

# Buyback misses target

**N**EW laws came into effect last week that outlawed a range of handguns, and imposed a range of minimum attendances and reporting requirements for licence holders.

Putting aside arguments from both sides of the debate on the merits of these laws, they will come at a cost that does not seem to have been taken into account and is rarely reported.

Most of our critics and, presumably, policy decision-makers seem to believe that the average use of firearms on any given weekend includes a dozen or so chaps plinking away at tin cans or the odd bunny on a farm.

However, the real picture is much bigger than many would assume.

There are 200,000 licensed shooters in Victoria with up to 25,000 engaging at organised shooting events in any given week, such as skeet and trap (shotgun), pistol and rifle target shooting at registered shooting grounds, and hunting.

Annual expenditure on these events alone is approximately a quarter of a billion dollars, which is more than the State Government will spend on capital works for the 2006 Commonwealth Games.

This shows up to annual expenditure of \$3 million in every municipal area or electorate on such things as accommodation, travel, food,

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entry fees and ammunition.

Clearly this is important in supporting regional towns that provide these services.

The new laws will, regretfully, cause some of this economic activity to be lost.

They will cut out some international competitions where large capacity magazines can no longer be used and cause up to one third of pistol clubs members, who are unable to meet the Government's new requirements, to quit the sport.

As unfair as it is, illness backed by a medical certificate will not be an acceptable excuse for non-attendance.

The Government believes the laws will provide overall net public benefits.

However, the buyback is only intended to remove legal guns from circulation, not illegal guns such as those smuggled into Australia, which account for about 90 per cent of all firearm related crimes, so you really need to ask where the benefits of these laws really are.

Restrictions on firearm ownership and use, can and do have merit. Our council recently proposed amendments to firearm laws, which promoted restricted access to handguns, that were accepted by Government.

However the baseline set by the Federal Government to ban handguns according to barrel length — and interpreted at state level with a few extras thrown in — will cause unnecessary hardship on clubs that will have flow-on costs to regional Victoria.

Although precise figures are not available, the cost to regional communities will be at least a hundred million dollars over the remaining term of the current State Government.

There are other issues of concern relating to the buyback that remain unresolved.

The first is the failure of both the Federal and State Governments to address the issue of compensation for dealers who are licensed

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to sell products in a market that both governments have now outlawed.

This is an appalling abandonment of small businesses that are suffering as a direct result of government policy.

The second is the government proposal that the buyback would be conducted at gun clubs.

This is interesting because none of the council's members — which include all of

Victoria's major shooting organisations — that I have spoken with have offered their venues. Some have explicitly rejected the idea.

This is not to be difficult, but simply recognition of the environment in which the shooting sports operate.

The Government has insisted on exclusive access to the club for unknown "safety reasons", which is odd given that there has not been a fatality at a civilian shooting range in Victoria for more than 100 years.

It would also be unreasonable and understandably objectionable to expect club members to allow use of their premises to destroy their sport.

There is a lot of work to do before shooters can feel confident that the Government fully understands the environment it wishes to regulate, and are part of an effective consultation process before firearm policies are decided upon.

Sensible decisions can only be arrived at if they take proper account of the associated costs and benefits.

I can only hope that the dialogue we now have with government can continue.

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