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cc The Hon. Minister Dimopoulos
cc The Hon. Tanya Plibersek

By email

July 29, 2024



Submission regarding proposed Victorian hunting regulations.

Dear Sir/Madam,

It is disappointing that “consultation” over the last few years seems not to have resulted in any non-hunter views being reflected in the current draft Regulations.

The current draft does not consider the significant adverse impacts of hunting on regional residents, landowners, or other recreational users, let alone the fragile and worsening¹ state of our ecosystems. It ignores key recommendations and findings of the recent Parliamentary Inquiry to do with hunter training, pollution remedy and reduction in public areas for hunting. It conflicts with the United Nations’ Sustainability Goals (to which Australia is a signatory) and our own Biodiversity 2037. It ignores glaring issues of public safety.

Public safety is *not* increasing public areas available to unmonitored hunters, refusing to conduct risk assessments, allowing hunting to occur in poor light conditions, and in so many thousands of public areas that authorities can’t estimate the number let alone monitor them. Public safety is also not lengthening the shooting seasons, ignoring noise pollution, postponing hunter education or proficiency training, delaying acting on toxic lead or non-biodegradable plastic pollution. And it certainly isn’t failing to ensure hunters advise authorities in advance of where they will be hunting and when, like they do in other states.

Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting inc. (RVOTDS) is a not for profit association which incorporated in 2018, recognising the need for there to be a voice for those adversely impacted by hunting. We now have over 6500 direct supporters, and the support of 90 organisations spanning business, conservation, animal welfare and First Nations interests. Our submission leans on first-hand experience together with a wealth of research into social/economic factors impacting the regions, including by way of community surveys. The results of our [recent survey](#) of 821 people have been shared with government. In short:

- More than half were concerned for safety
- More than half had suffered stress/anxiety as a result of shooting nearby
- Over a quarter witnessed illegal hunter behaviour, yet only 18% of those who made reports to authorities were satisfied their reports were managed appropriately
- Nearly 40% said they lived within 3 kilometres of hunting (the distance shotgun noise is audible)

We are concerned the “survey” method for public comment on the draft Regulations failed to include many important aspects and that there was no provision for “other”. This submission provides comment on some of the key aspects of the draft Regulations, as well as some which have been conspicuously missed. Our prime focus is on the length, times and locations of the native bird hunting season.

Our making this submission should in no way be construed as condoning the continuation of native bird hunting in Victoria. On the contrary, we submit there are other far safer, more popular and financially beneficial recreations such as wildlife watching, which should be encouraged by the government instead.

We welcome the opportunity to further discuss any aspects.

¹ https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/4ad8a4/globalassets/tables-paper-documents/tables-paper-7953/state-of-the-environment-2023-report_summary-report_digital.pdf

Draft Regulations

Length of native duck shooting season: Opposed. Whilst we support a mid-week opening, we strongly oppose the length of season (which is proposed to be elongated, in complete contradiction to the key recommendation of the Parliamentary Inquiry which was to ban it). The season length should be wound back to reflect the fact less than half of one percent of the population choose to shoot native ducks for recreation. The adverse impacts of shooting on growing numbers of nearby residents, landowners and other recreational users are significant and it is unconscionable to allow this to occur for 25% of the year. We submit the duck shooting season should be 1-2 weeks, and certainly no more than 30 days, in June when migratory birds (highly susceptible to disturbance) have left the area.

Length of native Stubble Quail shooting season: Opposed. With no stakeholder consultation, the regulator has continued to recommend full quail shooting seasons of 20 birds a day per shooter despite the fact little is known about the birds' populations (only recently being counted and using "N-mixture modelling" which is criticized by scientists²), a "poor understanding of its basic life history and threats to the species"³, and the fact there are other species which closely resemble the Stubble Quail which are at risk of being shot. Unbelievably, there are no species ID tests required of quail shooters. Further, the regulator has knowingly allowed the quail shoots to take place during the little birds' breeding cycles⁴. Quail shooting should receive at least the same level of attention and restrictions as duck shooting. The season should be 1-2 weeks, definitely no more than 30 days, to protect our native Stubble Quail and other threatened species it resembles, as well as nearby residents. It should be in June, outside the birds' breeding cycles.

Shooting times: Opposed. There should be no shooting before 8am nor after sunset, *any day*, for any type of hunting. This is to ensure appropriate light conditions for species identification, and lesser adverse impact to growing numbers of nearby residents⁵ and other recreational users.

Banning of non-hunters from many areas of public land until 11am: Opposed. It is unconscionable that the public would be banned at any time from public areas so that a minority choice of recreation could occur without interference. These are public areas, maintained by public funds, which the government is encouraging the public to visit and enjoy. Hunting already hampers other recreations such as fishing, boating, and birdwatching which are far more popular and financially beneficial to regional communities. Why hamper it further? If such a ban is out of concern for public safety, then why allow hunting at so many thousands of public areas the authorities can't provide an estimate of the number of them let alone monitor them?

Bag Limits: Opposed. Given bird declines and worsening effects of climate change, default bag limits should be at least halved. It is ludicrous to maintain old parameters in changing times.

Duck licence fees to increase to \$88: Insufficient. The small increase in fee is offensive to the vast majority of Victorians who value our native wildlife. It is also insufficient to cover the costs of the regulator's operations, hunter compliance monitoring, hunter education programs, bird "counts", wounding research etc. Taxpayers have been subsidizing hunting for decades. We are now up to \$100 million and counting⁶. Most would agree it is unacceptable that this minority choice of recreation continues to attract such generous taxpayer support, especially when most taxpayers oppose the pastime. Hunters should pay a much higher fee. For comparison, we note a ski season pass (for one adult at just one area of Victoria) is \$1900.

Mandatory knowledge testing "not part of the current regulations": Unacceptable. As shown in GMA's [hunter knowledge tests](#), hunters do not portray a high level of hunting knowledge. This is an unacceptable risk to protected species and to public safety. All hunters should have to sit annual species ID tests and undergo practical proficiency training (e.g. to reduce wounding) at least once. Would we allow drivers to simply do a basic online test, no practical test, before they got in their cars and drove on public roads?

2Link, W. A., Schofield, M. R., Barker, R. J., and Sauer, J. R. (2018). On the robustness of N-mixture models. *Ecology* 99, 1547-1551. doi:10.1002/ecy.2362 See page 1551.

³ 2020 Quail Forum presentation 3.1

⁴ 2020 Quail Forum presentation 3.5 "Breeding occurs regularly in spring and autumn", [CSIRO](#)

⁵ Times have changed since the 1950's. It is estimated 1 in 4 Victorians now live regionally.

⁶ https://www.regionalvictoriansotds.com/taxpayer-funding-for-hunting-shooting?utm_campaign=8c9dde59-c7ca-4c25-a1d8-778de83112f9&utm_source=so&utm_medium=lp

“Non-Australian residents not needing to pass an ID test, because they would have done so overseas”: **Opposed.** Obviously Australian species are different to overseas species. Any and all hunters should have to sit a species ID test.

Ban lead ammunition for quail & deer as well as duck: Supported, but this must be immediate without exception. Given the extreme dangers to wildlife and people, this ban must be immediate with no exceptions. Lead does not break down, remaining in the environment a significant risk to people and wildlife such as eagles, swans and diving ducks. It is estimated [five tonnes of lead](#) is pumped into our environment each year by quail shooters alone. Lead can mobilise in wet environments and enter adjoining properties and the food chain. There is no safe limit of lead in a person’s blood. Taxpayers have funded millions of dollars already to clean up lead contamination around Victorian shooting ranges. Who will fund more clean-ups around the state due to hunting, and what irreversible damage will be done by lead ammunition deposited into our environments in the meantime? It is curious where the author gets the estimated cost of phasing out lead ammunition. It’s concerning why the significant cost of *not* banning it (including to taxpayers for clean-up attempts and public health implications, to farmers’ whose livelihoods will be impacted, and to our ecosystems) would not rate a mention.

Electronic callers / decoys: All callers and decoys should be banned in all hunting to be in line with “fair chase”.

Species to be exempt from hunting: The draft Regulations only mention Blue-winged shoveler. However other “game” bird species are in serious decline. Any game birds showing a decline (according to independent peer-reviewed data) should not be hunted. We specially refer to the Australian Shelduck and Pink-eared duck. The Hardhead should also not be hunted given the fact it is highly susceptible to wounding, “more crippled Hardhead are lost than any other species” and serious doubts are held for its survival as a common species⁷. We would be happy to provide more detail.

“Administration improvements and technical changes”: **Transparency lacking.** There is a worrying lack of detail which must be made clear and transparent to the public before any regulations are confirmed.

Plastic pollution, “More work required, therefore not part of these regulations”: **Unacceptable.** Like lead, plastic does not break down in the environment, posing a serious and long-term risk to wildlife and us as it ends up as microplastics. A government board paper obtained through Freedom of Information, shows the government is aware of over 2 million plastic components from shotguns entering the environment each year from duck shooters alone (see extract below). Shotguns which eject non-biodegradable plastic components into the environment must be immediately banned - particularly on public land.

⁷ Waterfowl in Australia by HJ Frith

Plastic waste in waterfowl hunting

Duck hunting contributes plastic litter into the environment through discarded plastic shotgun shells (hulls) and plastic wads (used to contain the shot payload as it travels down the barrel on discharge). Upon firing at a target, hunters may fail to pick up ejected spent shells and they can drift away or sink to the bottom of the waterbody. Wads cannot be retrieved as they are propelled from the barrel some distance away after firing.

Research conducted in Denmark has found that wads and shells feature among the top ten litter items found on reference beaches (hunting of sea ducks is a popular activity) and contribute an estimated 13 tons of plastic litter into the environment annually. This plastic waste may take hundreds of years (and longer if covered by sediment) to breakdown and it accumulates at sites, presenting an aesthetic problem and posing a hazard to the health of ecosystems and wildlife that try to eat them. Decomposition of these macro plastic items into microplastic particles or beads can be ingested by small animals and filter-feeders and accumulate up the food chain, creating hazards for ecosystems, other wildlife and human health.

In Denmark, it has been estimated that it takes four shots to successfully harvest a duck/goose. If this same figure was applied to Victoria, and given the average annual harvest of game ducks (not including those lost to wounding) of approximately 370,000 birds, this would equate to 1.48 million spent shotshells and 1.48 million wads being deposited into the environment each year. While an unknown proportion of spent shotshells may be recovered by hunters, this would still mean that almost 1.5 million wads alone are deposited into the environment on average each year by duck hunters. If hunters conservatively recovered half of the spent shotshells fired and the remainder (740,000) entered the environment, this equates to 2.22 million plastic shotgun cartridge components, or pieces of plastic waste, being deposited into the environment each year by Victorian duck hunters. By any stretch, this is unacceptable and must be addressed.

Traditional Owner groups to be exempt: Opposed. How will this be enforced in practice? How will the government ensure this is not open to abuse at the cost of our native wildlife and regional communities? There should be no exemptions to any rule for *any* group.

Public areas open to hunting: Requires Immediate Change. Currently hunting is permitted at so many thousands of public areas, the authorities can't estimate the number of them, let alone monitor them. This is an unacceptable risk to wildlife and people. There should be transparency of the number and location of hunting areas. The number of public hunting areas should be wound back to correlate with the fact less than one percent of the population hunt. This will ensure better compliance monitoring and respect for regional residents and other recreational users. There should be no hunting within at least 3 kilometres of residents (the distance shotgun noise is audible) or other recreational facilities such as walking tracks. Only areas which have had a safety risk assessment conducted, should be open to hunting. In addition, RVOTDS supports the recommendations of Environment Victoria and Victorian National Parks Association in regard to reducing hunting areas.

We refer to the first three findings of the recent Parliamentary Report, which the authors of the draft hunting regulations appear to have missed:

FINDING 1: Up to 3.5 million hectares of public land is available for duck hunting, for a limited season, of which 285,000 hectares are primary hunting locations near waterways, including 75,000 hectares of State Game Reserves.

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FINDING 2: Publicly available map data on hunting areas is difficult to generate and available data is not at a consistent standard.

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FINDING 3: If hunting is to occur in public places, it should be in declared areas rather than allowed in public land by default. This would assist members of the public to know where hunting can occur, and assist in effective regulation by the Game Management Authority and Victoria Police.

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Reducing areas available to hunting would also support the recommendation by Dr Gillian Sparkes, Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability, in the State of the Environment Report Summary 2023, to establish safe havens to protect and restore critical habitat for nature and wildlife. It would also enable the targets of Biodiversity 2037.

Further safety measures. As occurs in NSW, it's entirely appropriate that Victorian hunters should register in advance, where they will be hunting and when. This will make compliance monitoring easier and help ensure public safety. No hunting should occur without signage erected in the area to alert the public. If the government is really interested in public safety and making compliance monitoring cheaper and more effective, it would mandate go-pro type devices on every firearm, activated as soon as they are removed from their safe, transmitting data back to police base.

Wetland closures. The regulator should recommend wetlands be closed to hunters for social/economic reasons (e.g. where community have requested it), as well as the presence of threatened species. The regulator has no answer for why it has continually refused to do this, despite it appearing to be its role according to The GMA Act.

Minimum age of hunters. In a climate of rising violence, it is perplexing why the Victorian government encourages children as young as 12yo (too young to watch an M-rated movie or drive a car) to kill wildlife with guns. There is a known link between animal cruelty (which native bird shooting is infamous for) and violence later in life. We submit the age of hunters should be lifted to a minimum 18yo which is in line with the National Firearms Agreement.

Compensation for non-hunters. We submit that the 99% of Victorians who do not hunt, should be compensated for being effectively locked out of a vast swathe of public areas while hunting occurs. Similarly that landowners and residents should be compensated for hunter disruption. Residents have a right to peaceful enjoyment of their properties, yet this right is being thwarted by the recreational whims of a relative few. Due to hunting occurring nearby, residents can't work from home, and businesses such as ecotourism businesses, cannot operate. It is only fair they are compensated for their loss.

Complaints Monitoring. The current system for submitting complaints about suspected illegal hunting is all but totally ineffective. The phone line is only open business hours, and online complaints are referred to an "independent" assessment panel which typically does not view complaints inside of a week. At this late stage, typically complainants are asked for evidence such as license plates and video footage which they likely would have had to put themselves in harm's way to obtain. Most complaints about hunting are therefore not followed up and the regulators' statistics to government about hunter behaviour are completely false. An independent, 24 hour complaints line should be implemented to ensure public safety and better accuracy of compliance reporting.

Cease misleading information / taxpayer funded hunting promotion. It is alarming to see government documents like the Regulatory Impact Statement (RIS) promote hunting, with the use of unfounded in fact highly controversial if not outright false statements about alleged economic benefit. It completely misses the adverse impact of hunting to non-hunting Victorians (99% of the population), let alone regional residents, landowners and businesses. The Executive Summary states hunting “contributes to state and local economies”, when the government knows this is based on a subjective (yet taxpayer funded) survey of hunters, not a cost-benefit analysis. The document fails to mention the findings of the Parliamentary Inquiry, that is that the surveys are biased and do not account for the *costs* to taxpayers or community, of hunting. It fails to list any counter findings such as those by The Australia Institute at all. On page 19 it states if there was no hunting in Victoria, the economy would forego millions of dollars and a large number of jobs which is plain false. Removal of hunting would of course allow for other more popular and financially beneficial pastimes to flourish. Why has there never been a proper cost-benefit analysis done? Why are taxpayers – most of whom are opposed to native bird shooting – continually expected to fund hunting activities and promotions? Particularly at a time of economic stress, the Victorian public should not be expected to support hunting. It’s high time 1. the hunting/gun lobby funded its own recreational / promotional activities like other recreational groups do and 2. the government refrained from perpetuating pro-hunting myths until such time as independent robust evidence (cost-benefit analysis.... Landowner consultation....) has occurred.

The current draft Regulations do not support the aim of providing effective management of game species or game hunting, let alone “safe, humane and sustainable” hunting.

We look forward to seeing the views of the non-hunting public represented in the Regulations.

Thank you

The Board.

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