

Rapid assessment of the document:

“Reference Document: Ministerial Briefing 2021 – Duck Season Recommendations 2021”

By

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A. Executive Summary

1. The reduction of the 2021 duck harvest season is excessive and unwarranted. The justification masquerades as a science-based decision, when in reality it is a politically expedient decision, aimed at legitimising the views of anti-hunting and animal rights groups, at the expense of hunters. The rationale appears to be politically based rather than science based.
2. Advice to the Minister from the Government’s Game Management Authority (GMA), and the evidence upon which it is based, has not been logically derived from the available data. The fundamental legislative responsibility for ensuring conservation and sustainable use of game animals during a legal hunting season, has been relegated a low priority, relative to embellishing with the Minister political advantages of favouring an anti-hunting approach. Evidence has been cherry-picked by GMA, to support an anti-hunting ideology, in preference to a science-based sustainable hunting ideology.
3. Field & Game Australia (FGA) are facing a well-coordinated and funded effort to restrict access of Victorian hunters to the game bird resource in 2021. At the expense of invoking a conspiracy theory, the possibility that this is a strategic political move, aimed at legitimising further restrictions on the 2021 season, followed by efforts to ban duck hunting within Victoria completely, cannot be ignored.
4. If so, there are strong reasons to expose all this before the results of the 2021 Eastern Australian Waterbird Survey are obtained. It is noted that renewed efforts are simultaneously underway to ban duck hunting within South Australia during 2021, and the commonalities between submissions from the anti-hunting groups suggest some higher level of coordination is involved.

5. It is recommended that FGA consider this report carefully, and in particular, examine the possibility of establishing an FGA “Task Force” and “Fighting Fund” to address known and potential challenges, and ensure the Minister is advised honestly and objectively about the very positive role hunting plays now and could play in the future.

B. Introduction

1. Field & Game Australia (FGA) requested Wildlife Management International Pty. Limited (WMI) to review conclusions reached by the Victorian Game Management Authority (GMA), in their document *Ministerial Briefing 2021 – duck season recommendations 2021* (MB-2021), and to assess whether the reduction in the bag limits and season length for 2021, were reasonably justified from the data presented and analysed in MB-2021.
2. WMI agreed to do this and advise FGA on potential and appropriate actions if any were merited.
3. MB-2021 draws heavily from submissions made by pro- and especially anti-duck hunting groups, particularly Birdlife Australia, RSPCA and Animals Australia, who made very detailed professional submissions, drawing heavily on interpretations of the results of the Eastern Australia Waterbird Survey (EAWS).
4. GMA appears to have committed itself to a “triple-bottom line” strategy for providing advice to the Minister, which is complex to unravel. MB-2021 claims to integrate public, political and economic evidence, with science-based wildlife management information of various qualities. But no clear process for prioritisation is described, which fundamentally means hard scientific data can be ignored in favour of an ideological position against duck hunting or vice-versa. For MB-2021, GMA has done nothing more than “cherry-pick” information that supports their GMA political position, and either ignore completely or cast doubt on any evidence to the contrary.

C. Basic Dilemma for FGA

1. In Victoria, duck hunting has occurred since the first Settlement and is now legally sanctioned under the *Wildlife Act 1975*. The species and conditions for regulated hunting are legislated within the *Wildlife (Game) Regulations 2012*, which establishes:
 - a. A daily bag limit of 10 ducks per day
 - b. The inclusion of 2 Blue-winged Shoveler ducks
 - c. A hunting season of 87 days
 - d. A hunting day of 12 hours
 - e. A hunting start time of 0600 hours
 - f. The opening of the hunting season on a weekend (rather than mid-week); and,
 - g. The opening weekend on the first Saturday in March.

2. Notwithstanding these commitments within the *Wildlife (Game) Regulations 2012*, section 86 of the *Wildlife Act 1975* contains provision for the Minister to further regulate the duck hunting season, if there is a “need” to do so (MB-2021).
3. MB-2021 seeks to establish that “need” in 2021 and prescribes conditions for significantly reducing the 2021 duck hunting season.
4. Relative to the baseline provisions (C.1 above), it represents a reduction of the “*seasonal harvest by approximately 88%*” (MB-2021):
 - a. A daily bag limit of 2 ducks per day (75% reduction)
 - b. No Blue-winged Shoveler ducks to be included (100% reduction)
 - c. A hunting season of 20 days (77% reduction)
 - d. A hunting day of 12 hours (17% reduction)
 - e. A hunting start time of 0800 hr (2-hour reduction in hunting time)
 - f. Rejection of the legislated “opening weekend” in favour of a mid-week date, and
 - g. Opening day on 26 May rather than early March.
5. In line with GMA’s triple-bottom line approach, GMA (MB-2021) recognise this reduction in the legal harvest will impact negatively on some Victorians, including:
 - a. Reduction of economic benefits to local rural communities in Victorian hunting areas
 - b. Reduction of economic expenditure by hunters within and outside of rural communities; and,
 - c. Restrictions on hunters’ ability to pursue duck hunting, and interrelated social, subsistence and recreational activities, associated with duck hunting
6. GMA (MB-2021) balances these “costs” to citizens by considering the reduced harvest will impact positively on other Victorians, whom it assumes will welcome GMA’s decision to reduce the harvest, including:
 - a. Those who oppose duck hunting
 - b. Those adversely affected by duck hunting
 - c. Those wishing to use hunting lands for other purposes during the hunting season
 - d. Those who wish to use amenities being used by hunters during the hunting season
7. The underlying rationale for these changes is:
 - a. GMA considers the game birds in Victoria are basically threatened with extinction.
 - b. GMA believes the 4-year drought (2016-2019) has reduced waterbird and wetland abundance in Eastern Australia, increasing the probability of extinction
 - c. GMA considers the “*normal arrangements*”, as prescribed in *Wildlife (Game) Regulations 2012*, would be excessive and “*may delay recovery when conditions do improve, or exacerbate the population declines if another poor spring breeding event occurs*”
 - d. The selection of an 88% reduction by GMA, is neither derived from nor justified by monitoring nor other scientific data. It is an arbitrary political decision, linked to GMA’s interpretation of its triple-bottom line commitment, which appears basically to be ‘political expediency’

- e. The Adaptive Harvest Management plan developed by the Arthur Rylah Institute in 2019, for the express purpose of objectively establishing hunting conditions, was not used by GMA, practically nor conceptually. It appears to have been rejected by GMA.
 - f. In line with recommendations from the Adaptive Harvest Management plan a substantive survey of Victorian wetlands and waterbirds was undertaken in 2020, but the results have not been used by GMA, practically or conceptually. No attempt to access even preliminary results, appears to have been made.
 - g. The Adaptive Harvest Management Plan was in fact derived by national experts, assembled by the Victorian government, and working with Victoria's premier waterfowl researchers (Arthur Rylah Institute). The results of the first intensive survey, even preliminary findings, could potentially have been used to:
 - i. Check the accuracy or precision of assumptions made in MB-2021 by GMA based solely on the EAWS; and,
 - ii. Provide evidence allowing the Minister to adjust the season up or down when the results of this survey are publicly available (stated as being 31 March 2021 within MB-2021).
8. In addition to the harvest reduction recommended by GMA in MB-2021, GMA further state in MB-2021`:
- a. The Minister may reduce the 2021 harvest further, below the 88% reduction already in place; and,
 - b. There are doubts as to whether duck hunting in Victoria: "*is to continue*" (MB-2021).
9. There is no consideration in MB-2021 about the very extensive "hands on" conservation work FGA and other hunters engage in between seasons, at minimal cost to government, because they have such a strong vested interest in sustaining ducks and the wetlands. In contrast, the anti-duck hunting lobby do little in the way of "hand-on" conservation. Neither is their consideration of the fact that the government budget to GMA and Arthur Rylah Institute is largely because such a strong and professional culture of duck hunting exists in Victoria. The government does not allocate similar resources to bird species that are not endangered and not used by citizens.

D. Should FGA be concerned?

1. FGA should rightly be concerned that serious efforts by GMA are underway to restrict duck hunting in Victoria, regardless of scientific evidence, and the veiled threat about whether duck hunting may no longer continue in Victoria should be taken seriously.
2. It is very clear GMA is opposed to duck hunting, and duck hunters, for reasons that are unclear but deserve investigation. The senior staff of the GMA appear ideologically and politically motivated, and arguably, are using their position to mislead the Minister.
3. It is unclear how long GMA have been providing obvious misinformation to the Minister, because the previous advice given to the Minister has been confidential. MB-2021 is a document that masquerades as a science-based assessment. In reality it is a

pseudoscientific assessment, promoting the ideological positions of the vegan-animal rights movement. As a matter of urgency the advice given to the minister in previous years needs to be accessed to determine whether the obvious biases and misleading advice in MB-2021 are part of an ongoing plan by GMA to stop duck hunting.

4. GMA's or their equivalent occur in many states, in many countries around the world, and their focus is typically on providing credible scientific, evidence-based management and regulation of waterfowl hunting. This appears to be the aim of the *Wildlife (Game) Regulations 2012* - but has been ignored and subverted by GMA.
5. It is unclear where GMA's focus on the "triple-bottom line" originates, but it is being used to favour political advice rather than science-based management advice. GMA has fundamentally ignored the well-being of duck hunters, ignored a proper science-based process for management and regulation, ignored the positive economic benefits of hunting, ignored the conservation action undertaken by hunters within and between seasons, and have focussed their attention on a single stakeholder group - the anti-duck hunting lobby. That GMA are the key source of advice to the responsible Minister, means that they are promoting animal rights agendas within government in a clandestine way, without open and transparent debate.
6. To prepare MB-2021, GMA relied on stakeholder submissions. They essentially ignored submissions from hunting groups and relied almost totally on submissions from anti-hunting groups. Indeed, where evidence from hunting groups contradicts evidence from anti-hunting groups, GMA casts doubt on the evidence of the hunting groups! They uncritically accepted evidence from anti-hunting groups and must be one of the only governments in the world to do so. The evidence they provide on many policy issues (eg live exports, dog racing) have failed to evaluate and balance impacts on society, leading to political backlash and economic harm.
7. There is not one example in the whole of MB-2021 where any challenge has been made to the evidence of anti-hunting groups. GMA staff are either incompetent, from a wildlife management perspective, naïve, or see their role as being a political arm of government, specifically to promote animal rights agendas within government.
8. The requirement of GMA to "consult" with stakeholders, has been blatantly abused. There was essentially no consultation with duck hunters. The situation with the anti-hunting groups is unknown, but with the hunting stakeholders, GMA seems to consider "consultation" is sending out their GMA written determinations, and requesting written replies to them, which they are at liberty to ignore without discussion.
9. Of particular concern, GMA appear not to have "consulted" with Victoria's own scientific authority on waterbirds, the Arthur Rylah Institute (ARI), largely funded by the Victorian government. This is particularly disturbing, because:
 - a. Despite ARI appearing not to be great supporters of duck hunting, they pursued an "Adaptive Harvest Model" in 2019, bringing in a team of national experts to work with their staff, to formulate an objective and scientifically sound mechanism for establishing seasonal hunting regulations, in an open and transparent way, that meets world's best practice. That is, regardless of their own potential leanings, they

were attempting to ensure the processes of setting seasons were objective and science based.

- b. GMA ignored the insights and directions within the extensive Adaptive Harvest Model report that emanated from that meeting. Indeed, the report, paid for with public funds, appears to have been buried. It has not been published.
 - c. The possibility that competition for public funds between GMA and ARI is behind GMA ignoring ARI should not be dismissed.
10. With regard to the evidence submitted by the anti-hunting groups, used at the exclusion of all other evidence by GMA:
- a. By simply assessing the language used, there has clearly been collusion between the anti-hunting groups in their submissions.
 - b. There has probably been some form of overall political management of the submissions. None of the submissions acknowledge contributors and funding agencies supporting their submissions.
 - c. From a commercial viewpoint, some of the submissions (e.g. Birdlife Australia, Animals Australia, RSPCA), are lengthy, detailed, and have involved significant investment of time in preparation, creative editing and polishing.
 - d. To objectively review these submissions, and tease apart fact from fiction, in both detail and major assumptions, would have been a complex task for GMA, FGA or anyone else to undertake objectively.
 - e. The anti-hunting submissions are designed to mislead the inexperienced reader, and to promote a plausible, political expedient story, that in scientific reality is full of poor analysis and flawed assumptions.
 - f. It is unclear whether GMA fall into the category of “inexperienced readers”, or whether they simply welcomed the anti-hunting “story” because it suited their own ideological and political goals.
11. The possibility that this attack on duck hunting in Victoria, which has been serious, sustained and well-funded, is the result of international Animal Rights organisations funding efforts to manipulate the political systems in Australia, needs to be considered seriously. The funding arrangements of national organisations are clandestine, but even a superficial assessment from their charity status, is worrying:
- a. In 2021, serious campaign efforts are being made in Australia to advance animal rights agendas on multiple fronts: Ducks (Victoria and SA), Crocodiles (NT), Kangaroos (NSW) and Sharks (WA, QLD, NSW). Who is funding these efforts?
 - b. Animals Australia is an Australian charity opposed to hunting and other forms of animal production that declares an annual budget of \$29 million! It is unclear how much of this is raised in Australia versus overseas, and how much is disbursed to other anti-hunting NGO’s, to increase the number of organisations actively making submissions.
 - c. World Animal Protection (UK based) has now opened a branch in Australia and is a registered charity here. The Australian office’s budget for 2019 was \$15 million, with \$7.2 million spent on unspecified domestic campaigns. The

possibility that these funds are overseas investments, specifically to influence Australian political decisions, needs to be rejected.

12. In terms of timing, the recent “bushfires” and “drought” within Australia are two random events that politically favour a renewed campaign against duck hunting. Even though the drought has ended, and there are now widespread rains and expanding wetlands, GMA have largely ignored and downplayed this positive change. Preferring to remain with arguments based on the drought (which has finished).
13. Given the EAWS in 2021 can be expected to show greatly increased abundance of game ducks and wetlands in 2021, the ability to use the drought as a major reason for restricting and or stopping duck hunting, will soon evaporate. In this regard:
 - a. The 2021 EAWS will not be completed until the last quarter of 2021
 - b. The 2021 EAWS results will likely demonstrate the dire predictions made in MB-2021 were flawed
 - c. Any political actions to ban duck hunting completely, would opportunistically be best undertaken before the 2021 EAWS is complete, and the results are available
 - d. The results of the intensive Victorian waterbird survey need to be accessed as soon as possible
 - e. They were promised by GMA to be available (MB-2021) on 31 March 2021, but if they provide evidence that MB-2021 is flawed, the possibility that their release will be delayed, or “buried” like the Adaptive Harvest Management plan, cannot be rejected.
14. In any overview, FGA has very good reason to be concerned about:
 - a. The flawed rationale for reducing rather than expanding the 2021 duck season
 - b. Possible further reductions in the 2021 harvest level
 - c. Increased political action in 2021 to ban duck hunting in 2022 and beyond

D. The Scientific Evidence

1. The “triple-bottom line” approach taken by GMA in MB-2021 means that evidence for and against hunting is not restricted to science. Animal rights ideologies and values, based on social assumptions and issues about ethics and morality, is treated as equally important as data on climate, biology, population trends, economic factors, contribution to conservation action, and management practices and principles.
2. Refuting science-based issues, in isolation, will not constitute compelling evidence to GMA, and the advice they provide to the minister, that MB-2021 is seriously flawed. But it is a critical step in the process, needed to demonstrate its short comings.
3. The Eastern Australian Waterbird Survey (EAWS) is a key element of the evidence submitted by anti-hunting organisations and used in MB-2021. This long-term waterbird survey is a valuable resource, but it is “policy relevant” rather than “policy prescriptive” – it has been used prescriptively in MB-2021. This limitation was fundamental to the actions proposed in the Adaptive Harvest Management plan.

4. A thorough review of the EAWS survey, with its strengths and weaknesses, is required, to highlight the spurious conclusions drawn from it in MB-2021. Key problems immediately apparent are:
 - a. Analysis of trends over time is statistically flawed. When you have an unpredictable “boom and bust” cycle over time, in duck hunting or anything else, in which baseline levels are sporadically elevated greatly, by more than 3 standard deviations, it is statistically invalid to treat the data as a homogeneous data set.
 - b. In the EAWS, by chance, the “boom” in abundance in the early 1980’s (when the survey started), means the results will always show a decline over time until a similar “boom” occurs again.
 - c. The repeated use in BM-2021 of abundance in 2019 and 2020 compared to the “mean” abundance over time, likewise, is statistically invalid, for the same reasons.
 - d. The “normal” situation appears to be the situation in years without a “boom”, and the degree of reduction within the drought years (now finished) is much more modest, and as such, does not constitute reasons to invoke impending extinction.
 - e. The scale of resolution of the EAWS, although very important for assessing general trends, is not in synchrony with the scale of resolution needed to apply standard game management principles and practices to Victoria’s duck hunting season.
 - f. The finer level of resolution survey now complete, from which results have so far been withheld, are a first step towards correcting this. It follows the expert advice by the panel of experts invited by the Victorian government to review the program. The findings of this survey are not yet available as a written report, but it should be expected that these will add significantly to the knowledge-base needed for setting the 2021 season, and that preliminary findings could have been sought by GMA if they were seriously interested in their advice being objective.
5. Extinction risk is embellished and misused in the anti-hunting submissions, and by GMA in MB-2021 - grossly and erroneously exaggerated. There is no possibility of extinction!
 - a. All current duck species in Australia have been here for 10,000’s of years, during which climate has changed dramatically (from the ice ages). Vast tracts of wetland habitat have been submerged as sea levels rose 100-150 m, and those remaining have contracted and expanded with periods of drying and inundation. The duck species all survived.
 - b. The IUCN, which publishes the “Red List of Threatened Species” examines the global status of all world ducks and geese (family Anatidae) and considers no Australia species endangered nor threatened. All Australian species are listed as “Least Concern”. For some global species that *are* considered endangered, they are subdivided into “vulnerable”, “endangered” or “critically endangered” – no Australia ducks meet the criteria for any of those categories.
 - c. There is no doubt that the reduction of wetlands in Australia, since Settlement, a consequence of agricultural production and the diversion of water for that purpose,

has been a serious anthropogenic influence on waterbirds. It has greatly altered the habitat available and its use by waterfowl, affecting both abundance and distribution. Improved management of wetlands (not hunters) is the key priority for interventions aimed at ensuring uses (consumptive and non-consumptive) can be sustained indefinitely.

6. Objective assessment of the available climate data, and wetland areas as monitored in the EAWS, also need to be subjected to objective analyses and predictions based on using appropriate statistical methods for handling the “boom” and “bust” cycles. Again, using “mean” values over time, as a baseline for comparing current abundance, is statistically invalid.
7. The Victorian hunting of ducks, over past seasons, has clearly been within sustainable levels. The standard principles and practices of wildlife management, particularly “sustainable use”, have been misrepresented throughout MB-2021. This was a fundamental goal of the “Adaptive Harvest Model”. The ability of wild duck populations to sustain a level of mortality due to hunting has been demonstrated over decades within Victoria and other states and is fundamental to the results of the EAWS over time. They definitively *have* sustained hunting, and there is no real monitoring or evidence that manipulating the hunting regulations each year, based on limited monitoring, has been a significant factor (relative to climate and wetland status) affecting abundance or distribution.

E. The Non-Scientific Evidence

1. The triple-bottom line approach taken by GMA means that a game management agency is expected to be expert in the merits or otherwise of socio-political movements such as animal rights, that have nothing to do with wildlife management science *per se*.
2. Under current arrangements, GMA is expected to integrate and balance all the evidence, and thus reject ideological evidence based on personal values and controversial assessments of ethics and morality, in favour of scientific management advice, or vice versa.
3. To assess MB-2021, and the conclusions drawn from it, it is important that the non-scientific evidence be subjected to the critical analysis and review as the scientific evidence. It requires each point of evidence raised be identified, the assumptions on which it is based determined, so that all evidence is critically reviewed. However, if genuine scientific evidence can be verified, there is currently no mechanism for prioritising it above non-scientific evidence.

F. Better Understanding Constraints on GMA

1. The legislation and other germane documents need to be investigated to better understand the mandate of GMA, and assess objectively, perhaps legally – perhaps with advice from the Ombudsman - whether the mandate they have been given is flawed, and not withstanding this possibility, whether they have fulfilled their duties correctly.

2. Their activities under the umbrella of a “game management” authority need to be independently investigated by suitably qualified people.
3. The process for setting annual harvest regulations objectively is in urgent need of review, as the Victorian government has been advised in the Adaptive Management Harvest plan of 2019.

G. Preventing further harvest restrictions in 2021.

1. The 2021 duck hunting season has now been finalised, but may be reduced further.
2. Political action by duck hunters may be needed in the short-term to ensure:
 - i. Evidence is not now being assembled by GMA to add further restrictions to the 2021 season.
 - ii. Given the current levels of rainfall and their effects on wetland status, whether there the 2021 season can be extended.
 - iii. Get political assurance that there are no current processes underway to ban duck hunting completely from 2022 onward.
3. The 31 March 2021 survey report, a direct outcome of the Adaptive Harvest Model, needs to be accessed and professionally assessed urgently. Political action may be needed to obtain this report, even in draft form. The findings of this report could impact directly on point G.2. above, and this needs to be open and transparent and not advanced in a clandestine way.
4. Up to date information and predictions on the 2021 rainfall need to be assembled so that it can be used politically, to ensure future actions (ban duck hunting) are not based on the past drought conditions.

H. Conclusions

1. For a variety of reasons, citizens in Victoria are clearly entitled to support or oppose activities such as duck hunting.
2. The Victorian government has made a long-standing commitment to legal duck hunting, with considerable investment in improved wildlife management practices, to ensure te hunting is sustainable and that its management is adaptive.
3. The concept of evidence-based decisions on hunting seasons is sound, and the hunters and management authorities need to work closely together to ensure the science of sustainable management is respected and that decisions made by the minister are indeed based on the best available science.
4. GMA’s handling of the 2021 duck hunting season, as embodied within MB-2021, serves to highlight a flawed decision-making process, intimately linked to the directions on how to handle the “triple bottom line” concept being vague and open to abuse and misleading advice.
5. The Covid-19 experience has reaffirmed that there are serious dangers in ignoring scientific advice in favour of political compromises.