

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

2021–22 Budget Estimates

Melbourne—Thursday, 17 June 2021

MEMBERS

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Gary Maas

Mr James Newbury

Mr Danny O’Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Nina Taylor

WITNESSES

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

Ms Katherine Grech, Director, Better Boating Victoria, Department of Transport; and

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

The CHAIR: Welcome back, Minister Horne, this time in your capacity as Minister for Fishing and Boating. We again invite you to make a 5-minute presentation and this will be followed by questions from the committee.

Visual presentation.

Ms HORNE: Thank you very much, Chair. I am really pleased to advise that the work has continued apace to deliver on this government's unprecedented commitment to boating and fishing. The sector is going from strength to strength, and as a major driver of regional tourism, it is as critical as ever to our post-COVID economic recovery.

Every year recreational fishing and boating collectively contributes around \$6.8 billion to the Victorian economy. Recognising the strong relationship between these pursuits and opportunities presented by joint planning we recently brought Better Boating Victoria together with the Victorian Fisheries Authority to ensure that we keep pace with growing demand. In delivering our ambitious agenda we have removed boat ramp fees and directed revenue from registrations to improving facilities across the state. We have increased fish stocks, opened up access to waterways and supported growth in the seafood industry. And we have further built our relationships with industry and local fishing clubs to ensure we are striking the right balance between meeting the needs of commercial and recreational fishing.

In the two years since establishing Better Boating Victoria we have made boating cheaper by removing all boat ramp, parking and launching fees at Victorian boat ramps. In this year's budget we have committed \$13.2 million over the next four years to continue to deliver this commitment. We have made boating better by funding new projects across Victoria and installing new berths at St Kilda, and following a particularly tragic summer with a significant increase in drownings, we will continue to prioritise making boating safer through the Boating Safety and Facilities Fund. We have built new ramps at Hastings and Avalon, and we are upgrading the ramps at Rhyll and adding a new lane at Queenscliff. We are providing more car parking at Point Richards, Clifton Springs and Altona, and we are improving accessibility for all Victorians and installing a new accessible pontoon down in Mordialloc. Have you checked it out?

Mr RICHARDSON: I have.

Ms HORNE: We have reviewed how boating infrastructure can be better managed as well, and that is why we have established the Better Boating Fund where more than \$30 million of licence and registration revenue will be deposited annually.

To make sure that revenue is put to best use we are currently progressing the first-ever Victorian recreational boating strategy, co-designed with Victorian clubs, industry and the boating community. To ensure that Victorians stay safe while enjoying great facilities, we have just announced \$6 million in funding for new projects at Warrnambool and Lake Bullen Merri and released over \$2 million in grants for improved boating infrastructure, aids to navigation and search and rescue as part of the boating safety and facilities program.

This year we stocked a record 8 million fish, with a further commitment of \$5.9 million for a new native fish hatchery in Shepparton, and we are well on track to increase fish stocking to 10 million fish annually by 2022. We have improved access for recreational fishing with better access gates and signage at over 40 sites along the Goulburn River, as well as upgraded fishing platforms and cleaning tables and improved fish habitat. One million dollars will also be invested to protect Victoria's fishing industry and provide the VFA with a new state-of-the-art patrol vehicle. This will improve the VFA's regulatory capacity in East Gippsland to allow for those open water inspections in enabling the VFA to better respond to emergencies in the region and continue that really important work that they do.

This government is continuing to invest in the critical infrastructure to support growth, efficiency and safety at boating facilities that Victorians use each and every day, whether in the course of their work or for recreation. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Minister. You will not be surprised to know the enthusiasm that I have for having an opportunity to chat to you about this topic. It is something that is really important to the people that I serve and represent. I will start by referring you to budget paper 3, page 107, and the government's unprecedented investment in recreational boating since the last election, making good on a number of commitments to boaters—even though I do not have a coastline, unlike you, . What do the recently announced commitments deliver?

Ms HORNE: You do not have a boat licence?

Ms RICHARDS: I do not have a coastline.

Ms HORNE: I see.

Ms RICHARDS: I do not have a coastline, unlike my colleague.

Ms HORNE: Boating and fishing, as I said in my presentation, contributes so much to the Victorian economy. Boating contributes approximately \$4.5 billion and employs around about 17 000 people. Indeed you are right: we have got an unprecedented and pretty ambitious program that is underway. This budget will invest \$19.2 million to continue our delivering better boating facilities and those safety upgrades across the state. We have that \$6 million, which will fund works to upgrade the Warrnambool boat ramp for local boaters, as well as, as I said, Lake Bullen Merri. Victorians will also have that free access to park and launch at 35 public boat ramps through a \$13.2 million investment.

At Warrnambool—and I was out there a month, six weeks ago, something like that—that was actually classified as the worst boat ramp in the state. I would really like to give a bit of a shout-out to the harbour reference group down there, who did a power of work with Better Boating Victoria, and also to the local council to be able to come up with a design for that. When I was down there too, there had also been a significant storm event, which had damaged some of the breakwall as well, so it was important to be able to work with council and this harbour reference group to be able to do some of those repair works down at Lady Bay. But down at Lady Bay, with that boat ramp that is there, there are a number of things that will be going on there because, as I said, the boat ramp itself was incredibly slippery and degraded. There will be new pontoons and ramps that go out there, because it is much loved by the community. It is a recreational facility for people, whether they are swimming horses down there or just being able to launch a tinny to go out and have a fish; it is so important to be able to do that.

Similarly with the work that is happening, I think in Mr Riordan's electorate, at Bullen Merri, I would like to really give a bit of a shout-out to a local community group you have got down there, who have done a power of work in helping to really understand the problem. When I was down there, again at the same time, they took me through—I do not know if you have ever gone for a fish out there for chinook salmon or anything like that—

Mr RIORDAN: You mean Purrumbete or Bullen Merri?

Ms HORNE: Bullen Merri, but I did duck into Purrumbete as well, which was pretty exciting. But at Lake Bullen Merri they showed me exactly how much the watertable has dropped over the course of about 40 years, and as a result of the wind—because the prevailing winds end up sort of going underneath boat ramp—it has actually caused it to degrade. There was about a 40-metre sort of drop that you then had to back a boat down the ramp. I do not think I could back a boat 2 metres, let alone down 40 metres. So the work that will be going on there allows it to come down, have a turning circle—which will make it so much safer, and then enable people to get boats out into that water there—as well as two new pontoons. Now, this is terrific—terrific for the regional economy, terrific for local tourism—because there are only two places in the entirety of this state where you can actually fish for chinook salmon, and it is Purrumbete and it is also Lake Bullen Merri.

On top of that we have also got a massive amount of commitment going on, with the six election commitments that we have got going on around the state. We have completed the first stage of the Hastings boat ramp upgrade. Contracts have just been awarded down at Rhyll. There is a \$1.4 million upgrade to the Cowes Jetty that will be completed this month. As well, contracts have been awarded for the boat ramps at Queenscliff and Point Richards. We are also providing new car trailer parking at Point Richards, and new pontoons will occur down in Mordialloc, as I mentioned, in about June, as well as the car park renewal there. And I know how popular boating is down in the south-east of Melbourne.

One of the other things that we are doing, though, too is establishing a strategic plan to be able to understand, you know, what the asset condition looks like and be able to forward plan ahead through things like the Better Boating Fund, and there is a power of work that is underway. So on top of that we have also got the boating safety and facilities program. Now, this is a really key part of maintaining our boating infrastructure, and it reinvests those fees paid by boaters into projects. This year's round allocated almost \$1.9 million to 33 projects right across the state, from Yarrowonga out through East Gippsland and down through the south-west, so a power of work has been done.

Ms RICHARDS: Thanks, Minister. So you have spoken about the Better Boating Fund and the recreational boating strategy that is currently being co-designed. Can you perhaps outline for the committee how the co-design process is working and the progress that has been made to date and any next steps.

Ms HORNE: Thank you very much. The Better Boating Fund was established through legislation, and it was done as an election commitment to return every single cent spent on the licensing and registration fees back into boating. And so it was really important that people that contribute to the fund that has been established actually then can undertake that co-design. And the level of consultation, which has been pretty much led by Katherine here, as the head of Better Boating, has been extraordinary.

I think that we had online consultation between 29 January and 20 February to understand what boaters wanted and what those boating priorities are. It was hosted on the Engage Vic website and promoted through social media and all those sorts of different channels to make sure that asset managers, waterway managers and the MAV, as well as boating and fishing industry representatives—

There were more than 3000 views of that survey, and more than 770 people participated in it, which I think is just terrific. The data then has been analysed by Better Boating Victoria, and eight different district plans have been developed. BBV also ran a series of pop-up events. They were attended by recreational boaters, fishing clubs, asset managers, and that was where people were able to come and view, understand the district plan for the region, understand what the recent recreational boating survey had identified and provide those thoughts. So I think this is a pretty exciting time for people who do own a boat and want to actually get involved.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you. I will congratulate you on the work you have been doing in consultation, and I will leave it there. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Richards. Mr Newbury.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you. I have got a quick question on the camping on Crown land issue for the department. Is that you, Mr Dowling—most appropriate?

Mr DOWLING: I am more than happy to take it.

Mr NEWBURY: What are the departmental resources, or associated agency resources, to police the 17 000 kilometres of land?

Mr DOWLING: Absolutely. I can only speak on behalf of the Victorian Fisheries Authority. So we have 70, or 69, fisheries officers, uniformed officers, across the state. And all up we have got 100 compliance staff. But I will—

Mr NEWBURY: On top of the 70?

Mr DOWLING: Sorry? No, it is 30 on top of the 70.

Mr NEWBURY: So it is 100 in total.

Mr DOWLING: So we have got 100 uniformed staff, but 70 frontline staff. And they will be working with Parks Victoria and Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning staff as well. And I suppose I will also just add on this that it is a wonderful opportunity for Victorians to go and have free camping on Crown land, public land.

Mr NEWBURY: On that very issue, farmers and home owners are already reporting people walking through their property to do that. What would we say to those people who are reporting that that has already started?

Mr DOWLING: Sure. Can I say that most people do the right thing. We have got almost a million rec fishers in Victoria, we have got half a million four-wheel drivers in Victoria, we have got all sorts of outdoors enthusiasts who get out there, and 99.9 per cent of those people are doing the right thing every day. Where there are people that do the wrong thing, unfortunately in every part of life, whether that is getting behind the wheel of a car and drink driving or speeding, those things will happen. But we have got the powers, we have got the regulatory authority, we have got the legislative power and we have got the resources for those people that do do the wrong thing to be addressed, noting that most people are doing the right thing. I would just make this point as well, Mr Newbury: the public already have access to this land, so it is not illegal for the public to be on public land.

Mr NEWBURY: To fish, but they cannot camp for 28 days.

Mr DOWLING: No, not yet. Not until 1 September.

Mr NEWBURY: Well, they are doing it now. People are doing it now.

Mr DOWLING: What is that?

Mr NEWBURY: We are getting reports that people are already doing it. They are walking through properties and saying that under the current rules they are allowed to do it. You mentioned that there is one officer per 170 kilometres, which is quite a wide remit to police. What I think is concerning home owners is it just cannot be policed.

Mr DOWLING: I will make this point. There were a number of submissions that came in in relation to the camping on Crown land. There are 8500 licences out there. A number of those licensees historically have been quite comfortable with people camping on the riverfrontage, and that has occurred up until this point. Now, my understanding of the intent of the regulations is it was to address some of those anomalies as well, where people have been actively camping on riverfrontages with the support of grazing licence holders and to give effect to what has been historically occurring for many decades. So that is part of it. But I suppose, coming back to your premise about 'Are all campers and fishers walking across private land?', no, they absolutely are not.

Mr NEWBURY: It is happening right now. You mentioned that there were people who had put forward positions, and I note that ministers D'Ambrosio, Mary-Anne Thomas and Gab Williams are reportedly briefing that they have issues with the current policy. Minister, what would you say to reports that your own colleagues have problems with the policy?

Ms HORNE: Well, having been present in conversations with my colleagues, I can say we are all united in acquitting this really important election commitment. What we are doing now is going through that process of consultation, and those regulations will be drafted so that we can get this up and running by 1 September.

The CHAIR: And I would remind you, Mr Newbury, that we are considering the budget estimates and to keep your questions within the scope of this inquiry please.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you, Labor Chair. I know that there are a number of regional schools, one specifically with Crown land on either side, and that the schools are concerned about what protections they have in terms of people camping outside their schools—

The CHAIR: Sorry, Mr Newbury. Just in relation to the advice I just gave you, could you relate your question back to the budget estimates, please?

Mr NEWBURY: Absolutely. And does the budget provide any protection for people who are camping outside a school who are legally entitled to under this new policy?

The CHAIR: Sorry, Mr Newbury. I would ask you for a budget reference. I am confused as to where you are going here.

Mr NEWBURY: There does not have to be a budget reference. I mean, you can try and cover up for your Labor colleague if you want—

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury.

Mr NEWBURY: but we have just heard that there is—

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, could you please stop speaking over that Chair again. I have asked you to relate your question to the budget, and simply mentioning the budget in your question does not relate it to the budget. If you could relate your questions to the scope of this inquiry, that would be appreciated.

Mr NEWBURY: Moving on. Mr Dowling, the Victorian Fisheries Authority, how much do directors earn?

Mr DOWLING: Well, there are different salaries within the band, so it depends upon—

Mr NEWBURY: Roughly speaking, what is the band?

Mr DOWLING: Well, again, we have a range of different staff that are part of the executive team. Some are—

Mr NEWBURY: No, the director, the board director.

Mr MAAS: On a point of order, Chair, look, I think we have been really patient with Mr Newbury. We have given him really broad scope. I think the committee has been more than fair throughout the course of these hearings—

Mr Riordan interjected.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan!

Mr MAAS: I think the committee has been really fair throughout the course of these hearings, particularly with ministers and now with department officials as well—

Mr NEWBURY: What is the point of order, Chair?

Mr MAAS: The point of order is—

The CHAIR: If you could allow Mr Maas to speak, please.

Mr MAAS: The point of order is that I think that questions should relate to the budget estimates, and this clearly does not—

Members interjecting.

Mr MAAS: How much a director earns can easily be looked up on a website. I find it absolutely extraordinary that you have not—

Members interjecting.

The CHAIR: Mr O'Brien, I cannot hear Mr Maas—

Mr NEWBURY: Can I respond to the point of order, please, Chair?

The CHAIR: If I could Chair this meeting, I would be able to call for further submissions on the point of order, but you are speaking all over the top of each other. Are there further submissions on the point of order? Mr Newbury.

Mr NEWBURY: Look, it is clear that the other committee member is concerned that I am about to raise Yorick Piper being given a job for the boys on the board—

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury!

Mr NEWBURY: because of his relationship with a cabinet minister—

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury!

Mr NEWBURY: and there being no reason for him having that job.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, you are completely out of order. That is not a contribution on the point of order. Your time has expired. I do uphold Mr Maas's point of order, and I would ask that all committee members relate their questions to the budget estimates. The scope of this inquiry is the consideration of the estimates to inform the Parliament in relation to the 2021–22—

Mr NEWBURY: A public servant's salary—

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, could you please stop speaking against me—

Mr NEWBURY: Against you? Are you saying you are partisan?

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, you have been continuously interrupting me and everybody else at this table all day and it makes it impossible for anybody—

Mr Newbury interjected.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, you are being extremely rude and disrespectful to me as Chair and—

Mr Newbury interjected.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, you are talking over me as I am trying to address this meeting—

Mr NEWBURY: No, you are talking over me because—

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, you are completely out of order. You have been disrespectful to everybody in this room for the entirety of the proceedings so far this week, and I would ask that you refrain. I have upheld Mr Maas's point of order and I ask everybody at this table to keep their questions to the scope of this inquiry. Mr Riordan on a further point of order.

Mr RIORDAN: On a further point of order, Chair, there is some confusion. We had quite a detailed conversation before we started these hearings that we did not have to refer to a page number in the budget, that it is the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee, which means it is a fairly broad scoping inquiry, and your ruling to say that you are now going to rule out of order when we ask how much people get paid from the public purse I do not think in any stretch of the imagination fits with the integrity and/or the scope of this—

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, you are taking a degree of licence. At the start of every day in the handout that is prepared for this committee by the secretariat we read that:

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2021–22 Budget Estimates. Its aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

I would ask that—

Mr Riordan interjected.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, I would ask that people keep their questions in relation to the Inquiry into the 2021–22 Budget Estimates, and simply mentioning the word 'budget' does not make your question relevant.

Mr NEWBURY: Chair—

The CHAIR: I have ruled on this point of order. Do you have a further point of order?

Mr NEWBURY: Further on the point of order, Chair, the idea that the salary—

The CHAIR: No, not further on the point of order, Mr Newbury. I have ruled on this point of order. Do you have another point of order?

Mr NEWBURY: That is the point of order.

The CHAIR: Well, Mr Newbury, I have already ruled on this point of order and I do not need to hear any further contributions. Right now we are taking from Mr Hibbins's time. Mr Hibbins, you have the call.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you, Chair. I would like to know: how many individuals in the last financial year actually applied for a fishing licence or actually got a fishing licence?

Mr DOWLING: I have got that, Minister, if that is okay. So in 2019–20 we had a dip because of COVID, so it was down to 227 178.

Mr HIBBINS: And that is individual people?

Mr DOWLING: That is individual people.

Mr HIBBINS: And what was it the year before?

Mr DOWLING: The year before it was 267 000—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Target One Million!

Mr HIBBINS: That is what I was getting to, Mr O'Brien. You have got a target of 1 million. I presume that is 1 million individual recreational fishers throughout a year.

Mr DOWLING: Absolutely, yes

Mr HIBBINS: And what is the current trend?

Mr DOWLING: We are confident that we are getting closer to a million people fishing, and we have had a lot of investment in this space to try and contribute towards that, including, as the minister has touched on, the 8 million fish being stocked, improvements to access with the new boat ramps and record numbers of participants attending our Vic Fish Kids events pre COVID. I suppose when we look at access and infrastructure and fish going into the water, then all of the steps that need to be taken to build that figure are occurring.

Mr HIBBINS: Is there a time line for reaching 1 million? That is a growth of four times.

Mr DOWLING: We are continuing to have a crack at it.

A member: That sounds like the tunnel-building.

Mr DOWLING: I will make this point: seeking to get more people fishing and get more out there and participating in this has really strong physical and mental health benefits and also regional economic benefits.

Ms HORNE: Mr Hibbins, if I can add in there too, it is an aspirational target. Also there are a number of licences that we do not actually capture that information for: kids, people on seniors cards—those sorts of people. But it is really about the investment that we make to be able to support more people fishing more often.

Mr HIBBINS: I guess why I am asking the question I am asking is: if your target is to get four times the number of people recreationally fishing—a million people recreationally fishing—have you done any assessment of the potential environmental impact of that and any actions that might ameliorate any environmental impact?

Ms HORNE: Look, Travis can speak to some of the detail on that, but what I would say at a high level is some of the environmental impacts that we have been able to do to support more recreational fishers have been things like removing commercial netting through Port Phillip Bay, removing commercial netting down in

Gippsland in the Gippsland Lakes, putting more native fish stock back into our rivers and waterways—those sorts of things—putting more habitat back into our rivers, whether they be trees that have been removed and put into the water to actually create that habitat for native fish stocks or creating those environmental reefs down off Geelong and also in Port Phillip Bay to be able to support new growth areas for things like our native oysters that were pretty much wiped out and mussels and things like that as well.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay, thank you. Thanks, Minister. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Hibbins, and that concludes the time we have set aside with you for consideration of the fishing and boating portfolio, Minister. We thank you and your officials for your time. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within 10 working days of the committee's request.

The committee will now take a short break before moving to consideration with you of your consumer affairs, gaming and liquor regulation portfolio. Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.