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Victorian Fisheries Authority
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DRAFT FRESHWATER FISHERIES MANAGEMENT PLAN

Dear Anthony,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Draft Freshwater Fisheries Management Plan on behalf of Victoria's recreational fishing sector.

As you know, VRFish along with the Australian Trout Federation and Native Fish Australia (Victoria) has made a substantial contribution to the Draft Plan through membership on the Stakeholder Reference Group.

In terms of additional feedback on the Draft Plan it is fair to say we have had limited responses. Despite efforts to design the plan for dual appeal for Government and recreational fishers we propose that strategic nature of the plan has presented somewhat of a barrier. Also, recreational fishers are passionate about their favourite fishing spots or waterways that they hold dear. It does demonstrate the importance of involving leaders in the recreational fishing sector to help guide and shape the plan. Overall, the intent of the plan has been well received, however enthusiasm and interest from recreational fishers is squarely focused on implementation.

We have taken the opportunity to review the results of a survey of almost 1,900 recreational fishers conducted by VRFish in the latter half of 2017. Data has been analysed and extrapolated to reveal trends and preferences of freshwater fishers. The survey, of which approximately 56% of respondents fish in freshwater, highlights:

***Let's make fishing
better, for everyone.***

- Restoring fish habitat followed by increasing fish numbers and were the highest ranked priorities for improving recreational fisheries in Victoria (ranked consistently across all ecosystem types, whether freshwater or marine).
- In terms of priority actions (detailed actions under each priority area), the five highest ranked actions included:
 - (1) controlling pest fish and plant species;
 - (2) research on how to rebuild declining fish populations;
 - (3) restoring and improving fish habitat;
 - (4) improving water condition, flow and levels; and
 - (5) teaching children about how to fish and good fishing practices.
- For those fishers that mostly fish inland, the regions fished most frequently (in order) included the North East, Port Phillip and Westernport, Gippsland, North West and South West.
- Trout, redfin, Murray cod and golden perch were listed as the most targeted species by freshwater fishers.
- Overall, respondents listed experiential (non-catch related) motivations as the most important motives for going fishing, with “to be outdoors”, “to relax” and “to be with friends and family” the highest ranked motives.

Guiding Principles:

- An overarching and important principle advocated in the Plan is that of stakeholders working in partnership – working together to benefit our freshwater fisheries. VRFish is highly supportive of this principle and employs a collaborative approach in all the work it does. The statement needs to be explored in more detail including delineation of roles and responsibilities to avoid confusion and ensure actions and outcomes are efficiently and effectively delivered. Recreational fishers not only want to be informed and involved, they also want to lead and implement.
- An integration of management actions is required so that resources available are used efficiently, without duplication and where possible value-added. Recreational fishers do express frustrations and confusion at the number of Government agencies that operate or have an interest in our freshwater fisheries. VRFish believes the plan will make a substantial contribution towards better coordination and maximize benefits to fishers from investment.

3.1 Environment rehabilitation through partnerships:

Considering the immense job to restore and improve fish habitat and a demonstrated support by recreational fishers, we recommend that a specific fish habitat funding scheme is established to expedite on-ground works. Funds could be contributed from the Recreational Fishing Trust and matched by Government. On-ground works should to be undertaken in a strategic approach and considering a Statewide perspective. Therefore, rather than a competitive grant structure, funds should be directed where it will result in the biggest benefit to fishers our fish.

Critical to the success of rehabilitating our waterways is empowering and building capacity of recreational fishers to participate in and lead this work. While our sector is committed to working in partnership with Government we also need the resources to grow our sector. This will enable more work to be undertaken, increased ownership and connection with our waterway and involvement in other aspects of sustainable and responsible fishing.

4. A deeper understanding of our recreational fisheries

Although it may not be practical or monitor each Victorian waterway from a traditional scientific perspective, the surge of interest in citizen science and value it can provide should not be overlooked. What is important to Government may not align directly with what is important to fishers. Therefore, it is important to provide our fishers with tools to collect data and acknowledge a range of both scientific and social benefits.

6.1 Facilitating fishing access

VRFish aspires to 100% access to our inland waterways yet there is complexity in land tenure, licensing arrangements and public liability concerns. Approaching this in a case-by-case basis is likely to be highly resource intensive and we would recommend Government focus on working to remove red tape and develop tools and options for recreational fishers to implement at the local level.

A reform of boating infrastructure governance is urgently required in Victoria, including the return of boating fees and licensing funds for infrastructure. An array of community, Government and industry organisations have been vested, often voluntarily to maintain boat ramps.

We are also experiencing increased conflict with other water users such as rowers, canoers, jetskis and motorboats and this needs to be addressed and planned for.

6.2 Connecting with recreational fishers

Changes are underway in VRFish and therefore a rewording is suggested to make this reference more general, including:

- remove reference to number of organisations that have VRFish representation
- remove reference to unaffiliated
- remove “hold regular board and state council meetings” to “consults and engages with Victoria’s recreational fishing community to gather their views and feedback, to create opportunities for empowerment, participation and involvement, and to share information”.

Fishcare Victoria also connects with communities and schools and this program could be further expanded to benefit our inland fisheries.

7.1 Environmental stewardship and volunteerism

VRFish recognizes and encourages the voluntary participation of recreational fishers to improve fishing and the environment our fish rely upon. However, volunteerism requires resources to operate effectively. A general decline in volunteerism in the community must be noted and planned for.

Given the interest in recreational fishing and demonstrated economic and social benefit to all Victorians, VRFish recommends recreational license funds should be directed to building capacity of our sector and strengthening recreational fishing groups. Globally, recreational fishers are emerging as Non-Government organisations that perform a natural resource management function or act as delegated authority. Therefore, volunteerism is just one aspect of recreational fisher involvement.

General comments:

- Recommend that the document be retitled as a “Strategy” rather than “Plan” as it lacks the detailed actions one would expect to see in a plan – rather is a high level strategic framework.
- Data collection framework to inform harvest strategy in Year 5.

- Listed threats and Section 3.5 should include introduced flora in addition to introduced fish – recommend changing threat description to one which is more general, such as “Introduced species” or “Aquatic pests”.
- 3.4 At-risk recreational fish species – recommend change of focus to all at-risk species (not just those that are of recreational value) – it should be an ecosystems based approach given ESD is a key objective of the Fisheries Act.
- There is no mention of fish irrigation and pump screening of interventions to prevent wild and stocked fish from being lost from the system.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rob Loats', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Rob Loats
Chair
Victorian Recreational Fishing Peak Body

22 March 2018