

Green groups up in arms at duck shooting deal

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THE Brumby Government has struck a "sneaky" deal with shooters to allow duck hunting along hundreds of kilometres of the state's newly created Murray River Park, a development that has infuriated the environment movement.

Green groups say they will withdraw their praise for the new system of river red gum national and regional parks across northern Victoria - the government's biggest environmental achievement this term - because they feel betrayed by the last-minute concession to shooters.

In the next few weeks, the Victorian National Parks Association will join anti-duck-hunting groups to letterbox key Labor seats on the issue. Friends of the Earth, the Wilderness Society and Environment Victoria have also condemned the decision.

The deal was discovered through letters released to the green groups under freedom-of-information laws.

Environment Minister Gavin Jennings wrote to hunting groups in March - four months after legislation passed Parliament - confirming the "outcome of discussions" between his office and two pro-shooter groups, Field and Game Australia and the Sporting Shooters Association.

In the letters, Mr Jennings agreed to open 40 per cent of the length of Murray River Park to duck shooting. The park is classified as a regional park, not a national park, which means it has less protection overall. But in its framework for setting up the new conservation areas, released in March 2009, the government agreed to ban duck hunting from the new regional parks.

The Sunday Age believes that while the letter agreed to 40 per cent of the park's length, the deal will actually cover 60 per cent, or 22,200 hectares, of the 35,000-hectare park.

"This smacks of a sneaky deal; a deal that will severely undermine the protection of 35,000 hectares of public land and endanger threatened species," said Victorian National Parks Association spokesman Nick Roberts.

"We had a very clear commitment from the Premier, John Brumby, and the minister's office. This is a backflip."

The fallout with green groups threatens to sully Tuesday's official proclamation of the new national parks. The network of parks, protecting red gum forests, wetlands and Murray River frontage across northern Victoria, resulted from a difficult consultation

process with green groups, shooters, loggers and cattle graziers and a long investigation by the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council. The regional parks will be proclaimed in September.

Protected areas include four new national parks, expanded existing national parks, seven regional parks and a string of lesser parks, such as conservation areas and wildlife reserves. The Murray River Park is a 1000-kilometre string of protected riverside land winding from Wodonga to just past Mildura.

The Sunday Age believes that during the community engagement process shooting groups were given a commitment by government - in line with Labor's election promises to support duck hunting - that they could continue to shoot ducks in the park.

But that commitment was not spelt out in any subsequent reports and government positions, and not communicated to the green movement.

It is believed that the duck-hunting groups have strong support from within the Premier's office.

The shooting lobby says it was always intended that duck hunting would not be banned from the park. Bureaucrats had simply made a "drafting error" in not allowing for it in the maps and legislation, said Rod Drew, the chief executive officer of Field and Game Australia.

He said shooting groups would now negotiate with the Department of Sustainability and Environment on which areas would be appropriate for duck shooting, keeping away from heavily populated areas.