

Travis Dowling
CEO
Victorian Fisheries Authority
By email: improving.fishing@vfa.vic.gov.au

Dear Travis,

RE: DRAFT GIPPSLAND LAKES RECREATIONAL FISHERY PLAN

The Victorian Recreational Fishing Peak Body (VRFish) is the peak body representing the voice of 838,000 recreational fishers in Victoria.

VRFish commends the Andrews Government for taking on board our advice to develop and implement a fish recovery plan for the Gippsland Lakes. This is very important work that will benefit recreational fishing directly while delivering economic benefits to the region and boost the Gippsland Lakes environment through improved fish habitat.

For the first time, recreational fishers are expressing hope and excitement about the future of the Gippsland Lakes Fishery.

With the commercial netting buy out complete by 1 April 2020, despite the impact of COVID-19 restrictions VRFish is already receiving positive reports of improved catches. Independent of catch success, the overall fishing experience has been boosted with recreational fishers knowing that commercial nets have been removed and work is underway to improve the fishery for the long-term through a recovery plan.

VRFish is elated at the enormous level of interest that recreational fishers have shown towards this consultation. The number of responses received in the Victorian Fisheries Authority's survey is testament to the enthusiasm of our sector to make fishing better in the Gippsland Lakes.

As you are aware, VRFish has taken the lead in consulting with recreational fishers on their aspirations for the fishery and the recovery plan. Our findings from our survey conducted in 2019 have been used as the basis for the development of the draft recreational fishery plan. There is a strong desire from recreational fishers to manage the Gippsland Lakes for the estuarine values of the system.

When we asked recreational fishers what the most important actions of a fish recovery plan were, their highest priorities are restoring fish habitat, establishing a fish stocking

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

program for black bream, dusky flathead and estuary perch followed by reviewing recreational fishing management and improving environmental flows.

Current recreational fishing management arrangements for black bream, currently assessed as a depleting, also fell way short of our sector's expectations and broad opinion. Our survey showed there is strong support to reduce the daily bag limit for black bream (80%) which currently sits at 10 fish per person, increase the minimum size limit for black bream (71%), and introduce a maximum size limit for black bream (75%).

During the consultation for the draft recreational fishing plan, fisher sentiment has been consistent with our previous consultations and the referenced 2019 VRFish survey.

1. Involvement of recreational fishers, traditional owners and community partners from day one

The Gippsland Lakes is an icon of Victorian recreational fishing scene that attracted national recognition. What we found speaking to many recreational fishers prior to 2018 was the community was despondent that the quality of fishery had significantly declined, and fishers were bypassing the Lakes in favour of better fishing opportunities elsewhere. There was frustration expressed at the lack of the improvement in the health of the Lakes and recreational fisher engagement.

The commercial netting buy-out and now the development of a fish recovery has inspired recreational fishers. In VRFish advocating for a recovery plan for the Gippsland Lakes, it enables recreational fishers to assume the role of stewards of their fishery. We are delighted the draft recovery plan recommends taking co-design approach, enhanced collaboration through partnerships and has recreational fishers steering the ship.

We believe there is immense interest by recreational fishers to understand more about the status of the Lakes system and for recreational fishers working with land, water and fishery managers and scientists

We are frustrated that workshops and forums with fishers could not be conducted due to COVID-19 restrictions. These are important foundation activities to bring the recreational fisher community together and focus on actions that can add value to improving recreational fishing. VRFish stands committed to supporting these important forums throughout the implementation of the plan as soon as they can be safely undertaken.

2. Revised regulations for recreational fishing, including changes to catch and size limits for iconic species such as black bream.

Our consultation with recreational fishers found that the current recreational fishing management arrangements were not meeting their expectations. There is growing awareness with recreational fishers that estuarine fish species such as black bream are slow growing, long-lived and natural recruitment is impaired due to environmental

conditions. Equally, the popularity of catch and release fishing and trophy fishing (i.e. dusky flathead in nearby Lake Tyers) is very strong across Victorian estuaries.

This has led to a desire from fishers to leave more fish in the water to increase abundance, build resilience in the spawning biomass, manage for quality fishing experiences and to benefit from increased catch rates over time. Some recreational expressed they had an obligation to contribute to rebounding fish stocks and play their part

We are pleased that the VFA Fishery Scientists have been able to apply their expertise and data modelling to quantify the estimated impact of specific management levers to improve fishing. This is valuable information that should be presented to recreational fishers during the consultation for the Fishery Notice.

Monitoring the success of the plan and with oversight by a recreational fisher-led steering group will allow the VFA and VRFish to regularly report back to recreational fishers the impact of management actions and progression towards social and fishery objectives.

3. Fish stocking throughout the lakes system to increase the biomass of dusky flathead and black bream

There is strong interest in the expansion of estuarine and marine restocking in Victoria.

VRFish supports fish restocking to potentially accelerate the recovery of fish stocks in the Gippsland Lakes. Natural recruitment of black bream, estuary perch, dusky flathead and Australian bass have been significantly impaired by environmental conditions.

Recreational fishers have expressed the need to monitor and evaluate the success of any stocking trials and that fishers are keen to be involved in the research through citizen science.

Recreational fishers are interested in how fish stocking can complement works to improve and support the natural recruitment of fish stocks.

4. Improving fish habitat and waterway health

Recreational fishers are concerned about the health of the Gippsland Lakes and interested in its restoration. It would appear that many recreational fishers are unclear about the diverse program of work and investment currently in place. However, it must be stated that the Gippsland Lakes catchment is a complex and variable system covering approximately 10% of the area of Victoria with numerous management agencies and stakeholders.

In our view, this is why a recreational fisher steering committee for this plan and conducting angler forums and workshops are important foundation actions. We believe the recovery plan can act as a platform for greater involvement and influence over the priorities of the management of the Gippsland Lakes, facilitate knowledge sharing and creating better working relationships with managers and researchers. This

can assist to answer questions how this plan fits into the overall program of work and Government structure and processes to improve waterway health of the Gippsland Lakes.

There are some fantastic opportunities to build on the success of partnerships between fishers, angling clubs and OzFish Unlimited Chapters. VRFish seeks to improve these partnerships and advocate for more ways recreational fishers can give back to their fishery.

Already the Gippsland Lakes has attracted new fish habitat funding from the Victorian Recreational Fishing License Trust and Federal Government through The Nature Conservancy for fish habitat restoration. We are delighted that through raising the profile of the Gippsland Lakes new investment has been attracted almost immediately. We recommend that fish habitat restoration plan and prospectus is developed so that future actions can be targeted, prioritised and recreational fishers can play a key role in advocating for increased investment.

It is widely acknowledged by fishers that the reduction of freshwater flows and increased salinity of the Lakes system is having a major impact on the Lake's ecology and fish stocks. Fishers are concerned about the impact from introduced pest species, including the European shore crab and carp, algal blooms and loss of critical fish habitat.

There are aspirations by recreational fishers to address these issues, particularly from those who have observed the changes over decades and have a sound understanding of the hydrology of the Gippsland Lakes system. At some point State and Federal Government, driven by the community, will need to adopt new adaptation and mitigation strategies to counter these fundamental drivers impacting the health of the Gippsland Lakes. Also, the level of investment to improve the Gippsland Lakes environment is grossly underfunded when comparing to other important sites of ecological importance in Australia such as the Great Barrier Reef.

Specifically, during our consultation recreational fishers have cited the dredging depth of the channel to the ocean, engineering solutions to mitigate saline intrusion and delivering more freshwater flows to the system.

The holistic ecological function and management of the Lakes is outside the remit of the Victorian Fisheries Authority (the owner of the plan) and the Fisheries Act. VRFish will encourage recreational fishers to pursue their concerns and aspirations through other avenues such as advocating for greater freshwater flows and environmental water within the current operating constraints.

Finally, it has been suggested that at an environmental audit of the Gippsland Lakes should be undertaken. This would build on the audit conducted in 1998, establish what progress has been made and inform the priority actions for the future. Again, this is outside the scope of VFA's recreational fishing plan, however it indicates recreational fishers aim to understand the current environmental status of the Gippsland Lakes and take a long-term and strategic view to improving the waterway health and fish stocks.

5. Monitoring the success of the plan's actions

Recreational fishers are committed to making fishing better in the Gippsland Lakes. That's why evaluating the success of the plan and actions are essential. VRFish wants to be in a position to have data and evidence to report back to recreational fishers on the successful outcomes and the impact of management levers.

VRFish recommends that the Steering Group Committee should play a key role to help establish metrics or targets for the plan in line with the key measures outlined in the plan. Recreational fishers aspire their fishery to be managed for maximum experiential yield and often cite the adjacent Lake Tyers fishery as a benchmark. This fishery has documented higher catch rates, larger fish and higher levels of satisfaction.

Finally, VRFish believes it is essential that our sector can report back to the community of Gippsland and celebrate the social and economic impact of improved recreational fishing opportunities in the Lakes.

Thank you for the opportunity to shape the development the fish recovery plan and position us recreational fishers as stewards of the Gippsland Lakes Fishery. We are excited at the prospect of what can be achieved in the first five years of the plan to make fishing better. The plan gives recreational fishers the mechanism to take a lead role as key stakeholder in the overall management of the Gippsland Lakes and environmental condition.

We look forward to distilling the feedback from recreational fishers into the final recreational fishing plan so that explicitly aligned our sectors needs and aspirations for the fishery.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rob Loats', written in a cursive style.

Rob Loats
Chair
Victorian Recreational Fishing Peak Body

28 October 2020