ENVIRONMENT, NATURAL RESOURCES AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the management, governance and use of environmental water

Colac — 10 November 2017

Members

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Witness

Mr Michael Burgess, executive officer, VRFish.

The CHAIR — Good afternoon and welcome to the Environment, Natural Resources and Regional Development Committee public hearing in relation to the inquiry into the management, governance and use of environmental water. I would like to extend a welcome to members of the public and members of the media if present.

The committee is hearing evidence today in relation to the inquiry into the management, governance and use of environmental water, and evidence is being recorded. All evidence taken today is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected for what you say here today, but if you go outside and repeat those same things those comments may not be protected by this privilege.

I would now like to welcome Mr Michael Burgess, the executive officer of the Victorian recreational fishing peak body. Today's evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with proof versions of the transcript at the earliest opportunity. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website. I would now like to take this opportunity to invite you to make an opening statement of around 5 minutes, which will be followed by questions from members of the committee. First, I ask that you state your name and role for the record and then proceed with your opening statement.

Visual presentation

Mr BURGESS — Fantastic. My name is Michael Burgess. I am the executive officer of the Victorian recreational fishing peak body. Thanks very much for the invitation to present today. I just want to quickly cover the importance of environmental water to recreational fishers, some of their concerns and perceptions in and around that and then open up to some questions.

We are an organisation that is trying to make fishing better for everybody around the state in a whole range of different aspects. We are a grassroots organisation, with members from fishing clubs and associations from around the state, working together to make fishing better.

E-flows and fishers: we are always looking to improve our fishing. The fish that we do target are very much cued around flows. To their whole life cycle, biology and spawning, the flows are a massive cue. We are very interested to see how we can have the potential to deliver better outcomes for our fish. During those high flows it is how we can look at supporting that good recruitment, which does not happen every year, and also the survival of the eggs and larvae of those fish.

The flavour is very much boom and bust. We have long-lived fish and we mainly have good recruitment maybe once every 10 years perhaps. Also just a note, we are also dealing with flows for, say, fish in Port Phillip Bay. Our snapper and sand flathead are very much tuned into the flows coming out of the Yarra. Obviously during the low flows, which do happen and are of massive concern to recreational fishers, we maintain those refuge areas. Look, e-water is a complex thing for recreational fishers and we have different competing stakeholders. We understand that, but I think the benefit for e-flows and fishers is that we are after healthy rivers and healthy fish stocks, so they do go hand in hand. But there are some negative connotations as well, which are real and perceived.

Some of the concerns we have are obviously the timing of that e-water — sometimes too much at certain times of the year or not enough to really coincide with our fish migration — and perhaps environmental water deliveries have not been enough to give us the big bang for the buck that we are looking for. There is a fair bit of confusion between environmental flows and other types of flows. There is a perception around blackwater events, cold water pollution and also perhaps favouring carp over our fish that we would like to see a few more of. Our expectation with e-water is we want to be involved in those discussions and decision-making processes. I think there is a real need to have more of a formal recreational fisher engagement program. We are dealing with quite a complex situation and very much at that local catchment level as well and also on a much larger scale around the Murray-Darling Basin as well.

Fishers are wanting to come to the table and be part of it. What we are seeing is that when they are, they really understand that catchment water managers are listening to them and that they understand what recreational fishers want to achieve out of it. Look, we want to be informed around the timings of the environmental flows. Recreational fishers will tell us that when a flow comes down the fishing goes bad, so it is almost like when you are asleep at night and the light goes on, you wake up. The fish are very much tuned into the flows. At the

wrong time of the year when we are planning to go fishing, if those flows are coming down — not just e-flows, but all sorts of other flows — the fish do go off the bite, for sure.

Just to wrap up the opening statement: e-water is just one of the tools in the whole toolbox to improving our recreational fisheries. We are also talking about in-stream habitat, we are talking about riparian vegetation and improving the fish passage and connectivity. It is really important when we think about blackwater events and how e-water is used to get fish to refuge areas and also to get larvae and eggs to those larval rearing and juvenile rearing areas of our catchments, reducing the fish loss during screens and pump screens, some smarter fish stocking and obviously controlling carp, which is a major issue in the success of our recreational fisheries. That is my opening statement. Hopefully that has covered our recreational fishers' interests in this topic.

The CHAIR — Thanks, Michael. I will start with the opening question if I may. You mentioned partnerships and having those ongoing conversations and dialogues with both local and state governments. I imagine that is where you are wanting to park that. What currently exists in terms of consultation with CMAs, local managers, the environmental water holder and those types? How do you currently manage that relationship? Is there an ongoing dialogue? How does that work?

Mr BURGESS — We have some ongoing dialogue with the environmental water holder. We try to catch up on a quarterly basis and have a look at that on more of a strategic basis. There are some clear opportunities where fishers will listen to fishers and trust what fishers have to say as opposed to maybe governments, so there are opportunities for how we get the facts and information out to the recreational fishers. The CMAs across the border are really proactive in getting fishers involved. There are a lot of fish and flow forums that are happening around the state. We are really tapping into the local fishing clubs, the networks, around getting them more involved in how the whole water delivery mechanism works and how e-water fits into it. So what we are seeing, where there is that great dialogue, recreational fishers are coming to the table with some clear misconceptions or ideas around what it is. They are actually learning through that process, they are understanding that, and also acknowledging that the catchment managers are operating in the best capacity they can to deliver outcomes for recreational fishers.

I reckon there are some really good partnerships that could be done there, but again there are 838 000 recreational fishers around the state. We are starting obviously with a few champions in and around the catchments, and we are using our fishers as spokespeople around the e-flows and environmental water and what it means to recreational activities, including fishing. They are pretty much at each catchment level, but for an organisation like us, there are 12 catchment management authorities and to get to every single one of them and, I guess, upskill our local volunteers in each one of those areas is a big task. There are certainly some better partnerships with certain CMAs.

The CHAIR — Great. Thanks for that. By way of a supplementary, we were up in Kerang for some of these hearings, and I got the sense that this was a work in progress, if you like, and that relatively modern practices were being implemented to try and improve the whole practice and manage the difficulty in stakeholders as we go along. I note in your submission you say, and I quote:

> Over time, we have seen water and catchment managers learn through good science and adaptive management how to deliver e-water more effectively and result in positive outcomes for our fish and quality of fishing.

In your view, do you think it has improved over, say, the last five to 10 years from where we are today to how it was, or are we sort of in the same space we have been?

Mr BURGESS — It is certainly adapting pretty fast. I think e-water was designed for wetlands and waterways. I think the CMAs have really clicked straight on that recreational fishers are a key stakeholder and fish are something that the community really understands and has a connection with to focus their work around fish. So from that, for instance with the north central CMA, we have got a native fish recovery plan based around that, with high amounts of rec fishing engagement. So it is happening.

What we are also seeing is more research being done with cause and effect, which is really interesting for us. We obviously want to know what is the result of these flows, are we seeing increased spawning and are we seeing increased recruitment back into the fisheries? It takes five or 10 years to start finding out that information. We are seeing that research coming onto line at the moment, which is really exciting. I think it is saying that we need to look at a much larger spatial scale. Say, for silver perch, which is a fish that used to be

quite prevalent in the Murray–Darling rivers, it might be the case that rather than trying to recover them in one part of the catchment here in Victoria that we focus our attention on another part of the basin where we know there has been successful spawning and we know that those fish travel hundreds, if not 1000 kilometres, back to Victorian fishers. So we are starting to sort of see more of that science, but I think it is still limited, and it is very much adaptive management happening at the moment. Certainly we are involved in those kinds of discussions with the CMAs.

Mr RAMSAY — Thank you, Michael. In relation to the blackwater effects on the fishing stock, can you give us a bit of an overview from your organisation about what impact blackwater has on the fish stocks?

Mr BURGESS — Rec fishers obviously get very concerned when they see dead fish — large Murray cod or freshwater crayfish — coming out of the water. We spend a lot of time protecting those fish and enjoying them, so when that happens it is quite an emotive issue. When you actually look at what blackwater is, why it is happening and how we can ensure we protect our fish stocks, what we have been able to find out is that blackwater is obviously a natural part of the system where it gives the system a big boost of organic matter. Unfortunately with our modified flow regimes, our droughts and things like that, we are accumulating so much organic matter in our flood plains and catchments that we just do not have that regular flooding — that regular boost of nutrients back into our waterways. When we do have these big floods, the system just cannot cope, so we end up having a greater frequency of blackwater events. They are short and sharp, so the low oxygen conditions do not last very long, but they can have some very significant impacts on our fish stocks if our fish have no way of moving to a tributary or a wetland away from the flow of the blackwater events.

So when we look at how we provide some resilience for our fish stocks, it comes down to what role e-water can play to provide those refuge areas, removing the barriers so that fish can actually freely move further around the catchment and within the system to get away from those kinds of events. Also, I know it is hard for us to kind of sit down and understand this, but the fact is that what we see after a blackwater event and a big flooding system is a big massive recruitment of our fish stocks. So probably what we are losing is getting replaced to a degree, but it is something where we do need to put some management in place to build that resilience in our system, where we may need to do the restocking, where we need to remove the barriers — how e-flow can give a little bit of a boost or a refuge to ensure our fish stocks are good.

But I think it does come down to connectivity. Our rec fishers probably do not have all that information with them or have gone through the journey. I can definitely tell you that a lot of recreational fishers expect that there is some e-water that will come down and remove that blackwater and everything will be okay, but the amount of water we are dealing with in a blackwater event is substantial. E-water is not a silver bullet with that, but something Victoria and all the states will need to deal with are more severe types of blackwater events. How do we deal with this organic matter, and in between those bigger flood periods can we actually reduce some of that load down to reduce that intensity when we do have those larger floods?

Mr RIORDAN — My question is a simple one. The government has had an increasing focus on the value of recreational fishing. There has been strong promotion and there are changes coming through shortly about sort of enshrining recreational values around water. What mechanisms exist, if any, that link your organisation and other angling and fishing groups into decision-making about what we do with water? Is there sort of a designated feedback system whereby blackwater events are reported or there are potential areas of concern? Perhaps historically fishermen know that there is going to be an issue in this area, that there has not been a fire or a flood or something for a while and it is going to be a problem. Do those sorts of opportunities exist at present?

Mr BURGESS — I think if they do exist, it is more of that regional basis. We were obviously heavily involved in the water plan for the state, and we are obviously doing a bit of work with the Victorian Fisheries Authority and other government agencies around a generic freshwater fisheries management plan as well. I think for us, because that is a new bit of work — those recreational values — and that is something we have been pushing very hard for as part of that process in that decision making, I could not probably tell you whether there are existing processes in place apart from the local catchment management side of things and also with the annual seasonal planning for e-water and how those values get picked up in the mix. So I think there is going to need to be a fair bit of work done, because I would say the other values — irrigation, environmental and cultural values — have sort of been included intrinsically, but I think there is some new work that needs to be done. I am sure there might be some competing — canoeists might want flows at certain times where we may not want

flows. So I think it will also be important for us, but it will also require a bit more work for us to work through how we put that together into a plan. Again, it is something that we have been pushing for, and it is very important for us.

Mr O'SULLIVAN — Thanks, Mr Burgess, for coming in. I caught a Murray cod yesterday morning before I got onto my official duties for the day. Unfortunately it is out of season, so I had to throw it back, but it was otherwise of legal size. But it still went back into the water.

In terms of the impact we have seen that blackwater events can have — and the Murray cod are a magnificent animal, absolutely magnificent — it is a tragedy whenever we see blackwater events, wherever they occur, because they are beautiful animals that end up dying. It says in your submission that environmental water cannot reverse a blackwater situation. In terms of your experience, have there been any signs or indications of environmental water actually contributing to a blackwater event, where through the release of water at the wrong time it might have worked for certain areas but it has not worked in the fishing space and it has actually contributed to a blackwater event?

Mr BURGESS — Not that I am aware of. I guess you need a substantial amount of water to take that organic matter into the river system, or if there is a fair bit of organic matter sitting within the river channel and the creeks of the systems, so I do not believe so. The river system itself is dealing with that breakdown of organic matter on a continual kind of basis as well, and obviously temperature as a role to play as well, but not to my knowledge has environmental water caused a direct fish kill or a blackwater event of that sort of magnitude. Generally when we deal with the blackwater events it is generally something that is the result of some rather large rainfall somewhere in the catchment and it progresses through the whole catchment, or there have been some unusual rainfall events that might trigger quite a big input of organic matter into a river system, for instance. I think there was a bit of that happening up at Shepparton earlier this year, for instance. I was up there at that particular time and they had obviously put a fair bit of nutrients into that system, and we are still trying to get over that occurrence.

Mr O'SULLIVAN — In terms of your presentation, it talked about carp control. That is something that certainly needs to be done throughout our system. The virus is hopefully going to come on board sooner rather than later, but we are not quite at the point of it being released just yet. Does environmental water, when it comes through and obviously goes out and floods the wetlands and so forth — we know of the impact that that has — actually in some ways contribute to carp continuing to breed up?

Mr BURGESS — Yes, it will do. If the conditions are right for carp, nice warm conditions, they will also be breeding as well and spawning. So what we have seen when we do have these large flood systems — and the water that has been around over the last 12 months has been quite good — we have seen an explosion of carp numbers as well. So they will take the opportunity if we are flooding areas that have good carp populations, and so trying to get it at the right time of year I guess is one way to get around it.

Mr O'SULLIVAN — So are the breeding and spawning patterns or ideal conditions for a carp the same as for a cod and a yellowbelly?

Mr BURGESS — Yes, springtime. So those increasing water temperatures mean that there is more algae and plankton for the juvenile fish to be eating. I guess the problem with carp is they are prolific breeders as well. They can quite easily outcompete our native fish, so you can have those areas that do cause carp numbers to explode, and that is why I think it is really important that we do look at the virus, and hopefully all the information that is being presented at the moment and being looked at is suitable for release, for sure.

Mr O'SULLIVAN — I would like to see that released sooner, if not today. One final question, and I know the Murray-Darling Basin plan is probably not the expertise of VRFish, but obviously that plan has a significant impact on your industry in terms of the way it is managed, but does your organisation have any particular view on how the Murray-Darling Basin plan is going at the moment?

Mr BURGESS — Yes, I guess we have had a fair bit of involvement in the plan through the native fish recovery plan for the Murray-Darling Basin. Recently we have been very concerned with the amount of water that is not coming down our rivers. We do attend some fisher and flow forums. Normally the Murray-Darling Basin Authority runs every couple of years a fisher forum around our native fish, so we have been involved in that aspect, but I think there clearly are signs of what we are seeing with the management of the water. There is

definitely some more work that needs to be done to ensure that it is working the way it should do, because certainly what has been uncovered by *Four Corners* and those other allegations has really concerned us in a big way.

The CHAIR — Any further questions? Michael, thank you for being here.

Mr RIORDAN — Unless he has got fishing tips!

The CHAIR — I was just going to get to that. The member for Polwarth and I think the entire committee just want to know where the best fish are being caught at the moment and where we need to head on our weekends.

Mr BURGESS — Look, the Murray cod opening is not that far away, so it is going to be absolutely epic. I think it is going to be a great season with the amount of water that is around, fish stocking at the highest level ever, so there are plenty of good spots. You will not have any trouble finding some fish.

Mr RIORDAN — Four thousand were put in here a couple months ago.

The CHAIR — That is fantastic. Thanks again, Michael.

Witness withdrew.