

Hon. Jaala Pulford
Minister for Fishing and Boating
By email: jaala.pulford@parliament.vic.gov.au

MODERNISING VICTORIA'S RECREATIONAL FISHING LICENSING SYSTEM AND TRUST ACCOUNT

Dear Minister,

We are writing to you to request that an independent review of our recreational fishing licensing (RFL) system and Trust Account occurs during this term of Government to deliver significant benefits to both Government and our sector.

The RFL system and reinvestment of our funds into programs that improve fishing has underpinned the successful development of our sector in Victoria. However, since the introduction of an 'all waters' recreational fishing license in 2001, the RFL and operation of the Trust Account has not been independently reviewed to ensure it is meeting our sector's requirements, now and into the future.

Our expectation was a full review of the *Fisheries Regulations 2009* was to occur before they sunset and this process would include a comprehensive examination of the RFL licensing system. We understand such a review is not planned due to time constraints. VRFish believes it is essential for this review to occur to deliver a range of benefits to both Government and our sector, including:

1. Determining a true, accurate and ongoing data on recreational fishing participation

A significant drawback of our current RFL licensing system is it cannot be used to determine a true and accurate picture of participation and the demographics of our recreational fishing sector. A modernised RFL system should be designed that encapsulates all recreational fishing participants so

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

that this data can be used for research purposes, improve communications and contribute to informed decision making by Government and our sector.

A modern RFL system enables our sector to target and evaluate the success of programs to specific demographics. For example, in the United Kingdom the introduction of a free junior fishing license was designed to increase the participation of young people into fishing. In 2018, the UK were able to demonstrate a 53% increase in junior participation.

The transition towards a digital fishing license through Service Victoria has the potential to unlock a range of exciting opportunities.

2. Providing a more stable and equitable revenue base for improving recreational fishing

A long-standing concern is a minority of recreational fishers are subsidising the majority of Victorian recreational fishers who do not need to purchase a license.

Recent trends in RFL data has exacerbated these concerns. In 2017/18, the total number of recreation fishing licenses sold (258,531) was the lowest since 2008/09 and was 76,169 less than anticipated in the Regulatory Impact Statement for Recreational Fishery Licence Fees (March 2016). This equated to \$3.16 million less revenue for the RFL Trust Account than forecasted for the 2017/18 financial year.

In addition, data trends are showing a strong preference towards a 3-year or 3-day licenced and a drop in 1-year and 28-day licenses being issued.

A review to modernise our RFL system must consider the most appropriate fee structure that enables the revenue base of the RFL Trust Account to increase with increasing participation in recreational fishing. The revenue received must meet the costs associated with improving recreational fishing.

3. Ensuring our RFL funds are directed to initiatives that improve recreational fishing and our sector

There are no formal governance arrangements directly involving our fishers to determine and review the broad RFL trust account investment priorities alongside Government funding of recreational fishing programs.

The Regulatory Impact Statement for Recreational Fishery Licence Fees (March 2016) stated Fisheries Victoria intended to undertake a full review of all regulations before they sunset, including consultation with RFL stakeholders to specifically consider:

- *the policy principles that will inform judgment about future design of RFLs and associated fees, including the case for government regulation and the specific activities funded by fees.*
- *a comprehensive analysis of the underlying costs and benefits (both public and private) of the government's activities related to recreational fishing (administration, managing the sustainability of fishing and promoting the interests of the recreational fishing sector).*

Such a review is required and would provide accountability to RFL holders by ensuring our funds are reinvested towards strategic and priority outcomes for our sector.

The RFL Trust Account by issuing grants should take into account the desired outcomes and priorities, including building capacity of our sector. Currently, the Recreational Fishing Grants Program is a competitive grants process with a broad assessment criteria. In 2017/18, RFL funds re-invested into the Recreational Fishing Grants Program and other projects fell to 17.2% of the total RFL Trust Account disbursements in that year. In addition, less than \$200,000 of these project grants were being delivered by recreational fishing organisations and angling clubs.

A review should consider a range of factors, including:

- whether our sector would receive better outcomes through an expression of interest for specific project applications on priority issues;
- addressing factors that are inhibiting our sector applying for funds;
- examining the maximum amount of funding available per project for small and large projects;
- the timing of these funding schemes; and,
- whether establishing a set annual percentage of RFL funds for the RFL Grants Program would assist in greater accountability and certainty.

In conclusion, our RFL system and RFL Trust Account have been the foundation of our sector's success and development since its inception in 2001. However, we are observing on many different levels it is now time to reflect upon and evaluate our RFL system. It's our view the RFL system must be modernised and re-engineered to address our sector's future challenges and priorities. Ideally, such a review should have occurred in the last 2 years to inform the remaking of the Fisheries Regulations 2009. Now that this opportunity has passed, we request you undertake a review during this term of Government.

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

29 March 2019