



PO Box 156 Deer Park, VIC, 3023
T: 0491 200 570 E: admin@siv.com.au

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Travis Dowling
Chief Executive Officer
Victorian Fisheries Authority (VFA)

Sent via email to: haveyoursay@vfa.vic.gov.au; steve.beaver@vfa.vic.gov.au, cc: mel.shubert@vfa.vic.gov.au, luke.osullivan@vfa.vic.gov.au

RE: Further Quota Order and draft Fisheries Notice 2026 for the Western Port/Port Phillip Bay Fishery

Seafood Industry Victoria (SIV) welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on the draft Further Quota Order and Fisheries Notice regarding Western Port/Port Phillip Bay (WP/PPB) Fishery ahead of the 2026/2027 fishing year. SIV supports the objectives of the Victorian Fisheries Act (1995), including the development of commercial fisheries for the benefit of the Victorian community.

A 2020 study found that most Victorians consume seafood regularly, with many preferring local seafood products based on perceptions of them being fresher and of higher quality¹. Improved availability of wild caught seafood from sustainably managed Victorian fisheries supports local businesses and reduces the market's reliance on imported product that can have a greater environmental footprint and less traceability. Availability of locally caught seafood is likely to receive an increased focus from consumers following the introduction of Country of Origin labelling in food service outlets on July 1st, 2026.

Longlining efficiency

An increase in the number of allowable hooks when longlining would increase the efficiency of each fishing trip, thereby reducing overhead costs and encouraging greater uptake of the available Snapper TACC (total allowable commercial catch). There has been a suggestion from an Access Licence holder that increasing the number of allowable hooks to 600 would make a tangible difference to the viability of their business, particularly in years where abundance of legal-size snapper in PPB is expected to be lower due to a dip in natural recruitment of juveniles into the bay 4-5 years earlier.

¹ Valuing Victoria's Wild-Catch Fishing and Aquaculture Industries: measuring the economic and social contributions, University of Technology Sydney, 2020.

Bycatch limit for shark in WP/PPB

The draft Fisheries Notice 2026 proposes continuation of a combined annual bycatch limit for Gummy Shark and School Shark of 1000 kg per WP/PPB Access Licence (8 tonnes total across 8 licences). School Shark is rarely caught; however Gummy Shark is caught by WP/PPB access licence holders whilst longline fishing their allowable Snapper quota. Once their annual 1 tonne bycatch limit is reached an individual licence holder must return Gummy Shark bycatch to the water rather than retain it for sale into local markets.

The management advice agreed between Commonwealth and State fisheries regulators with respect to Gummy Shark and School Shark provides a combined annual commercial take from Victorian fisheries of 40 tonnes. The status of Gummy Shark stocks has been deemed as sustainable, with commercial fishing in Victorian waters unlikely to impact overall stock biomass^{2,4}.

To avoid the annual Victorian allocation for commercial shark catch being exceeded, the VFA has set an annual catch 'trigger limit' of 36 tonnes. If the 'trigger limit' is reached the VFA will initiate management actions restricting further catch. Data for all Victorian fisheries since 2018 indicates an average total shark catch of less than 25 tonne/annum, well below the Commonwealth agreed allocation and the VFA's trigger limit.

SIV requests that the VFA consider increasing the annual shark bycatch limit per WP/PPB Access Licence. Minimising any unnecessary return of Gummy Shark to the water will increase the availability of local 'flake' for Victorian consumers without being likely to impact statewide shark catch to a point that requires any management action by the VFA. The appropriateness of future by-catch limits for shark could be verified by conducting an onboard independent observer program during the Snapper season.

Commercial catch limits for species other than snapper and shark in WP/PPB

The Fisheries Notice 2025 proposes continuation of a combined annual 2-tonne catch limit per license for fish other than Snapper and shark, with take of King George Whiting, Kingfish and Mulloway prohibited entirely, along with Southern Calamari.

Commercial fishing Access Licence holders in WP/PPB have observed strong demand from wholesalers, restaurants and seafood retailers for local King George Whiting and squid (including Southern Calamari) since the removal of netting in Port Phillip Bay resulted in a significant reduction in state-wide commercial landings³. High demand from consumers is especially evident at peak summer periods when these popular seafood varieties are often not in ready supply from other areas. In the case of King George Whiting, Victorian restaurants and retailers are now mostly reliant on commercial catch from Corner Inlet, where natural fluctuations in recruitment (unfavourable currents from spawning grounds in Western Victoria) resulted in a much lower catch volume in 2024/25 (59t, down from 122t)⁴.

² Status of Australian Fish Stocks Report – Gummy Shark (2018). Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences.

³ Bell, JD, Ingram, BA, Gorfine, HK and Conron, SD (2023), Review of key Victorian fish stocks — 2022, Victorian Fisheries Authority Science Report Series No. 38, First Edition, June 2023. VFA: Queenscliff. 66pp

⁴ 2024/25 Corner Inlet Fishery Stock Assessment, Victorian Fisheries Authority

The Melbourne restaurant and retail market has not been able to address local supply issues by sourcing additional product from South Australia, where catch of King George Whiting and Southern Calamari has been severely impacted by the marine algal bloom⁵. Catch rates of both species in Gulf St Vincent & Kangaroo Island declined sharply during 2025, with catches of both now more than 80% below historical levels. Total catch of Southern Calamari has also plummeted by 50-80% of baseline levels in the Spencer Gulf region. Recent surveys have shown record low levels of King George Whiting juveniles and Southern Calamari eggs in areas impacted by the algal bloom, indicating that the capacity for SA fisheries to supply these sought after seafood species into Victorian markets will not recover for several years to come.

The stock status of King George Whiting in Port Phillip Bay in 2021-2022 was 'Very Good' based on VFA analyses of commercial Catch Per Unit Effort (CPUE) data before haul seine netting was removed from the bay⁶. Remaining WP/PPB Access Licence holders could contribute to maintaining a consistent supply into local markets by sustainably harvesting the species using hook and line. Likewise, fishers in WP/PPB could help meet demand for local squid species, which are known to be resilient to fishing pressure due to their fecundity and short life cycle⁷. Squid jig fisheries are highly targeted and typically incur very little bycatch⁸. Jig-caught squid are also generally considered superior in quality to trawl-caught squid as the method causes less physical damage and stress, resulting in better texture and colour⁹.

SIV and WP/PPB commercial fishing Access Licence holders would welcome an opportunity to discuss trialling commercial line take of King George Whiting and squid (including Southern Calamari) to gather valuable catch data to inform future fisheries management decisions for the benefit of the community.

Capturing accurate data on all fishing mortality

An opportunity exists for data on recreational catch of Snapper in WP/PPB to contribute to stock assessments that are used to inform fishery management decisions.

The VFA currently mandates that recreational lobster fishers report their catch using an online app, with the resulting data reviewed at regular Resource Advisory Group meetings. This is also the case in Tasmania where recreational lobster fishers must record the date and location that fishing was undertaken, along with how many lobsters were kept and released. Given the state government's plan to attract one million recreational anglers, there is now a greater necessity to record what finfish are being taken by that sector.

The opportunity to collect additional data includes fishing charter operators who are running commercial businesses reliant on landing consistent volumes of target species such as Snapper. It is expected that conscientious members of the recreational fishing community would support the opportunity to contribute data that has the potential to improve management of the resource for all stakeholders.

⁵ Algal bloom impact on key fish stocks in South Australia's gulfs, SARDI Aquatic and Livestock Sciences, January 2026.

⁶ Port Phillip Bay Management Plan, Fish: King George Whiting. Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action.

⁷ Status of Australian Fish Stocks Report - Arrow Squid (2018). Australian Fisheries Management Authority.

⁸ Commonwealth Southern Squid Jig Fishery Report, Fisheries Research and Development Corporation.

⁹ Dunning, MC, Yeomans, K and McKinnon, SG (2000). Development of a northern Australian squid fishery, Fisheries Research and Development Corporation, Project 94/017.

Recommendations for the 2026/27 fishing year

- Elevate the efficiency of Snapper longline fishing and viability of WP/PPB Access Licences by increasing the amount of hooks that can be used to 600.
- Amend the draft Fisheries Notice 2026 to allow greater bycatch retention of shark to help meet market demand for local 'flake' without risk of exceeding the statewide allocation for shark catch. Consider verifying bycatch rates through an onboard observer program early in the snapper season.
- Work with WP/PPB access licence holders to trial sustainable harvesting of line caught King George Whiting and squid to provide data to inform future fishery management decisions for the benefit Victoria's seafood consuming community.
- Investigate methods for increasing the accuracy of catch estimates by recreational anglers and charter operators to ensure that robust data is available from all sectors to inform future management of the WP/PPB fishery.

SIV looks forward to continuing discussions with the VFA in efforts to support WP/PPB access licence holders in providing fresh, local iconic species to the Victorian public sourced from sustainable fish stocks.

For more information on the contents of this submission, please contact:

Seafood Industry Victoria
p: 0491 200 570
e: admin@siv.com.au
w: www.siv.com.au