

Season appals activists

Peter Bannan

pbannan@theguardian.com.au

MORE verbal shots have been fired as duck hunters and anti-hunting activists react to the announcement of a 2023 season.

Activist group Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting said if ever there was a bird shooting season to cancel, "this was it".

"The shocking rates of cruelty in duck shooting have plastered the papers - called out by reputable organisations such as Australian Veterinary Association and RSPCA, who can no longer sit back," it said in a statement.

"Science has shown bird numbers have continued to decline - despite rain - to just 25 per cent of their long-term average.

"And there have still been no safety risk assessments or social-economic impact studies done to gauge the true toll of unmonitored shooting, on the growing numbers of Victorians living in our regions."

The 2023 season was announced by hunting regulator Game Management Authority last Friday.

The season will start at 8am on April 16 and will close 30 minutes after sunset on May 30.

The bag limit will be four birds per day, with shooting of the threatened blue-winged shoveler and hardhead prohibited.

GMA said while the interim harvest model had been run to inform the settings for this season, the outputs of this model were modified to provide a more precautionary approach to concerns regarding the rates of wounding of ducks, poor behaviour by some hunters, and the fact that waterbird abundance, breeding and habitat availability, all showed long-term declines.

RVOTDS said it was "appalled" that despite another election win, the Victorian Government "didn't have the strength to ban bird shooting like other states have done".

"This season absolutely should have been cancelled to allow birds a chance to recover, and allow the regulator to conduct overdue social-

economic impact studies and risk assessments mandated by legislation yet never performed," the group said.

"We hoped to see stronger leadership and the right thing done.

"Less than half of 1 per cent of the population shoot our native birds for fun, and polls continue to show most Victorians want the pastime banned and for good reason."

Hunting organisation Field & Game Australia said it was disappointed that the government "chose to ignore the science" and reduce the season length and bag limits.

"This is a dramatic departure from Labor's previous position of supporting safe, responsible and sustainable duck hunting," it said in a statement.

"FGA has expressed extreme concern that the regulator and legislators have chosen to cite poor hunter compliance and wounding rates as justification to modify the season, even though the government's own figures show hunter compliance to be exceptionally high."

Member for Mildura Jade Benham said the season's arrangements were an "insult" to hunters across the state, many whom travelled to northern Victoria, including the Kerang Lakes and wetlands.

She said hunters were being "punished by a government looking to shore up votes in the city".

"Duck hunters are becoming the poster child of Labor's green crusade," Ms Benham said.

"The government is mounting pressure on hunters that are doing the right thing, hitting them with restricted bag limits and shorter seasons.

"The government's own compliance statistics show zero hunters of the 802 that were checked had exceeded their daily bag limit."

Ms Benham said the hunting community took a leading role in the conservation of the region's wetlands and environments to ensure the sustainability of wetland species.

Outdoor Recreation Minister Sonya Kilkenny didn't respond to questions before deadline.



Jade Benham