



Depression levels rise as fishers hung out to dry

**Tanya
KING**



PREMIER Napthine has announced that a re-elected Coalition Government would phase out commercial netting in Port Phillip and Corio Bay.

The Better Bay Plan will allocate \$20 million over four years for the removal of 42 professional licences, not due to concerns about the environmental health of the fishery but in an effort to promote the region as a "recreational fishing mecca".

And the Opposition has announced its Target One Million plan to also cut commercial netting in favour of increasing the number of recreational fishers to one million.

Objections to the Napthine Government's plan are informed by independent research organisations such as CSIRO, MAFRI and others who assess the commercial sector to be robust and sustainable, as well as restaurateurs and members of the public who wish to continue to access fresh and responsibly caught local seafood.

Additional concerns have been raised about the potential for an increased demand for black market local seafood. The anxiety that this announcement has caused those in the industry, however, has escaped the attention of the public as well as the Napthine Government, and now the Labor Party.

While the health and wellbeing of farmers tends to remain in the spotlight, the challenges facing commercial fishers is largely ignored.

Media coverage of the recent

drought and its impact on farmers has highlighted the particular risks to mental health of males in rural and regional areas. Unlike the iconic Australian "bushman", however, fishers in Australia do not hold the same degree of cultural significance as they do in places like Gloucester, in the US, or Iceland.

Australian farmers struggling to cope with climate change have been valued, being offered assistance packages, subsidies and loans in order to keep their businesses afloat. In contrast, fishers who are working sustainably in a healthy resource are being told that they are dispensable, and this negative judgment of their role in our society is detracting

significantly from their wellbeing.

Research led by Deakin University on the physical and mental health of this other primary industry reports "widespread anecdotal accounts describing very poor physical and mental health within the fishing industry, including suicide and attempted suicide".

Reflecting on the restructuring of a lobster fishery, one fisher reported: "The mental health is big. When they did changeover (to management arrangements) in crayfishing, within a two-year period there were six successful suicides and 18 attempted suicides".

This account adds to those of other stress-related problems facing fishers around the country, including hair and

weight loss, substance abuse, domestic breakdown, social withdrawal, shaking, sleeplessness and nightmares.

Despite the efforts of public health campaigns by groups such as BeyondBlue, fishers are "particularly reluctant to seek and even discuss mental health issues, and indicated that while there was an industry-wide

concern, there remained a stigma attached to poor mental health".

While the "plight of our farmers" is often described in a sympathetic tone by our politicians — and rightly so — fisher mental health is not afforded the same recognition and support, either financially or in terms of political oratory.

The tendency to conflate their issues and management in policy leaves fishers and their particular concerns virtually invisible. The key difference between the two groups of primary producers is that farmers can own private property, while fishers invest in a resource that is publicly owned and therefore subject to government control and strategising.

Our current leaders have chosen to appease the powerful lobby groups who represent the state's 750,000 recreational fishers/voters rather than protecting the 42 Port Phillip and Corio Bay licence holders who sustainably provide fresh local fish to the rest of the Victorian public.

This decision has been made despite the long and stable history of commercial activity in the bay and the best available science that consistently describes the fishery as healthy.

The potential to push another fisher over the edge is a very real risk, and for political rather than environmental reasons.

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REEL CAMPAIGN: Recreational anglers march through Geelong in support of proposed bans on commercial netting earlier this month. Picture: CORMAC HANRAHAN