

Bird populations decline alarming

ANTI-duck hunters have called for the 2023 season to be cancelled following "alarming continued declines in the bird populations".

Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting (RVOTDS) also cited the lack of breeding despite two consecutive La Ninas, and significant adverse impacts of hunting on protected species and regional communities not yet adequately investigated by the hunting regulator.

In their 20-page submission made last week, RVOTDS gave examples of those impacts, including tables obtained through freedom of information showing thousands of threatened species killed as collateral damage, tourism operators' concerns for customers' safety and economic loss, landowners' fears for their families, of trespass and the risk spread of foot and mouth disease.

"The 40th annual aerial survey, one of the largest wildlife surveys in the country and the only objective long-term dataset, has again shown game duck populations are declining, in some cases by an order of magnitude. Ninety-six per cent of bird breeding was observed in ibis, pelican and egrets - not game ducks," a spokesperson said.

"No government authority has been able to provide an estimate of the number of public waterways open to shooters or confirm whether it is closer to 8000 or 20,000.

"Unlike outdoor shooting ranges, the vast majority of duck shooting areas are neither signposted as shooting areas, nor monitored by any authorities."

The spokesperson said closing the 2023 shooting season was the "only sensible and appropriate way" to allow the birds a chance to recover and the regulator a chance "to conduct overdue due diligence of social/economic impacts to community and that includes impacts to mental health".

"In Victoria, less than half of one per cent of the population participate in it, while polls show most Victorians, particularly regional, want the pastime to end."

RSPCA chief executive Dr Liz Walker told the *Herald Sun* it was unclear why a State Government that prides itself on being progressive hadn't banned the annual slaughter.

"It is hard to understand why they haven't acted given there are really significant animal welfare issues associated with duck hunting that you can't mitigate," Dr Walker said.

"Now is definitely the time to stop duck hunting. It's overdue. The evidence is only mounting, both from an animal welfare and a sustainability point of view."

Nationals leader and Member for Murray Plains Peter Walsh said the Liberal-Nationals continue to support duck hunting in the state and the "massive annual cash injection it provides in regional Victoria".

A cash injection Mr Walsh said was "incredibly vital" to the people of Gannawarra Shire.

He said an economic analysis conducted a few years ago ranked Gannawarra as the number one shire for the highest financial windfall from duck season.

"Duck hunting is a popular recreational activity and an important traditional and legal pursuit - and one in which the overwhelming majority of participants do the right thing," Mr Walsh said.

"Although this duck season is yet to be declared, it is important this legitimate sport continues and we encourage hunters to be responsible and safe when it comes to participating in this year's duck season

"When appropriately regulated

and safely conducted, duck hunting is a sustainable industry that delivers a significant economic benefit to regional communities - one on which many of them rely each year.

"And the Liberal-Nationals haven't seen any policy positions to discuss anything different."