

Game Management Authority takes document fight to VCAT

The Game Management Authority is fighting a decision to release documents justifying a decision to increase the daily duck kill limit in 2021.

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Victoria's hunting regulator has come under fire for refusing to release documents in support of its decision to increase daily kill quotas in the state's increasingly controversial annual duck shooting season. Amid mounting calls for the "cruel" and "unnecessary" annual season [to be cancelled for good](#), activists say the Game Management Authority has gone to great lengths to keep the documents secret.

These documents, including the results of a trial aerial duck survey in 2020, were the basis for the state government's [shock decision to increase the daily bag limit in 2021](#).

It gave shooters the green light to each kill five birds a day – almost doubling the reduced daily limit from the previous year, when the state was reeling from the devastating black summer bushfires.

Activists say the decision was despite consistent reports, including the Eastern Australian Waterbird Survey (EAWS), highlighting the continually decreasing numbers of waterbirds, reduced breeding and habitat.

Conducted annually since 1983, the most recent EAWS survey found total waterbird abundance had decreased by 41 per cent in two years – the third lowest record in 39 years.

The widely-recognised survey, released by the University of Sydney, also found waterbird numbers remained “well below” the long-term average, leaving environmental and animal activist groups scratching their heads about the GMA’s survey results when its own documents concede the prolonged decrease in game duck numbers, with five of eight game duck species showing long-term declines.

Shooters were given approval to descend on Victorian waterways for an [extensive three-month season this year](#), with a daily limit of four birds.

Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting Inc described the decision as a “shock” and added the GMA’s claim there were millions of waterbirds in Victoria was in stark contrast to data pointing to “alarming” long-term decline in duck populations.

It led the not-for-profit to request a swathe of documents through Freedom of Information laws but months later it says it has not seen one, despite the Office of the Victorian Information Commissioner last month ordering the release of three key documents.



Duck lovers are calling on the GMA to release documents pertaining to its decision to increase the bag limit in 2021, despite data showing duck numbers were decreasing. Photo: Kim Wormald

These include a draft report of the game duck survey in 2020, minutes of GMA's board meeting that year and a report on game duck abundance estimates from March 2021.

In its decision, seen by Leader, the OVIC said there was "strong public interest in the public being better informed about the advice obtained and provided by the agency given its independent role and statutory functions".

It said it was the government's role – supported and informed by analysis and advice undertaken by agency officers – to make decisions in the best interests of the public and these were subject to "public scrutiny".

The disclosure of the documents would "promote transparency and accountability in government decision making processes", it said.

The GMA has since taken its fight to the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT), in an attempt to overturn the OVICs decision.

"It makes you wonder what is in these documents that the GMA is trying so hard to keep hidden from the public at taxpayers' expense before the state election," RVO DS campaign director, Elizabeth McCann, said.

She added most Victorians were against the "cruel and unnecessary recreational killing of wildlife".

"Populations of duck species targeted by shooters are showing an alarming long-term decline and a litany of environmental reports have revealed Victoria's ecosystems and wildlife in crisis," she said.

A recent survey conducted for the RSPCA, which has backed calls to ban duck hunting, highlighted how "unpopular" the season is.

More than two thirds of respondents opposed it and expressed support for a permanent ban in line with three other Australian states, while more than seven in 10 said they would avoid holidaying where duck hunting occurs.

It comes as recent GMA data showed around 7700 of 24,330 licenced shooters participated in the 2021 season, taking a total of around 52,500 birds — one of the lowest on record.

Noting this, Ms McCann added how media reports suggested the Labor Party was [“bitterly divided” over the issue](#) and called on the government to unite and “do the right thing”.



[A survey found Victorians would avoid holidaying in areas where duck shooting occurs.](#)
Photo: Kim Wormald

She wants to see the government act now to “permanently remove this stain on its environmental credentials” by introducing a long-overdue ban.

In a statement, the GMA said season arrangements were based on analysis and modelling of habitat and waterbird abundance surveys across eastern Australia, along with data relating to game duck abundance, habitat distribution and climate.

It said the revised 2021 decision to increase the bag limit from two to five ducks per day was made after data became “available” from the 2020 aerial survey.

Two of Australia’s leading experts in waterfowl ecology and population dynamics, Professors Marcel Klaassen and Richard Kingsford,

developed an interim harvest model to guide decisions on sustainable duck seasons, finding that reducing the bag limit was more effective in managing the overall harvest rather than reducing the season length.

The GMA said it was for this reason that it did not recommend the government alter this year's season length.

It noted the documents in dispute were "internal working documents", but its recommendations for each season were publicly available.

Chief executive Graeme Ford said its annual survey of the state's duck population was postponed on October 17 due to flooding across the state.

"Postponing the survey will minimise disruption to flood affected communities and ensure emergency response is prioritised during the floods," he said, with it set to resume in late November or early December.