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Response to draft Fisheries (Western Port/Port Phillip Bay Fishery Catch Limits) Notice 2025

Seafood Industry Victoria (SIV) welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on the draft Fisheries Notice regarding Western Port/Port Phillip Bay (WP/PPB) fishery catch limits for the 2025/2026 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. The majority of seafood wholesalers, processors and retailers say that demand for local seafood is growing¹.

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.

Commercial catch limits for shark in WP/PPB

The draft Fisheries Notice 2025 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 a licence holder must return Gummy Shark bycatch to the water rather than retain it for sale into local markets.

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

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 by at least 500 kg per WP/PPB licence. Allowing for additional Gummy Shark bycatch to be retained in WP/PPB 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.

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 licence holders in WP/PPB have observed a strong demand from local wholesalers, restaurants and seafood retailers for King George Whiting and Southern Calamari, especially at peak summer periods when these popular seafood varieties are often not in ready supply from other areas. Local commercial fishers are well placed to help meet demand given that both species can be reliably caught close to where their boats are launched.

The stock status of King George Whiting in Port Phillip Bay in 2021-2022 was 'Very Good' based on VFA analysis of commercial Catch Per Unit Effort (CPUE) data before haul seine netting was removed from the bay³. The removal of netting in Port Phillip Bay also resulted in a significant reduction in state-wide commercial landings of Southern Calamari⁴, which is a species known to be resilient to fishing pressure due to its short life span⁵. An opportunity exists for the VFA to work with industry to support sustainable supply of line caught fish from WP/PPB to assist meeting local market demand for these iconic table species.

SIV and commercial fishing licence holders would welcome an opportunity to discuss trialling commercial line take of King George Whiting and Southern Calamari to gather valuable catch data to inform future fisheries management decisions for the benefit of the community.

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

³ <https://www.marineandcoasts.vic.gov.au/port-phillip-bay-emp/habitats-and-marine-life/fish/king-george-whiting>

⁴ 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

⁵ <https://goodfish.org.au/species/southern-calamari-3/>

Recommendations for the 2025/26 fishing year

- Amend the draft Fisheries Notice 2025 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.
- Work with WP/PPB access licence holders to trial sustainable harvesting of line caught King George Whiting and Southern Calamari to provide data to inform future fishery management decisions that will benefit the 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 WP/PPB fisheries.

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.

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