

VRFish Position Paper - Port Phillip Bay Channel Deepening Project

VRFish is the Victorian Recreational Fishing Peak Body and has the role of providing advice to the Victorian Government on recreational fishing, which also includes recreational diving.

With regard to the Port Phillip Bay Channel Deepening Project (CDP), we have expressed our grave concerns about the project's likely adverse impact on our Bay's ecology to the Bracks' Government.

Although VRFish has not taken a position of opposition to the project, the following sets out a brief synopsis of our concerns and actions arising from the Government's stated intention to proceed with the CDP:

VRFish's Issues with the CDP

- The dumping of huge volumes of spoil into Port Phillip Bay, much of which is seriously contaminated with toxins (arsenic, copper, zinc, lead content), such as the waste proposed to be removed from the Yarra River bed, is a major cause of concern. VRFish is concerned that this toxic spoil will remain un-capped for 140 days. We are also concerned that proposed capping of toxic spoil does not appear to be adequate and will result in toxins leaching into the bay for many years. It is also of concern that some sites chosen to dump spoil are popular and productive fishing areas. These sites have been chosen without providing VRFish with any opportunity to suggest some potentially less sensitive alternative sites.
- It is highly probable that the leaching of toxins throughout Port Phillip Bay will result in fish, shell fish (particularly filter feeders, such as mussels and scallops etc) being unsafe (or less safe) to eat. This may prove to be the case for many years. VRFish notes that there are already health advisories in place cautioning against the consumption of fish from the lower Yarra. Consequently, it is quite clear that there will be an exponential increase in this risk as a result of the disturbance of the sediments that would occur as a result of the CDP commencing. It is unacceptable to VRFish that the Supplementary Environmental Effects Statement (SEES) does not attempt to quantify the risk on these and the vast majority of other recreational fishing species in the bay. Also, public perception of adverse impact due to contamination of Port Phillip Bay's fish and shellfish is likely to be negative and will impact on their consumption of sea food sourced from it.
- VRFish holds deep concerns about the likely serious damage to the delicate ecology in the vicinity of Port Phillip Heads. Trial dredging was a disaster in this area and there is high potential for further serious damage if the CDP commences. This area is a major diving site, which supports many small businesses and is claimed to be a superior diving site to the Great Barrier Reef.
- The potential environmental damage resultant from the CDP extends beyond the impact on fish species that anglers like to catch. There is also likely to be widespread adverse impact on most, if not all, forms of marine life in Port Phillip Bay - such as penguins, dolphins seals, shell fish, sea grasses and kelp beds, just to mention a few.

- There is high potential for the CDP to result in the further spread of exotic pest species (such as Pacific Seastars, Sabella Worm) throughout the bay.
- There is little doubt that the CDP will seriously impact on the ability of snapper to breed successfully in Port Phillip Bay for a minimum of two years. VRFish notes that the trial dredging in 2006 was conducted at a similar time to when snapper spawn and was accompanied by a failed spawning - the first such failure in several years. Is there a causal correlation? VRFish does not believe that this was a coincidental occurrence.
- VRFish was involved in lobbying for the cessation of scallop dredging some years ago, which resulted in vastly improving the bay's ecology and improved fish stocks. The CDP would reasonably be expected to have a much wider and more intense impact than scallop dredging. It should be noted, that for many years, Victorian Governments insisted that scallop dredging did not cause any ecological harm. They were subsequently proven to be wrong. It has to be conceded that the CDP may well result in far worse ecological damage to Port Phillip Bay than its proponents are currently anticipating. No indication has been forthcoming as to what will be done to repair such damage if, indeed, Port Phillip Bay suffers greater than anticipated ecological damage.
- VRFish understands that the dredging in the Yarra River will come very close to a trunk sewer pipe, which runs below the river bed, which is a serious risk to the pipe being damaged, with a resultant major adverse environmental impact of tonnes of raw sewerage pouring into the river. Risk Management strategies to deal with such an occurrence are not evident in the SEES.
- In spite of Government arguments to the contrary, the CDP may well prove to be a poor investment. Potential investment upside is stated as being only \$2.2 Billion over 28 years. Potential investment downside is serious damage to the bay and consequential damage to small businesses all over Melbourne, especially in the manufacturing sector and those in the vicinity of Port Phillip Bay. VRFish notes that investment in Victoria's manufacturing industry (boating and accessories) is approximately \$1.4 Billion, with 70% of trailerable boats and accessories being for fishing and a high percentage of these are used for fishing in Port Phillip Bay. The Government's own figures state that \$440 Million is spent annually on recreational fishing alone. When considering the abovementioned figures, it is actually possible that the CDP will actually have a net negative impact on Victoria's economy.
- The CDP does not seem to be sufficiently economically viable enough to enable the compensation of businesses adversely affected by the project and such costs are not factored into the figures quoted in the SEES.
- It is somewhat unclear as to whether the project will be paid for by the beneficiaries of its introduction and to what extent it will be subsidised by the tax payer. This should be resolved as soon as possible. Recreational fishers, who are also tax payers, will take a dim view of subsidising damage to Port Phillip Bay's ecology and the consequent serious loss of recreational fishing (including diving) opportunities that the SEES now concedes will occur.

VRFish's Recent Actions

- VRFish Board Member, Doug Evers-Buckland, has served on the Project Stakeholders Advisory Committee (PSAC) (now disbanded).
- Meeting with Minister Tim Pallas January, 2007. Follow up correspondence, including underwater pictures that were taken in the Port Phillip Heads region - many say this is a superior dive site to the Great Barrier Reef.
- VRFish Media Release of 22nd March, which set out our concerns at the time.
- Follow up meeting to express our concerns with PoMC April, 2007.
- Further meeting with Minister Pallas's Advisor April, 2007.
- VRFish's Executive Officer, Chris Collins, has appeared in both radio and television interviews, as VRFish continues to publicly raise concerns about unsatisfactory aspects of the CDP.
- Issue of Media Releases to the print media.
- VRFish has engaged a Marine biologist to review the Supplementary EES and provide us with a fully independent scientific review of the report and findings. This will allow us to respond to the Supplementary EES in an informed manner.
- VRFish attended, and took part in, a forum organised by ABC Radio 774 on 18th April, 2007.
- Various briefings for members have been provided and will continue to be provided.

VRFish will continue to review and report on our position on the proposed CDP as new information becomes available to us.