

Media Statement

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Feed for a lifetime: Victorian Government must restore Traditional Owner management of sealife

The Victorian Government is selling out Traditional Owner rights for a few hundred tonnes of shellfish, and must immediately commit to a Traditional Owner-led fisheries strategy if it's serious about fair Treaty-making, says the statewide body advocating for Traditional Owner groups' rights and interests.

The Victorian Government this week announced a \$1.25 million investment in water to increase production at 18 existing mussel farming sites in Port Philip Bay – which Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations interim CEO Kaley Nicholson said continue to lock Traditional Owners out of their rights and resources, and undermined the Government's commitment to good-faith Treaty-making.

“This announcement shows the Government favours its commercial arrangements over Traditional Owners' rights – who have grown and have harvested native seafood in Port Philip Bay for tens of thousands of years. We could have talked about fishing rights, our obligations to care for sea Country, and ways to restore our cultural management of shellfish in Treaty negotiations – but the Government's taking that option away.”

The Federation has long called on the Victorian Government to stop creating new entitlements that undermine Traditional Owner groups' ability to regain management of land and sea resources – which could be the subject of agreements with Government made under Treaty and Traditional Owner Settlement Act processes – including granting aquaculture leases to non-Traditional Owner recipients without Traditional Owner involvement.

The Federation welcomes individual growers' willingness to work with Traditional Owners, but calls on the Government for a systematised approach that embeds Traditional Owners' rights across the fisheries sector.

The Victorian Fisheries Association (VFA), which manages fisheries, has failed to deliver on its 2012 vows to “explicitly consider Recognised Traditional Owner Groups' interests when allocating entitlements for new fisheries” and “identify opportunities for Aboriginal employment or economic development prospects within existing fisheries”, made in its [Aboriginal Fishing Strategy](#) – and the organisation last year ignored a directive from outdoor recreation minister Steve Dimopoulos to engage with the Federation to progress a proposed Traditional Owner-led fisheries approach, conceived and costed by Traditional Owner groups in 2022-23.

“The VFA committed itself to culturally informed fisheries management that improves Aboriginal wealth, capacity and wellbeing when Ted Baillieu was premier, and today, we're a matter of weeks away from signing a Statewide Treaty with a Government that can't even step back to let Traditional Owners step into commercial fishing in our own waters,” says Ms Nicholson.

“We're ready and willing to sit down with the VFA to progress its commitment to fishing that improves Traditional Owners' wealth and wellbeing. But this can't be a token effort: the Government must immediately commit to a self-determined Traditional Owner Fisheries Strategy that enables us to meet our obligations to Country, and meet cultural, social, environmental and economic needs. Decisions like this week's water investment shouldn't happen until that strategy's in place, and we're ready to help make that a reality.”

– ENDS –

About the Federation

The Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations is the Victorian state-wide body that convenes and advocates for the rights of Traditional Owners while progressing wider social, economic, environmental and cultural objectives. It was established in 2013 by Traditional Owner Corporations who recognised they could be stronger together in advancing shared interests in policy, economic opportunity and caring for Country.

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