. I am reluctant to prescribe effectively what I want to see, because I want to be guided by the consultation with exactly the people you talked about a moment ago. But what we found when we came up with the government position of additional training was that there was some evidence in the Parliament’s own report of some desecration of some Aboriginal cultural heritage sites as well as wounding rates and a whole range of things. So what we are going out to the community in relation to is how we can improve those things. One way of improving those things is requiring mandatory training. But that is just the announcement. I now want to go through the period of the regulation impact statement, consultation with the community –

**Bev McARTHUR:** Who would be setting the fee for doing this?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** That is all subject to the RIS process, Mrs McArthur, in the next few months. But what I can say to you, though, is the government made a decision to continue with native duck hunting because it decided it was a legitimate activity that had been going on on these lands –

**Bev McARTHUR:** Very well supported by the workers.

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Workers and others – for thousands of years and even prior to white settlement. We just need to make sure that it is done responsibly and safely, and that is what these changes are geared towards.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Okay. Minister, the government also stated that additional Aboriginal heritage officers will deliver a stronger on-ground presence to enhance protection of cultural heritage sites. How many Aboriginal heritage officers are employed at the moment? Would Ms Jones have an idea?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Actually I might throw to –

**Beth JONES:** Mrs McArthur, in terms of this year there were some Aboriginal cultural heritage officers attending onsite with a number of GMA staff who were doing patrols across the duck season.

**Bev McARTHUR:** How many?

**Beth JONES:** I would need to take that figure on notice.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Take it on notice; that is fine. How many additional officers will you be hiring?

**Rachaele MAY:** We will be looking, Mrs McArthur, in the new financial year, ahead of next season, at increasing the number of authorised officers across GMA and working with the First Peoples state relations team in DPC, who do the Aboriginal cultural heritage compliance, to look at cross-authorisations and also employing an additional five staff.

**Bev McARTHUR:** How many Indigenous officers will you be hiring additionally?

**Rachaele MAY:** We would hope to be able to advertise those positions as Indigenous positions, so we will see how that recruitment goes.

**Bev McARTHUR:** But you do not have a figure of how many you are looking for?

**Rachaele MAY:** We are looking to create five new positions.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Five. Okay. Thank you.

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Mrs McArthur, sorry, can I just clarify for the record. It is not just the GMA that employs these people. The way that we make sure that the regulations are being complied with across every aspect of it, not just the Aboriginal cultural heritage but all the other aspects, is through a combination of Parks Victoria staff, police officers, GMA staff, DEECA staff and others, who all come together. It is not like we are creating new positions necessarily for Aboriginal cultural heritage – there is an existing framework. Every duck hunting season a whole bunch of people go out on the ground for multiple reasons, not just Aboriginal cultural heritage. I do not want to pretend it is like we are making additional investments just for that.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Okay, excellent. Let us go to page 164 of your questionnaire, where you have said that hunting initiatives were deemed to have a positive gender impact. Now, this is fantastic. Can you outline how exactly these programs have a positive gender impact?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Whereabouts is that, Mrs McArthur?

**Bev McARTHUR:** In the questionnaire, page 164. That means women – actually biological women – are very excited about going hunting. So hunting has a positive impact.

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** I have got the response in front of me, but I do not have the statement that it references. But part of it would be the economic contribution made right through regional Victoria, Mrs McArthur. Someone who was out on the wetlands on day one saw families literally with a duck hunter –

**Bev McARTHUR:** Very family-oriented sport.

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Very much so. The best of it, in my view, is family-oriented. Whether it is young kids and a husband and wife, or couples and others, all camping for the purposes of duck hunting, they were visibly seen by people that were advising me on day one. So I imagine from that perspective – I can come back to you with a bit more intel – but from that perspective there would be a positive gender impact. But I do not have the statement that that alludes to.

**Bev McARTHUR:** That is fine. You can come back to us and provide a copy of both the gender impact statements to the committee. That would be good. Minister, the supporting sustainable hunting reform initiative is new to this year's budget and it has \$4 million allocated to it over the forwards. How is it different to the safe and sustainable recreation game hunting initiative which has a \$6.9 million allocation?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** We made some decisions about funding the wounding reduction action plan; we made some decisions about funding the better compliance and mandatory training – things that we have not quite landed because of the RIS, but we have done some internal costings of what that cost would be to make duck hunting safe, responsible and sustainable, and that is what that money will go towards.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Okay. Minister, can you just tell us about your decision –

**The CHAIR:** Apologies, Mrs McArthur. We are out of time, Mrs McArthur. We are now going to go to Mr Galea.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister, Secretary, officials. Minister, I actually want to ask about those two output initiatives as well. Those two items on budget paper 3, page 58, total \$11.6 million. Earlier this year you announced \$10.1 million in funding, as a response to the Select Committee on Victoria's Recreational Native Bird Hunting Arrangements, for improved training and other resources from next year. Is that \$10.1 million counted as part of the \$11.6 million?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** No, they are separate. Thank you for the question, Mr Galea. They are separate. The additional investment we announced was effectively to put into practice the recommendations of the upper house committee that you were on – you were Deputy Chair, I think, Mr Galea. We accepted seven of the eight recommendations, and in accepting those seven it was obvious to us that we needed a budget uplift to make hunting sustainable, safe and responsible. So that \$10.1 million is a new funding commitment to give respect to and deliver the aspirations of the decision the government made, which was to accept seven of those recommendations. For example, mandatory education and training for hunters, including cultural awareness training, but also just wounding reduction – how to actually shoot a duck in a way that does not cause it to lie in the wetlands for hours bleeding to death.

There is already a range of resources – if you go onto the GMA website, like I have done, there is a range of resources right now on hunter proficiency – but this will actually put a bit more of that meat on the bone, so to speak. I am reluctant to go any further on what exactly that will look like because I do not want to pre-empt what is a regulatory impact statement process, which is only fair and reasonable for both environmental groups and hunting groups.

**Michael GALEA:** Of course, and on that – I believe you touched on this with Mrs McArthur earlier, and I know you do not want pre-empt the regulatory impact statement process – one of the options being considered, I am assuming, would be that the mandatory training that you spoke of would be applicable to all hunters, not just new hunters. Is that part of the mix?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** That will be in the public domain for people have a view on, yes, that is right.

**Michael GALEA:** Great. Thank you, Minister. I might actually ask Mr Toop to come up. While he is coming, Minister, on the package that has been announced, how are you intending for that to make recreational native bird hunting more sustainable and less impactful?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Thank you, Mr Galea. Again, we have got the RIS coming up, but a big part of that for me is actually implementing the waterfowl wounding reduction plan. It is a plan that has a body of knowledge – a panel was appointed to give us the best science about how you actually reduce wounding. I think that is the most offensive part of hunting to Victorians, where there is some element of wounding which causes pain and suffering. If we can reduce that heavily through those investments, that is what we intend to do.

That is one example of what we would implement – again, this is all part of the RIS – but another is the science-based adaptive harvest management model to be used as a guide to guide the seasons. I want this to be science based as much as possible. When there is an abundance of ducks, then the season gets recommended to me by the GMA, and when there is not an abundance, again the GMA may make a different recommendation. But it needs to be science driven, because we all, even hunters, despite popular belief, want a thriving duck population obviously, because their ability to kill and consume a duck relies on there being a duck population. For us it is about ensuring that threatened species are protected and that other species remain in abundance every season and be guided by the GMA. Ultimately, I make the decision. The GMA gives me recommendations. I might throw to Mr Toop. Sorry, did you have any specific questions?

**Michael GALEA:** Yes. Thank you, Minister.

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Sorry, Mr Galea.

**Michael GALEA:** No. Absolutely, I do, Mr Toop. Thank you for joining us. The ‘Department Performance Statement’, page 85, outlines some of the various outputs and targets for the GMA. I am just wondering if you could please provide us with an outline of some of the enforcement activities that the GMA has undertaken this year.

**Simon TOOP:** For duck season?

**Michael GALEA:** For the duck season.

**Simon TOOP:** This year we have increased our effort in the field. We work across with other agencies – Parks Victoria, DEECA, Victoria Police – and we operate a risk-based, intelligence-led approach to our compliance. This year over opening week we had 132 authorised officers out in the field, which was an

increase from the previous year of 95. To date we have conducted patrols at over 360 wetlands, which is an 86 per cent increase on the same time the previous year. We have checked 1200 hunters for their licences. We have checked over 900 bags to ensure that people are complying with the bag limit levels and the species restrictions. So all in all we have done an increased effort over this duck season, and we will continue to do that for the remainder of the season in conjunction with our partner agencies.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you very much, Mr Toop. If I may add to that: if you can provide, whether it is in broad terms or if you have specific information, the enforcement activities on hunters as compared to duck rescuers – do you have any information about that?

**Simon TOOP:** Well, we do not target any one particular group. We operate to things as we see them and they are presented before us. So far this year there have been 35 offences detected. Eighteen of those have to do with people breaching the public safety laws.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Activists?

**Simon TOOP:** Correct.

**Michael GALEA:** It is my time, Mrs McArthur, thank you.

**Simon TOOP:** And the remaining 17 offences are hunting-related, 15 of those directly to hunting activity and two of those to land management practices. Does that answer your question?

**Michael GALEA:** That does. Thank you, yes. So it is pretty much even numbers that we are talking about.

**Simon TOOP:** That is right.

**Michael GALEA:** Of that 35, almost exactly.

**Simon TOOP:** But as I said, we have had interactions with over 2000 hunters checking various elements of their compliance.

**Michael GALEA:** And you said there is an increase in the enforcement activity on last year. How does that compare? I do not want to put words in your mouth, but I think that is what you said to me. How does the enforcement activity this year compare to last year, and again with those proportions if you can?

**Simon TOOP:** Well, as I mentioned, 364 wetlands were patrolled up until late last week as compared to, I think it was, 196 or something like that, so an 86 per cent increase for the same time as the previous year. All of our compliance statistics we put on our website. They will be done after the conclusion of this financial year; we will update those statistics. But the current ones within the last quarter are up on our website at the moment.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you. And those alleged offences – you referred to the 35 figure for this year. Do you have that figure for last year?

**Simon TOOP:** Last year in total was 45, but we have still got several weeks of the duck season to continue.

**Michael GALEA:** Of course. And was the breakdown similar? Was it roughly half-half?

**Simon TOOP:** In terms of banning notices or the public safety breaches, there were five last year, and 18 have been detected so far this year.

**Michael GALEA:** Terrific. Thank you.

**Bev McArthur** interjected.

**Michael GALEA:** Mrs McArthur, thank you. Minister, yes?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Just add a bit more, I am not sure if Mr Toop said this but over 1200 duck hunters licences have been checked so far this season and 917 hunters bags have been checked, obviously for the bag limit.



**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Minister – that is very helpful too – and thank you, Mr Toop. Minister, if I might now turn to fishing. I understand from the ‘Department Performance Statement’, page 85, again, the target was to stock 10 million fish, and I understand that we have well and truly met that target. Can you please talk to me about what sorts of activities that has supported through this program?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Thank you, Mr Galea. It is probably far less contentious than the previous topic. I want to just say at the outset that we are looked on by the rest of the country – there are literally chats in social media pages around Australia about how this state is leading in fishing. I want to thank all the fishing clubs – and I have met several of them. I want to thank all the fraternity. I want to thank the Victorian Fisheries Authority and the department for doing an amazing job. I was at Lake Wendouree in Ballarat stocking for the first time –

**Danny O’BRIEN:** Marlin? Was it marlin? Flathead?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Hang on a second – stocking Lake Wendouree –

**Michael GALEA:** I do not want to trip you up on this.

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** On the record, it was trout on this occasion. It was 10 million, as I said at the outset – more than any other state or territory combined. But it is actually meaningful for multiple reasons – mental health, family time – and a recreation which is fundamentally at very low cost and takes people away from the hurly-burly of life and social media. It is profoundly impactful for regional communities, because a lot of these waterways are in regional Victoria – some inland, like Blackburn Lake and others in Melbourne. It is profoundly important for that. There is a commercial fishing side of this, which is also profoundly important. Some of the best product this state produces is by those commercial fishers, who catch beautiful seafood, and there is about \$120 million worth of economic activity in the commercial fishing space.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Minister.

**Danny O’BRIEN:** Are you going to guarantee the future of Corner Inlet for me?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** You love the word ‘guarantee’, don’t you?

**The CHAIR:** Mr O’Brien, it is all falling apart towards my left.

**Danny O’BRIEN:** Are you talking about the wonderful commercial fishing?

**The CHAIR:** We are going to go to Mr Puglielli.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you, Chair. Good morning. We have got the outdoor recreation portfolio here, or as I sometimes call it, the portfolio for the killing of animals. The inquiry that we have been hearing about into recreational native bird hunting in Victoria: are you able to provide a cost for that undertaking – what that cost Victorian taxpayers?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** The inquiry itself, the parliamentary inquiry?

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Yes.

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** It would be the Parliament that would provide that.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** That is okay. Could you pass it on – is that possible – to them?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Yes, of course.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you so much. Just looking at the performance statement, page 85, fishing, boating and game management, they have got objective 4, ‘Build prosperous and livable regions, and manage and promote outdoor recreation’. In that, one of the intentions is to support the development of sustainable game hunting. With respect to ducks, why aren’t there any performance standards for that objective?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Which page, Mr Puglielli?

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** That was page 85 of the performance statement.

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** Thank you. I have got to say, Mr Puglielli, how the performance measures are arrived at – effectively they are a combination of this committee and the Assistant Treasurer, but I will give some thought to that for a future budget year.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Sure. Just thinking, like, ducks saved, things like that that sort of relate to the ducks themselves as opposed to kind of a bit of a void that is there at the moment.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Ducks saved?

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Well, apparently that is the intention of the government, Mrs McArthur. So in terms of safe and sustainable game hunting, Minister, what is safe and what is sustainable? How many dead ducks is sustainable?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS:** We are driven by the science on this. For example, the GMA, the Game Management Authority, my department, DJSIR, people on the witness list here and DEECA, the department of environment, do the analysis of what is appropriate given the circumstances of the population in any given year. They make a judgement call and give me a recommendation. The adaptive harvest model, which we are implementing in this coming hunting year 2025, is one that takes into account population size, migration patterns through the east coast of Australia and the ability for the duck population to survive. That is absolutely the basis upon which these decisions are made. We are not going to go out and just make decisions which actually disadvantage threatened species or the population of ducks to the point where there are none left. That is completely anathema to what we are doing here.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** So you would not –

**The CHAIR:** Apologies, Mr Puglielli, your time is up.

Minister and department officials, thank you very much for taking the time to appear before us this morning.

The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses are required within five working days of the committee's request.

The committee is going to take a break before beginning its consideration of the environment portfolio at 10:15 am.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

**Witnesses withdrew.**