

T R A N S C R I P T

SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE 2026 COMMONWEALTH GAMES BID

Inquiry into the 2026 Commonwealth Games Bid

Traralgon – Thursday 14 March 2024

MEMBERS

David Limbrick – Chair

Joe McCracken – Deputy Chair

Melina Bath

David Davis

Jacinta Ermacora

Michael Galea

Sarah Mansfield

Tom McIntosh

Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

WITNESS

Barry Howlett, Communications Manager, Sporting Shooters Association of Australia (Victoria).

The CHAIR: We will now resume the committee's public hearings for the Inquiry into the 2026 Commonwealth Games Bid. Thank you for appearing today.

All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during this hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

For the Hansard record, can you please state your name and the organisation that you are appearing on behalf of.

Barry HOWLETT: Barry Howlett, Sporting Shooters Association of Australia (Victoria).

The CHAIR: Thank you. Thank you for appearing today. I will briefly allow the committee to introduce themselves for the record. I am David Limbrick, Chair of the committee.

Michael GALEA: Michael Galea, Member for South-Eastern Metropolitan.

Tom McINTOSH: Tom McIntosh, Member for Eastern Victoria.

Melina BATH: Hello, Barry. Melina Bath, Eastern Victoria Region.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Jacinta Ermacora, Western Victoria Region.

Joe McCRACKEN: Hi. Joe McCracken, Western Victoria Region.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Sarah Mansfield, Western Victoria Region.

David DAVIS: David Davis.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I welcome you to make your opening comments and ask that they be kept to around about 10 minutes. Thank you very much.

Barry HOWLETT: All right. Thank you, Chair, and thanks to the committee for the opportunity to give evidence here today. I have read the terms of reference for this inquiry, and what I think is relevant to SSAA Victoria and the broader recreational shooting sector is the term on the impact on community, social, amateur and professional sport in Victoria.

The Sporting Shooters Association of Australia is in fact a national federation of individual state organisations. As a national body the association has 220,000 members. SSAA Victoria has 43,000 members and operates two major metropolitan and a dozen regional shooting facilities as well as a registered training organisation delivering training and assessment to recreational shooters, government departments and occupational firearm users, including airports, zoos and local councils. Shooting encompasses a diverse range of interests and disciplines and is growing in popularity. A quarter of a million Victorians hold a shooters licence. The SSAA Victoria's Springvale shooting range attracts 37,000 visits a year and our Eagle Park Range at Little River attracts 25,000.

I am the Communications Manager with SSAA Victoria. I was born and raised in Moe, and I live with my wife and my son in Warragul. My great-grandfather came to the valley to work at Yallourn when the power industry started here, and my older brother is now the fourth and most likely the last generation of Howlett's at Yallourn.

In the lead-up to the 2022 election SSAA Victoria led a joint program bringing together the state's leading hunting and shooting organisations to promote a positive set of policy initiatives for shooting and hunting. Key amongst them was seeking a commitment for shooting to be included in the 2026 Commonwealth Games. While shooting is not in the core program of events for the Commonwealth Games, it has featured in 1966, 74, 78, 82, 86, 90, 1994, 98, 2002, 2006, 2010, 2014 and 2018. So over the past 60 years shooting has been left out of just two of the last 15 games. And Australia has dominated shooting at the Commonwealth Games, winning more medals than any other country: 70 gold, 60 silver, 45 bronze. Shooting ranks as Australia's fourth most successful Commonwealth Games sport.

In October 2022 it was announced that five shooting events would be on the program for the regional 2026 Commonwealth Games and that they would be hosted here in the Latrobe Valley. Those events were to be track, which is shotgun clay target shooting, and variations on 10-metre air pistol and 10-metre air rifle, and really importantly, for the first time in the Commonwealth Games history Para shooting was to be included on the program.

Shooting as an activity is highly valued by many Victorians. As I said earlier, there are a quarter of a million Victorians with a shooters licence. Most shooters do not participate in air pistol, air rifle or trap. Most do not compete at all. There are precision shooters, historical shooters, long-range shooters, hunters sharpening their skills and just about everything in between. For those shooters, having a showcase like the Commonwealth Games is a way to bring what they do into the mainstream. We all too often see shooting on the evening news and on the front page of our papers, and typically for all the wrong reasons: criminals with illegal firearms doing illegal things. Having shooting in the Commonwealth Games puts a true face on shooting for the general public: responsible, law-abiding people safely enjoying a fantastic and challenging pastime.

When the Commonwealth Games were cancelled in July last year, the government distributed a raft of press releases that seemed to be aimed at assuring communities like the Latrobe Valley that the benefits from the games would still flow. We are not disputing that this is the case at a broad scale. However, the physical legacy for shooting from the cancelled games is a bit more complicated. On shooting, the government's release stated:

The Morwell Gun Club will get a new shotgun trap shooting range, all the equipment required for Air Rifle and Air Pistol, and new security fencing.

The equipment required for air rifle and air pistol is minimal, and it is difficult to see how it would be relevant to a shotgun shooting club anyway. SSAA Victoria operates the busiest shooting facility in the state, at Springvale. It operates seven days a week and, as I stated earlier, attracts 37,000 visits a year. The least used facility at the Springvale complex by far is the air pistol range. Most days it has no users at all. While air pistols are a terrific showcase for shooting – as an example of that we have got a former coalminer turned federal MP for Hunter who is right on the cusp of qualifying for his fifth Olympics in 10-metre air pistol at the moment – there is really no screaming need for new standalone air pistol shooting facilities, particularly when there is an air pistol range here at the Traralgon Pistol Club just near Loy Yang.

The Morwell Gun Club has now got a new spectacular range and clubhouse, and the club, the government, EnergyAustralia and Latrobe city all deserve congratulations and gratitude for that. But the link between that and the Commonwealth Games is exaggerated at best. The club had to vacate its former home back in early 2021 due to its landlord EnergyAustralia requiring the land to expand its mining operations at Yallourn. EnergyAustralia found the club a new site, and in July 2021 the club received a grant under the now-defunct shooting sports facilities program to help fund the first stage of its relocation project. In October 2022 the club received another grant under that program to help support the second stage of this project. The second grant did coincide with the announcement of shooting being at the games, so it is fair to attribute it to that. However, it is important to note that that was not new money; it was funds that had already been allocated to the shooting sports facilities program as promised to our organisation back at the 2018 election. No additional funding that we can see has been added to shooting because of the Commonwealth Games, and the shooting sports facilities program has not been funded since 2022.

None of this is said as a criticism of the government and its contribution to shooting sports. Over the eight years that it was in operation, the shooting sports facilities program provided over \$17 million in funding for shooting clubs. This money went into big showcase sorts of facilities like the new Morwell Gun Club, and just as importantly it went to smaller projects at shooting clubs all over the state that have boosted safety and access –

projects like the construction of new toilet blocks with disabled access, small things that mean that the next generation of shooters can contribute without barriers.

We think this committee could consider making recommendations to the government that would continue its already impressive legacy of supporting the growth in shooting. Specifically, it could recommend that the government work with the shooting and hunting community to design a sustainable growth strategy for shooting and associated outdoor recreation facilities and that the government could work with the shooting community to promote increased and diverse participation in the shooting sports.

Our organisation, SSAA Victoria, is busy both promoting shooting and building facilities for the future. In October this year the association is staging the SHOT Expo at the Melbourne Showgrounds. This will be the first SHOT Expo since 2019. SHOT Expo is the largest showcase for the shooting sports in the Southern Hemisphere, and it gives tens of thousands of visitors the ability to inspect hundreds of brands of shooting, hunting and outdoor equipment over a very busy two days. Although there is no current government grants program specifically for shooting, SSAA Victoria continues to invest in the capital works necessary for the future of the shooting sports.

Victoria's only purpose-built multidisciplinary shooting training centre and range has started its operations just this month at our association's Eagle Park facility at Little River. This represents an investment of over \$1 million to ensure that training for new and occupational shooters is conducted in the best possible environment. Investing in facilities ensures that as shooting and hunting continue to grow, so does the skill set of shooters and hunters. Those skills are important. They are skills that ensure that firearm owners are safe and that hunters are humane. They are also the skills that ensure that Australians continue to punch above our weight in the international competition to bring home the gold and to put shooting on the front pages for all the right reasons.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. I can very much confirm that the Springvale rifle range is very popular. In fact I have taken both of my boys there, and they think that it is wonderful. The only problem with it is that my youngest son is not quite old enough to have a go yet. But young boys love it, I can assure you of that. I can also confirm that I do not think I saw anyone ever using air pistols there while I was there, so that sounds true as well.

I think one of the things that you spoke about was the potential for improvements to clay shooting facilities. What is required there and how could that be used now that the games are not actually going ahead?

Barry HOWLETT: It is really a very diverse question. Continued things like – for clay target shooting particularly, there are small clubs dotted all around country Victoria. Some are associated with SSAA, some with Field and Game and the clay target association, which is who Morwell Gun Club is associated with. For some, they need wholesale new facilities. For some it is as simple as fixing access tracks or fixing fencing or upgrading toilet facilities so that they are more comfortable for disabled shooters or for female participation. Some of the toilet facilities are quite rustic and are not really encouraging the community to come in and start shooting.

The CHAIR: What has the effect been of the announcement of the cancellation on the sporting shooting community? Because I imagine many people were excited about the possibility of being involved in this, particularly the possibility of being highly competitive. As you said, Australia has some excellent shooters. What has been the effect on that?

Barry HOWLETT: It is pretty hard to measure. It has been disappointment more than anything, as I think most people were disappointed with a decision like that. I do not think it is surprising at all that people would be disappointed with it. It has denied I suppose some of those more elite shooters an opportunity to participate on the national stage and certainly to shake their cobwebs out ahead of the Olympic Games and those sorts of things that are coming into Australia in due course. To not give the organisers in those peak organisations that exposure of running really big international shooting events is a missed opportunity.

The CHAIR: Thank you. You also mentioned the diverse range of shooters that exist, from hunters to recreational competition. We have heard evidence from other people that having the games on encourages participation in various sports. How would people move from, say, being a recreational shooter into taking part in competitions, and do you think that the Commonwealth Games would have helped in that sort of pipeline?

Barry HOWLETT: It might have inspired a few people. It is pretty hard to measure. Like I said, the vast majority of shooters do not want to participate in competitions. They might be interested in any number of things, or the competitions they want to participate in are not the sorts of disciplines that feature at Commonwealth and Olympic games. Most clay target shooters are shooting in disciplines that are not Commonwealth or Olympic disciplines. Most pistol shooters shoot in disciplines that are not Commonwealth or Olympic disciplines. There is a broad range even within the competition in shooting that does not fit in with that Commonwealth or Olympic games space.

The CHAIR: Do you see the possibility that if we had improved facilities we could facilitate competitions that are not Commonwealth or Olympic level but certainly would accommodate some of these shooters that take part in events that are not Commonwealth or Olympic events?

Barry HOWLETT: Certainly, and there is a dearth of facilities, particularly in this region, in eastern Victoria, for rifle shooting, but less so for shot gun and pistol – there could be a lot more facilities for pistol. But certainly there is a lack of facilities for people who are into rifle shooting in eastern Victoria. Some of that is history. These used to be a lot of small gun clubs dotted around the place, and urban development and all of those things have frozen them out. It is very, very difficult to get a new facility up with the planning. As you would imagine, typically if a new gun club wants to start or even expand their hours, there are quite a few objections from neighbours and people who – a bit of nimbyism – do not particularly want a shooting facility near their backyard.

The CHAIR: That is unfortunate. I will pass to Mr McCracken.

Joe McCracken: Thank you very much, Mr Howlett. Thanks for your time today and for all that you do for shooting. I have been out to a few ranges and have had a few shoots, particularly at Little River too – it is a great facility, so I am glad it is going from strength to strength there. My first question is: what sort of role did your organisation have in the lead-up to the Commonwealth Games? Was there any role that you had in the preparation of the games at all in liaising with the government?

Barry HOWLETT: Not in the actual organisation of the games, more in advocating for shooting to be included. The Olympic and Commonwealth Games disciplines sit under an umbrella called Shooting Australia, which is funded through the institute of sport and sits in I suppose what you would call the elite level, and that is the body that is directly responsible for organising those elite competitions. Our organisation took a really active role in the lead-up to the games, which coincided with the lead-up to the 2022 election. Being a non-core sport, it was not taken for granted that shooting would be included in the games. It had been left out at the Birmingham games. We took a really active role in advocating for shooting to be included from a really philosophical level – from the level, as I said earlier, that we want shooting on the front page for all the right reasons. We want people to come and see shooting events and be excited by them and see what we see in shooting, see that it is a fun, safe, accessible thing for people to do – but not specifically in organisation with the government, no.

Joe McCracken: No, that is fair enough. Perhaps with government agencies and those sorts of things, are you able to provide any times or dates of meetings that you had, or maybe even any correspondence that you had with the government, just to give us an idea of the flavour of what you might have been saying to the government in your advocacy?

Barry HOWLETT: Yes, certainly. I have got a document here, but we can provide the document that we went to ahead of the election – less so to government agencies, more to politicians, so the leaders of the parties and relevant ministers and shadow ministers. We distributed that widely and went to pretty well anyone who was running for the election and let them know what our priorities were. I am happy to share that document.

Joe McCracken: That would be fantastic. Thank you very much for that. Leaning forward now to the cancellation of the games, you said before that many shooters were experiencing disappointment. Can you explain to me a bit more about what your reaction was and what the organisation's feeling was towards the cancellation of the games – how it came about, those sorts of things?

Barry HOWLETT: I suppose we learned about it the same way everyone else in Victoria learned about it, so it came as quite a shock and quite a surprise. Beyond a general disappointment and the disappointment that we would not have that great showcase, that we would not be coming to the valley and having shooting in the

media and shooting portrayed in all the right light, it was not featured in our long-term plans. It was not part of our strategic plan, or anything that seriously shook the organisation. We are a diverse organisation with a diverse range of interests within shooting. It was more a general disappointment.

Joe McCracken: I guess it was properly also a great opportunity to showcase shooting in a really positive way that perhaps is now not available. Does that make it harder to recruit more people into shooting and get more of an interest because of the cancellation?

Barry Howlett: Yes, certainly. It is intangible – we do not know to what degree, but that is certainly why we would encourage the committee to encourage the government to look at ways to bring people into shooting, to promote shooting and to replace that lost opportunity as best we can.

Joe McCracken: Yes, okay. I am trying to get an understanding too of what sorts of activities the organisation would have taken in preparation for the games in terms of what must have cost you guys. Do you have an idea about the cost to your organisation in terms of the advocacy you would have done and those sorts of things in order to really put shooting front and centre?

Barry Howlett: It has not really cost us a great deal of money. The election document had all of our priorities for the election, one of which was shooting. So I suppose there was one thing we did not advocate for because we were advocating for Comm Games instead. But it was part of our broader advocacy efforts, and our association advocates every day for our members on any range of issues. So it would be hard to put a dollar cost on that. It is part of what we do, and it is probably no surprise that a fair chunk of the things we advocate for do not actually come off or never come to fruition. We probably lose more than we win.

Joe McCracken: Yes, that is fair enough. You are probably not alone in that. I guess in terms of going forward, then, what support would you like to see from the government to ensure that shooting remains sustainable, viable and has a growth path? I think you mentioned a sustainable growth strategy into the future. Given that the games have been cancelled and the rug has been taken out from under a lot of people's feet, how would you like to see that support put towards shooting?

Barry Howlett: Building on that shooting sports facilities program that ran for eight years and put over \$17 million into shooting, to have a new fund or a new program along similar lines to that – maybe not that specific program, but something that supports building new shooting and outdoor recreation facilities along with upgrading the old ones. Growth needs participation, and you have got to have somewhere for people to participate – so if we could get some support from government in doing that. And the other thing would be to enable regulators or encourage regulators more to promote shooting and hunting. That sort of strays a bit from the Commonwealth Games bid into the hunting area, but a great example is that the Victorian Fisheries Authority is specifically enabled to promote fishing. The Game Management Authority is specifically not enabled to promote hunting. There is a dichotomy there and an easy thing that the government could do – to make that change to enable the GMA to actually promote hunting beyond just regulating it. That would bring more people in and bring more people in in the right way, if that makes sense.

Joe McCracken: Absolutely. I think my time is up, so thanks very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr McCracken. Mr Galea.

Michael Galea: Thank you, Chair. Thanks for joining us this morning, Mr Howlett. Like the Chair, I have of course also had the chance to come out to the Springvale range, which is in the heart of our electorate and get to see firsthand some of the activities that take place there too. It is good to see the busiest range in the state in the heart of the south-east suburbs.

The Chair: I suggest that we have a competition between MPs there.

Barry Howlett: That would be fantastic.

Michael Galea: That could be the second round of our Commonwealth Games inquiry perhaps.

Just in terms of the general demands and patterns that you are seeing statewide – I note that you said a quarter of a million Victorians do have those shooting licences – what sort of demand are you seeing? Are you seeing growth? Are you seeing any particular trends across the state and, if you have it, in regional Victoria as well?

Barry HOWLETT: Yes, we do. We do not have good data on regional Victoria just because our facilities there tend to be more volunteer-run, so run on weekends and heavily by volunteers, but we certainly have got data for those two metropolitan ranges. They have experienced really strong growth – I have got the data here – with a big decline over COVID of course but 15 per cent growth in 2021–22. And if we go from 2014–15 through to 2022–23, there was 64 per cent growth overall in visitation to those facilities. If you look at that over a decade, it is really strong sustained growth, particularly when we had those huge dips in the COVID years, where the facilities operated in a very limited way, if at all. But the bounce-back from COVID has been growth above the pre-COVID levels. I have not got really good data on shooters licences because Victoria Police hold that pretty tightly. But they do give us regular updates, and numbers keep growing.

Michael GALEA: Certainly, from participation at least, 64 per cent growth over approximately a decade is very significant. You spoke as well about, obviously, promoting safe and legal shooting, and I note that through your various ranges you offer a number of programs that support and facilitate that. How do you guide new entrants into your sport through safety and through being the best, most responsible gun owners they can be?

Barry HOWLETT: There are a number of pathways, and it gets a bit technical depending on what discipline of shooting you are getting into. Handgun shooting has a whole other layer of regulation on it, but the majority of shooters would come into long arm shooting, so rifles and shotguns. The minimum prerequisite for that with Victoria Police is to do a firearm safety course, which is a 3-hour theory course. Our organisation set up a couple of years ago what we call a practical firearm training program that gives people that basic safety course plus 4 hours of supervised range shooting. We show people how to set up the gun properly, and we get them pulling the trigger. For a completely voluntary program, that is heavily oversubscribed. Shooters are lining up to do the program. We are finding shooters that even do the basic firearm safety course with us then go and book to do the practical firearm training to get that extra training. So we have set that up as a voluntary stream and it is going absolutely gangbusters. We have got trainers delivering that across Victoria. We deliver it in Buchan, we deliver it in Portland, Warrnambool, Wodonga, Mildura and at Springvale and Eagle Park. That is just giving people that bit beyond just doing your safety course and teaching them. They walk away from that really confident that they can handle a firearm and head to a range and shoot and have a good time.

Michael GALEA: Yes. Thank you. And so the 3-hour one, I think you mentioned that is run by LRD. Does that have any practical element to it or is it all theoretical?

Barry HOWLETT: It does not. No. It is purely a theory course. It is delivered by a number of private providers. Our organisation delivers it along with other private providers. Like I said, we are finding more and more shooters even doing that basic course, coming out of it aware that – particularly shooters who are coming into shooting from non-traditional pathways, which through generational change, urbanisation, it is more common now for shooters to be coming into shooting not having the tradition handed down from their parents or their grandparents. Those shooters are really missing those practical skills, and to be able to teach them those practical skills is really important.

Michael GALEA: Interesting. I can well imagine. Would it be your organisation's view that such practical training should become part of that registration and licensing process?

Barry HOWLETT: We think there needs to be some sort of demonstration that people can safely use and handle firearms, yes. I think it is heading that way. It is heading that way not just shooting but for hunting and for all sorts of things. As societal expectations change, we must develop along with societal expectations.

Michael GALEA: Interesting. Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thank you very much for being here today. It is good to know that you have got roots in the Latrobe Valley and Moe and certainly in Warragul. Just help me understand, with the Commonwealth Games inquiry was there infrastructure that SSAA was actually seeking from the government or seeking to put through, or was it more of a verbal advocacy rather than some infrastructure?

Barry HOWLETT: Yes. It was more advocating for the games to come and ideally for a legacy to flow from that, so an infrastructure legacy to flow from that. The dream would be a large multidisciplinary shooting

facility in the Latrobe Valley. That would be the dream if this committee wants to strongarm the Treasurer. I am sure Mr Limbrick can go and get that out of the Treasurer tomorrow.

Melina BATH: Mr Howlett, I think you came and presented to the closure of the Hazelwood and Yallourn power station inquiry that we had previously. I think you either came or did you put in a submission?

Barry HOWLETT: I think we put a submission in.

Melina BATH: And that submission had that whole multidisciplinary facility that was going to be based in the Latrobe Valley.

Barry HOWLETT: Yes. So there has been a feasibility study done for that by the by the Australian Deer Association, who I used to work for actually.

Melina BATH: Yes. Yes, that is what it was – now I remember. You have changed hats in time.

Barry HOWLETT: That is right. Yes.

Melina BATH: I guess part of that then is where we have got now the Morwell Gun Club – and we know that they were removed from their land because they needed to be for the Yallourn power station. Yallourn power station have engaged in a long-term agreement with them. That would have been part of your philosophy, I guess, in this document.

Barry HOWLETT: Yes. Certainly in using those areas that have traditionally been used for power stations or in that envelope of power stations of Yallourn or Morwell or one of those mines there. You have already got the large excavation there. You have got no neighbours, and you have got –

Melina BATH: Some clear space.

Barry HOWLETT: Yes, and some really good zoning as far as doing stuff that is loud and ugly and people do not particularly like. The zoning in those areas is really beneficial.

Melina BATH: Sure. And indeed we have got Mr Balcombe coming in from Morwell Gun Club at the end, so we can sort of toss that idea around with him as well. Noting you just said, and I can hear what you are saying, the rise of pistol – there is a dearth of facilities in Eastern Victoria Region, on this side of the state. Does SSAA have any options or thoughts around or plans to invest in other locations here?

Barry HOWLETT: We have got an aspiration, and certainly an ongoing commitment to looking at it, and it is on the agenda with our board. They are looking at it and always seeking opportunities in eastern Victoria. As I said, it is really difficult. It needs some sort of large breakthrough to get the sort of facility that would have the scale to operate efficiently and sustainably. It needs a really big breakthrough. It would need a push from government to say, ‘Yes, we’re going to do this and we’re going to provide some security of tenure and provide some support to get it up and running.’ It would be a substantial project.

Melina BATH: And hence your motivation to be in front of us today.

Barry HOWLETT: Partially, yes.

Melina BATH: Yes, you need to. It is important to look at – you spoke about a firearm safety program, and you said you are a registered training organisation. Can you explain to the committee what you do there and who else is doing that in the field?

Barry HOWLETT: As far as the RTO stuff goes?

Melina BATH: Yes.

Barry HOWLETT: Not many people at all when it comes to shooting training. There have been some interstate providers sort of ad hoc renting ranges to do it. There was a real gap. It was initially set up just as a way to ensure that we were providing the best possible training for recreational shooters, which is our bread and butter. Our members are predominantly recreational shooters, but we have just got in the last couple of days on our scope for our RTO courses to do with commercial harvest of game and kangaroos so that we can offer

those courses now throughout Victoria through our registered training organisation. Our practical firearm training program is delivered through the registered training organisation, and then there are other courses such as training for airport workers, council workers and government workers. There is a wide range of training required for the shooting sports, and there was a real gap in nobody effectively delivering that in Victoria in a cohesive way, so the organisation has stepped up and seen that as a really important thing to do.

Melina BATH: Thank you. That is great. And then I guess others may enter the market as they see fit as well. In relation to this region, because at this time of day in this place we are about supporting this region, I can imagine that in the past for the working-class person hunting was very much at the forefront of what they did. It was a family pastime, gun use et cetera. How important is that to you, for that to continue on in Eastern Victoria Region?

Barry HOWLETT: It is huge, and if you look at the hunting element particularly, if you look at the game licence data in eastern Victoria, I think Morwell and Traralgon and perhaps Wellington – Latrobe and Wellington are the biggest user municipalities for game hunting. I came into shooting predominantly through deer hunting, growing up in Moe and having mates whose parents went deer hunting and then took me deer hunting. It is very much an important pastime for people around the valley.

I always told an anecdote when I was with the deer association. ADA has branches throughout the place, and people would always question why we get such large turnout at our metropolitan branches compared to branches like Gippsland. My answer was always that if I live in Melbourne and I want to talk about deer hunting, I have to go to a meeting to talk about it. When I was living in a Moe or even when I lived in Warragul, if I want to talk about deer hunting, I have just got to go to Woolworths and I will bump into someone who is a deer hunter who can talk deer hunting with me.

Melina BATH: Do you support duck hunting?

Barry HOWLETT: Absolutely. I support and participate in duck hunting.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Melina BATH: I think my time is up.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Ermacora.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Hello, and thank you very much for appearing today. I was particularly interested in, you mentioned that a number of your members compete but that the majority do not, and my only kind of involvement with shooting has been – I was brought up on a farm, so particularly I think my father used to shoot snakes, which is very disappointing.

Barry HOWLETT: I think ‘used to’ is the important thing to say there.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Yes, true! Can you just fill me in in a bit more detail how many of your members compete, and what do the majority of members do and enjoy the most?

Barry HOWLETT: The majority is really hard to say because it is so diverse, but if you look at our Eagle Park facility, for example, you go there any given Friday through to Monday and there will be 100 shooters on our main range just shooting at targets – so setting targets anywhere from 50 metres out to 500 metres. Some of them could be people who like to load their own ammunition and run it through and see how that ammunition performs; some could be people who are hunters who want to make sure they are performing really well and effectively and they know where their gun is shooting at all sorts of different ranges; and some of them are people who purely just like pulling the trigger, just like having the shot going off and hitting some paper. It is really hard to say what most would do because it is as diverse as comparing backgammon and AFL football, the range of disciplines within the shooting sports.

Jacinta ERMACORA: So would that include what perhaps are people that need shooting skills for their professional occupation, like police and so on, or do they have their own ranges?

Barry HOWLETT: VicPol are not necessarily licensed. VicPol members do not need to have a firearms licence as such – that comes through occupational – but Victoria Police are certainly a big user of our Eagle

Park range. So we are open to the public Friday through to Monday. Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, those ranges are typically booked out by government organisations, Victoria Police, or firearm manufacturers who want to use it for testing and all sorts of things like that. But they are part of the wide range of use, yes.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Okay. I am learning a lot. So are the firearm manufacturers based in Victoria or based in Melbourne?

Barry HOWLETT: Most of the industry in Australia is based around Victoria. I will get this wrong, but of the five major wholesalers, three or four of them are based in Victoria. You have got Winchester out at Geelong and a couple in and around suburban Melbourne. Winchester were up until quite recently manufacturing ammunition. They are in Geelong. They do not do that anymore, but there is NIOA, which is a Queensland company that runs a very large ammunition manufacturing facility up at Benalla.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Okay. Well, thank you. That is all I have.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Thank you very much. I will go to Dr Mansfield now.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you, and thank you for appearing today. We have heard from a number of other sporting groups who, I guess, had similarly been looking forward to the Commonwealth Games and the opportunity it provided. Regarding, I guess, the lack of broader strategic planning around sporting facilities and what is needed for that particular sport and therefore how government investment is made, is that an issue with shooting as far as you are aware?

Barry HOWLETT: It is, and it is probably a bit different with shooting than most other pursuits and sports. We sort of sit broadly under Sport and Recreation Victoria but as one of four recreation bodies. One of the big issues with shooting facilities is that whilst many sports are operated on council land and then access support and grants and schemes through local councils, there are very, very few shooting facilities, as either a quirk of history or happenstance, that operate on council land. Most of them are either privately owned or work on Crown land leases under DEECA or on leases with forestry companies like Hancock's or one of the private forestry companies or like Morwell Gun Club who are sitting underneath EnergyAustralia. So there is that lack of strategic planning and a clear funding stream for shooting, but it is particularly difficult because with other sports it is often taken up at local council level and looked after at a local council, and shooting does not tend to be.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Okay. You have touched on this already, but if you could get anything you wanted out of the legacy funding, what is the sort of top thing you would like to see for the region you are in?

Barry HOWLETT: The gold standard, the dream, would be a large multidisciplinary shooting facility, something that allows rifle shooters in particular to shoot out at long distances – so out to, say, 500 metres at least. Those things are difficult to build because of the sheer logistics of that. If you are shooting 500 metres, you then have to have a backdrop that is multiples of that 500 metres. It needs to be wide enough that you can take enough shooters to make it financially viable to operate, and you have to have access. They are really difficult, challenging things that require long-term strategy and long-term investment.

Sarah MANSFIELD: And how hopeful are you, based on any discussions you have had, about that being forthcoming?

Barry HOWLETT: I do not imagine that we are going to be jumping for joy this May. But, look, I am a hunter, so I am an eternal optimist. You cannot be a hunter without being an eternal optimist, so I am hopeful it will happen one day.

Sarah MANSFIELD: That is all I have got. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Dr Mansfield. Mr McIntosh.

Tom McINTOSH: Thanks, Barry. Thanks for being here. I just want to ask: you just talked before about munitions manufacturing and that side of things. You may have already touched on this, but across the industry, across the sector, how many jobs are there broadly?

Barry HOWLETT: I can probably chase that up on notice. It is difficult. There is certainly data on how many jobs there are with recreational game hunting, but that is such a very small cohort of shooting overall.

Tom McINTOSH: Yes, you were talking before about the broader, bigger aspect.

Barry HOWLETT: And particularly stuff like that munitions facility at Benalla. It is a huge enterprise. It is Commonwealth government supported. It is fantastic to see new manufacturing spring up anywhere, but to have that in Victoria is a big enterprise. Certainly gun shops and that broader retail sector has big employment and growing. Where I live, Warragul has a relatively new gun shop that employs half a dozen people that was not there five or six years ago, and as shooting grows and I suppose as the population grows and spreads out through the suburbs, you are seeing gun shops appear where they never used to be, and people have got jobs in that.

Tom McINTOSH: And just to touch on the fact that this weekend the Mallacoota Gun Club is opening. I think it was \$280,000-odd tipped in from the state post fires. So that is good from a Mallacoota perspective obviously to get that up and going again after a number of years without it.

Barry HOWLETT: Yes, it is fantastic. It is fantastic to see it rise from the ashes, as they are saying. I think they are calling their shoot this weekend the Phoenix Shoot.

Tom McINTOSH: Yes.

Barry HOWLETT: I certainly know of a person we had a family association with who perished in those fires who had a really close association with that gun club, so there is something really nice about seeing it continue on.

Tom McINTOSH: I have been impressed by the way the club, with the new facility opening, are looking to throw the doors open, inviting the whole community and further abroad and whatnot.

Barry HOWLETT: It has sort of popped up in my social media feeds and been promoted pretty well.

Tom McINTOSH: Yes. You touched on earlier in your contribution around what should be simple things – disabled toilet access and whatnot. I remember being out at the Bairnsdale club, and I forget what it was – something like \$150,000 they have received. But things like even the pathways to be able to shoot, if you currently do not facilitate wheelchair access. It is such a great sport that can be completely inclusive for all abilities. So just seeing that money go towards things like that to get more people, and more people of all abilities, involved.

Barry HOWLETT: Yes, really important. And really important – there is a push across sport in Victoria for more female participation at all levels. Shooting has currently got about 7 per cent I think female participation. But a limiting factor in that certainly throughout regional Victoria is having toilet facilities that are suitable to have female participation. We cannot expect to drive women to come into the sport, when we are not offering sanitary toilet facilities for them, to come and shoot.

Tom McINTOSH: Yes, I think that was something Bairnsdale talked about with some of the local champs they have got – having the facilities there for them to train with and be ready to go off to comps and whatnot. Yes, okay. And broadly with your membership, obviously we have got the \$2 billion regional fund going forward with lots of opportunities re the sport and infrastructure investment and whatnot. Is the Commonwealth Games something your members are raising with you on a daily basis now?

Barry HOWLETT: No, it is not front of mind now. Certainly when the announcement happened, members were raising it and were disappointed.

Tom McINTOSH: The last six months and – yes.

Barry HOWLETT: People move on, I suppose.

Tom McINTOSH: Yes. Okay. All right. Thanks very much for attending. That is all from me, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Davis.

David DAVIS: Thank you for your contribution. I think most of what I would have asked has been covered, but I just want to reinforce a point that you made relatively early in your presentation. In effect I think what you were saying is that there has been no net addition, due to the games, to the club's position overall. That, I thought, was the short summary of what you said?

Barry HOWLETT: Yes, the funding was through that shooting sports facilities program, so it was funding that already existed.

David DAVIS: But it could be reinstated in some form or another?

Barry HOWLETT: We would encourage governments and prospective governments of all stripes to commit seriously to funding the shooting sports, yes.

David DAVIS: All right. That is all I wanted to cover. Thank you.

Melina BATH: I do have a –

The CHAIR: I will go back to Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thank you. Thanks, Chair. We have heard from other disciplines, athletics et cetera, that it is very important when you have got the likes of the Commonwealth Games that they provide the stimulus for new volunteers, for accredited trainers and for officials. Is that a problem that you have in your organisation, when you have those professional shoots, or are you fairly in-house and do not need it? Do you see that as a lost opportunity, and would that have built on your volunteers and/or trainers and officials?

Barry HOWLETT: Not for our organisation. It would not have been involved. I am sure Morwell Gun Club might be able to speak to that in a different way.

Melina BATH: Yes, happy to ask them.

Barry HOWLETT: But not for our organisation. Generally on volunteerism our organisation has seen what organisations throughout society are seeing, which is a challenge recruiting volunteers. We have done work and research on that, and that comes down to different work-life patterns and all sorts of factors affecting volunteering, so generally we do have a challenge with volunteerism. But I do not think that is unique to the shooting sports.

Melina BATH: No, indeed. You know, we often remember back when Mr Diamond or Mr Mark came through and were tremendous. Is there any anecdotal or quantifiable evidence about the spike in that participation post those wins, whether it be on Olympic or Commonwealth games wins?

Barry HOWLETT: Anecdotally I would say, yes, there is anecdotal evidence that people will then go out and want to try shotgun shooting when we have big success and front pages for shotgun shooting. For us it is more about that social licence picture, I suppose; it is more about people seeing shooting as something that is legitimate and celebrated rather than seeing it as something that is scary and frowned upon.

Melina BATH: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thank you, Ms Bath. Thanks very much for appearing today. You will receive a copy of the transcript for review in about a week, before it will be published on the website. The committee will now take a break for lunch and resume at 1 pm.

Witness withdrew.