

4 October 2020

The Hon. Gladys Berejiklian MP
Premier of NSW
GPO Box 5341
Sydney NSW 2001

Delays in processing funding applications to the NSW Recreational Fishing Trusts

Dear Premier,

The Recreational Fishing Licence was introduced in 1998 and Recreational Fishing Trust Funds were established to accept the fees the public paid for their licences. Expenditure committees (the Recreational Fishing Freshwater Trust Expenditure Committee and Recreational Fishing Saltwater Trust Expenditure Committee) were formed and included representatives of the Department of Primary Industries and members of the public experienced in recreational fishing issues and well-connected with the recreational fishing community.

The Expenditure Committees receive applications for funds from organisations and individuals and then make recommendations on use of the funds to the Minister of the day responsible for fisheries, via an advisory council (currently known as the Recreational Fishing NSW Advisory Council).

Currently, the Trusts receive approximately \$15 million a year from licences, and distribute a similar amount to organisations, government agencies and individuals.

The Expenditure Committees and the Recreational Fishing NSW Advisory Council meet several times a year and their recommendations are passed very quickly to the Minister of the day. In the past, the Minister usually approved or queried the recommendations within a few weeks, so that projects could be funded without delay, and so that DPI's own programs (many of which depend very heavily on the funds from licences) could continue without interruption.

The importance of the licence system and the transparent and prudent processes that underpin it cannot be understated. When the licence was introduced there was some scepticism about how it would be accepted by the public, but it was generally approved of and valued by recreational fishers. It has made an enormous contribution to milestone projects in NSW such as the buyout of commercial fishers to create Recreational Fishing Havens, the operation of hatcheries and research facilities, world-class research projects by scientists and academics, and recreational fishing events that contribute to regional economies and the health and wellbeing of the community. The Trust Funds also pay for over 60 fisheries staff positions within the Department of Primary Industries.

This process of Ministerial approval of recommended applications has been grinding to a halt. Letters to the Minister have not been answered and enquiries about the situation to DPI staff have led nowhere.

Instead of promptly reviewing and approving the recommendations put before him by the Recreational Fishing NSW Advisory Council, Minister Adam Marshall has sat on his hands—the outcomes of the January 2019 meetings of the Expenditure Committees have been published just in recent days, and outcomes of meetings held in July 2019, January 2020 and August 2020 have not been published.

This means that as far as applicants know, applications for funds since that date have apparently not been approved, applicants were not notified in a reasonable time of success or failure, and projects were not started. It also means that new applications that should have been considered at subsequent Expenditure Committee meetings have not been processed, because it was not clear how past un-approved funding recommendations had affected the funds that might have been available in the Trust for distribution. The delays also affect the progress of projects that should be funded in agreed stages, and the funding of staff positions within Fisheries.

These delays are causing disquiet among many stakeholders and are eroding public confidence in a successful licence system that—until now—enjoyed broad support. We are alarmed that loss of that support will result in resistance to paying the licence fee and the failure of the licence system.

The undersigned represent major recreational fishing groups in NSW, and we request that you direct Minister Adam Marshall to expedite the review and approval of all delayed funding recommendations, and that he acts promptly in the future to ensure that similar delays do not occur.

Yours faithfully,

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