

# TRANSCRIPT

## PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

### Budget estimates 2019–20 (Fishing and Boating)

Melbourne—Wednesday, 12 June 2019

#### MEMBERS

Mr Philip Dalidakis—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr Gary Maas

Mr Danny O'Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Ingrid Stitt

Ms Bridget Vallenge



**WITNESSES**

Ms Jaala Pulford, Minister for Fishing and Boating, and

Mr Gary Gaffney, Chief Executive Officer, Better Boating Victoria, Department of Transport; and

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

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

On behalf of the Parliament the committee is conducting this inquiry into the 2019–20 Budget Estimates because that is just who we are. Its aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community, and I think I can comfortably say we are doing that with aplomb.

The committee will now begin consideration of the portfolio of fishing and boating, and I welcome the Minister for Fishing and Boating, the Honourable Jaala Pulford, and officers from the department. I thank you all for appearing before the committee, but again you really did not have much choice.

All evidence given is protected by the Parliamentary Committees Act. This means that it attracts parliamentary privilege and is protected from judicial review. Witnesses found to be giving false or misleading evidence will be strung from their toes off the—do not worry about that.

**Ms PULFORD:** Those are not the official words.

**The CHAIR:** We will just say ‘contempt of Parliament’, or you could watch Collingwood games—your choice. Minister, I invite you to make a brief presentation of no more than 5 minutes. This will be followed by insightful inquiring and always interesting questions from the committee.

**Visual presentation.**

**Ms PULFORD:** Thank you, Chair. Recreational boating sustains 18 000 jobs and is worth \$4.5 billion to the Victorian economy. With vehicle registrations growing at 2.5 per cent a year, recreational boating is a growth industry. More and more Victorians want to get out on the water to discover our beautiful coastline, rivers, lakes and estuaries. And rec fishing is big business too, given that 838 000 people wet a line or dive for seafood each year. We are investing rec fishing licence fees in projects like stocking waterways with fish and improving the facilities that anglers use every weekend, if not every day of the week. And we are working hard to implement our commitments like Target One Million, which aims to increase participation by anglers to 1 million Victorians.

The Andrews government is embarking on the biggest reforms to the way that boating infrastructure is managed that the state has ever seen. We are fixing boat ramps, abolishing boat ramp parking and launching fees, and reforming the way that our vital boating infrastructure is managed. We are doing this because Victorian boaters already pay boat licence and boat registration fees. We do not believe they should also then have to pay local councils up to hundreds of dollars in some cases each year to use the boat ramps or to park at boat ramp car parks. Boaters also expect and have a right to expect that their fees are invested back into their community and improving their experience.

That is why we are in this budget establishing the Better Boating Fund, and we have allocated \$47.2 million in the budget. Through this fund we will invest in public recreational boating infrastructure like boat ramps and car parks and schedule major asset maintenance and waterway safety facilities and service. But this budget is just the beginning. We will ensure that every dollar of collected boat licence and registration fees is allocated to improving facilities and safety for the boating community. Never again will our boat ramps and boating infrastructure be allowed to fall into the state of disrepair that some of them are in.

When we made these election commitments we did identify a number of locations where there was an urgent boat ramp upgrade need or essential maintenance required. So the funding is there for projects in Rhyll,

Mordialloc, Queenscliff, Point Richards, Hastings and at Cowes Jetty, and we have already started some of the work to plan for delivery of these projects.

We believe that Victorian boaters should have better access to the water, and we are aiming here to increase participation. That is why we are making much-needed upgrades to boating infrastructure across the state. Boating is not just a passion and a hobby for 400 000 Victorians; it is a big contributor to a healthy, thriving Victoria. As with rec fishing, this is a wonderful, wonderful pastime, much loved by so many in the community but also a huge source of economic activity.

On fishing, the really lovely, lovely thing about fishing and indeed boating is that it gets people together with family and friends in the great outdoors, away from the screens and spending time with people. It is a pastime that a nine-year-old and a 90-year-old can do side by side, and you do not have to go very far in Victoria to see that happening. We understand the economic value of the recreational fishing sector. Recreational fishing contributes \$2.3 billion each year to the Victorian economy and employs 16 000 people. Phase 2 of Target One Million, we promise, will be as exciting as phase 1 has been. So \$35 million is invested in this budget, including some key initiatives: mandating access for fishing and camping by opening up Crown land river frontages; opening up more lakes and reservoirs to kayaks, canoes and boats with electric motors—Barkers Creek and Tallarook are already open, with work well advanced on the remaining locations; investing in fishing infrastructure—cleaning tables, fishing platforms and more; introducing a Fishing for All program; and in a sort of unusual coming together of the fishing and boating portfolio with the roads portfolio, recreational fishing numberplates are coming to enthusiasts soon. We look forward to launching those very soon. We have had a fun competition where people have submitted their design and slogan ideas.

The next slide shows some of the huge numbers of native fish that we have been stocking across the state, and you can see those record-breaking numbers there. Other parts of our ambitious package include phasing out of commercial fishing in Gippsland Lakes through a compulsory buyout to return the lakes to recreational anglers. This is a fishery that has been in decline and under pressure for some time. We will invest in the science and habitat restoration in the Gippsland Lakes to ensure that the environment in that fishery remains healthy but also is able to recover. There is also a complementary initiative with the Lakes Entrance Fishermen's Co-op, a new on-water cafe on Bullock Island that will be delivered by the Minister for Regional Development.

We are going to build a really big native fish hatchery near Shepparton—\$7 million invested in this budget for that. You can see on the slide there warm-water species like Murray cod and golden perch. We have taken our fishing efforts and just smashed record after record, and all credit there is due to the team at the VFA. But we came to government saying we would increase fish stocking to 5 million and we ran straight past that target—6 million, 7 million, and we are rocketing towards 10 million fish annually. What that means for the uninitiated non-angler is that you will catch a fish no matter where you go.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Is that a guarantee, Minister?

**Ms PULFORD:** There is a bit more nuance around that, around species recovery in different locations, and that is all very carefully planned and delivered. And indeed, if I could just throw very briefly to Travis Dowling right now. In Ferntree Gully—

**Mr DOWLING:** We are stocking Murray cod, golden perch and trout. Today we know it is raining and hailing out there in Ferntree Gully. They are ready to be caught. It is bringing fish to the suburbs for people that do not have access to get out and about, so it is great.

**Ms PULFORD:** Yes, so we have been doing a bit of that as well, but literally if we were presenting to the committee tomorrow, there would probably be fish stocking, and if we were presenting to the committee to yesterday, there would be, but today all the action is at Ferntree Gully.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Dog parks. Have you got the fish parks next to the dog parks?

**The CHAIR:** All right, we are not far from the lunchbreak, crew, so let us keep it handy.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** Thanks, Minister, for joining us today. Minister, I want to get straight into it and take you to the Better Boating announcement, which was a substantial and significant benefit for my community in

the Mordialloc electorate. This is where a number of my constituents spend their recreational time with family and friends. I refer you to budget paper 3, pages 100 and 107. Could you please explain for the committee what the Better Boating Fund and free boat ramp launching and parking initiatives will deliver?

**Ms PULFORD:** Yes. Thanks, Tim. This election commitment may have almost been announced in your electorate.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** It was, yes. Peter Scullin Reserve, Mordialloc Creek.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Deidre Chambers, what a coincidence.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** Well, you are invited any time out on the boat with me, Danny

**Ms PULFORD:** You were there on that occasion, though I was not.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** I was, with the Premier.

**Ms PULFORD:** But it is my great pleasure to be delivering these election commitments that are so important to so many people—literally hundreds and hundreds of thousands of people in the Victorian community, and people who live near the water but also people who do not and will happily travel a bit to get on the water. And so the Better Boating Fund will ensure that every dollar of revenues raised from boat licences and registrations will be invested back into facilities and safety. That is a massive change, and just to give you some insight into what that will mean, over the last four years the average revenue from those sources is \$29 million. It fluctuates a little, because some licence renewals are on a five-year rotation, and so there are some periods that ebb and flow a little, but the average is \$29 million a year. So people will see a remarkable investment and change compared to what they are used to.

We have identified a number of locations for urgent upgrades, as I indicated in my introduction, but our number one priority so far this year—my number one priority—has been on putting in place the arrangements to remove the fees for parking and launching.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** And can you outline, Minister, what has been done to abolish those parking and launching fees? It was something that was of substantial interest to my community, but could you take the committee through what has been done in that space?

**Ms PULFORD:** Yes. I have been stopped in the street on more than a few occasions, so I know that people are very, very keen to see this commitment delivered, and I am super excited to have the funding to do this confirmed in the budget.

When I first assumed responsibility for the delivery of this election commitment, my first question was, 'Righto then, how many boat ramps do we have?'. And the answer to that was not known, because there are so many different land managers and so many different ramps and so many different sets of arrangements. So whilst I know there is some frustration among voters that this could not be done 5 minutes after the election and the government getting straight back to work, we have been very, very busy on working through all of that. So there are 22 separate land managers who have boat ramps, 35 of them—there are some with more than one—sorry, there are 36 boat ramps that fees are charged on. And so we are well advanced in our discussions with those 22 land managers around arrangements that will ensure the removal of those fees, and I am confident that people, when they are putting their boats in the water in the spring, will not be paying those fees anymore.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** And I think communities like mine have the confidence of having a minister in the cabinet named 'Fishing and Boating' as well, and how significant that is for them—the appreciation of their recreational passion and outcomes. Minister, are you able to outline for the committee what progress has been made on delivering those better boating commitments as well?

**Ms PULFORD:** The projects?

**Mr RICHARDSON:** Yes.

**Ms PULFORD:** Yes, so the funding in the budget for those projects is phased over two years. The work that has been underway to date has been scoping and identifying what the scale of the works will be, putting a firm figure on that which people can now see in the budget, with a view to being able to get on and do these works as quickly as possible in each of those locations. Some of this work is seasonal, and the best time of year to do it is obviously when things are a little quieter at the boat ramps, but we will get this done for people as quickly as we can.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Minister, continuing on the same theme, page 107 of budget paper 3, 'Better boating Fund and free boat ramp launching and parking', it was \$27 million in 19–20, it is \$12.6 million in 20–21 and then there is nothing in the out years. Given the government's commitment was to return all boating and registration fees, why is the money decreased and basically cut in half in the first year, and then is not there in the out years?

**Ms PULFORD:** Yes, thanks, that is a good question. So what that represents is the period of time that we believe it will take to complete the review of management of boat ramps. And so what we want to do is deliver on that commitment as quickly as we can to remove the fees, but in the second half of this year, and over a period of probably no more than 12 months, we will be undertaking the review into what will be the enduring reform around the management of boat ramps.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** But that is part of the fund, as I understand it. The commitment was to return boating licence and registration fees. So in its entirety, I think, going back to, say 2016–17, that was about \$27 million, and it will go up and down every year.

**Ms PULFORD:** Yes, so as I indicated before, it is around \$29 to \$30 million a year.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** So why is it not budgeted for in the out years? Are you now saying that you will not return all those fees in future years?

**Ms PULFORD:** Oh, no, we absolutely will.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Well why are they not listed then, in the out years of the budget papers?

**Ms PULFORD:** Well, those fees will be generated and they will be put into the Better Boating Fund and that will be an ongoing reform, and it will be in the order of \$29 to \$30 million a year that will be generated from those licences.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** So it is trust you, do not trust the budget papers?

**Ms PULFORD:** Well, the budget papers reflect the big infrastructure projects in the first couple of years that are part of the commitment, and the budget also includes funding to undertake the review that will be the basis of the ongoing reform around management. Now, we indicated before the election that a new authority would be the most likely way that boat ramps will be managed in future, but the review needs to be undertaken to work out what is going to be the most effective form.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** I appreciate all that, Minister. It is the fact that the commitment is not reflected in the actual budget papers. But anyway, I will move on.

**Ms PULFORD:** It is.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** The announcement you made as part of the budget last week, which reflected \$7.6 million to abolish fees, parking fees, at boat ramps, picking up the tab for those councils that charge those fees. Will you also be picking up the maintenance tab for all councils that do not charge maintenance fees but actually absorb the cost of maintaining boat ramps in their general revenue?

**Ms PULFORD:** Yes, so the review will go to the question about what the long-term model will be that will ensure that people have boat ramps of a standard that they expect both in some of the metropolitan areas where people are being charged and then in all of those areas in regional Victoria where they are not. In our extensive search for boat ramp fee collecting arrangements we have discovered there are a couple of honesty box

arrangements among them, so these arrangements are really many and varied, which is why we will be entering into 22 arrangements with 22 land managers over the coming months.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** So will those councils that currently just pay for boat ramp maintenance—

**Ms PULFORD:** No, maintenance will be included. It has been included in all of those discussions, and it will be included.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** How will that be calculated, then?

**Ms PULFORD:** We have sought information from them about their maintenance costs. There have been a lot of discussions with them over the last five months or so.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** So that will apply to every council equally across the state—equitably, not equally, because each one will have different costs and things.

**Ms PULFORD:** As I indicated at the start, the first priority is to remove the fees, and the funding that you referred to a minute ago over the first couple of years is to provide for that to occur. There are some maintenance costs that have been a feature of those discussions with those 22 different landowners, and then the fund will continue to be—well, funds will continue to flow to the Better Boating Fund through those licence and registration fees in the order of \$29 million, \$30 million a year—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Except they are not mentioned, but anyway.

**Ms PULFORD:** Yes, that is right. And so the arrangements for how that will all operate and the enduring arrangements around the management, including of course importantly the maintenance of boat ramps right across the state, will be the subject of that really detailed work and review that will be commencing in the next couple of months.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Okay. So just to be very clear: you will fund the maintenance costs for all councils across the state for the costs that they incur for boat ramps, whether or not they charge fees?

**Ms PULFORD:** That will all be considered as part of the review.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** No. Will you be funding the maintenance costs for every council across the state?

**Ms PULFORD:** As I said, that will be considered as part of the review, but our intention is to take responsibility for them, and inherent in that the answer is yes.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** So, yes, you will be funding them? Let me give an example. Frankston council has two ramps at Kananook Creek and Olivers Hill, which will be paid for by the government, but smaller regional councils that do not charge fees, such as East Gippsland, which Mr Gaffney will know about, maintains 24 ramps and car parks. Will they equally get support from the government to maintain those facilities?

**Ms PULFORD:** And as I indicated, that is something that the review will contemplate, and we will work really closely with all of those land managers.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** That surely is a principle of equity across the state, Minister. It is not something you need to review.

**Ms PULFORD:** Which you know is something I am deeply committed to.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Okay, so clearly no guarantee on that. Minister, I will move on perhaps to—

**Ms PULFORD:** Well, if we could get in our time machine and see what the review tells us, then we could do that, but—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Well, no, no. It is a fairly simple thing: 'We're going to abolish boat fees'—

**Ms PULFORD:** Yes, and we are; we are going to abolish them really soon.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** 'We're going to return all the fees back'. And now we are saying, 'Oh, we're going to review it, though. We're not really 100 per cent sure'. Anyway, can I move on to Target One Million, Minister—

**Ms PULFORD:** Hang on, just one sec. This is an entirely new portfolio, an entirely new set of responsibilities. We have—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** It is not that it has not existed before. It is just this new portfolio.

**Ms PULFORD:** No. The state government has not previously taken responsibility for boat ramps in the way that it is now, so as I indicated at the start, the first thing we did was went and counted them all, understood their current arrangements—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Minister, I am running out of time and I have got an answer, so the—

**Ms PULFORD:** We will deliver our election promise, I promise you that.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** The issue of Target One Million and the discrepancy between the number of people fishing that you say there is versus the actual licence fees: will you commit to a new study to accurately reflect angler participation rates in this state?

**Ms PULFORD:** Yes, there is one underway at the moment.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** It is underway? When will that report be?

**The CHAIR:** And with that, we will take that as a question on notice.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Thank you for appearing. This might be best answered by you.

**Mr DOWLING:** Sure.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Just in terms of the Target One Million approach and the shift—I guess you are phasing out commercial—

**Mr DOWLING:** Commercial netting.

**Mr HIBBINS:** and moving to recreational. Can I ask if there are any new initiatives or anything new you are doing to measure the environmental impact of recreational fishing?

**Mr DOWLING:** Yes, absolutely. I will just say a couple of things. We are not actually phasing out commercial fishing. We are growing commercial fishing. We are phasing out commercial netting in two spots, in Port Phillip Bay and in Gippsland Lakes, but overall commercial fishing continues to grow in Victoria. In terms of the number of people fishing and growing that number, we have got a number of initiatives underway, including establishing the biggest stocking program in Australia for native species. In terms of overall participation and our strict size and bag limits, we are now stocking more fish and recovering more waterways than we have done before. There is some really good work being put out of Arthur Rylah Institute in DELWP which is looking at the numbers of Murray cod, silver perch, catfish, Macquarie perch and trout cod. Those numbers over the last six years have continued to grow in terms of the sections of rivers that are being monitored. So we are working with catchment management authorities, the department of environment, Parks Victoria and others to ensure that where we have got a growth in participation we do not in any way compromise the environmental values, and there are a lot of very happy fishers out there.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Yes. So you have referred specifically to fish stocks, but obviously there are also environmental impacts to non-fish stocks and the environment in general, and my understanding is—

**Ms PULFORD:** They are conservationists, our anglers.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Yes, I am not—

**Ms PULFORD:** Yes, they are.

**Mr HIBBINS:** I think it is fair to say if you are looking to really increase recreational fishers, I think it is good. My understanding is that your ability to actually measure the environmental impact of recreational fishing will need some improvement, so I am just trying to understand what you are doing to improve those measurements to be able to get an accurate picture of the environmental impact.

**Ms PULFORD:** Yes, sure. If we run out of time, we might have to provide you a little more on notice, but we work really closely with the rec fishing community around sustainability of their activity. There are bag limits in place. We have a crayfish tagging program that is pretty innovative and really important. We have worked with our rec fishers on some really wonderful conservation initiatives as well, like for stingrays and banjo sharks in Port Phillip Bay. So, yes, there is quite a bit there, and we might provide you with a bit of further information.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Can I just get on notice as well the specific line item in terms of size and habitat restoration in the Gippsland Lakes?

**The CHAIR:** You certainly may, and just like that your 3 minutes just went like that—that is how much fun boating, fishing and camping is.

**Ms PULFORD:** We will happily, yes.

**The CHAIR:** All right, ladies and gentlemen, that brings a close to the appearance before us today of Minister Pulford and her officials. 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 or you will be forced to fish in New South Wales. The committee will now take a 1 hour break before beginning consideration of our next portfolio, which is public transport. Thank you, Minister.

**Witnesses withdrew.**