



Times

Thursday 13/1/2005

Page: 1

Section: General News

Region: Victor Harbour SA Circulation: 6,298

Type: Regional

Size: 448.19 sq.cms.

Published: ---T---

Brief: MARINA-A
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Fight for access

By **SOPHIE WANDEL**

HINDMARSH ISLAND - South Coast boat owners and the Member for Finnis Dean Brown have joined forces to lobbying for the removal of the state government's ban on boating past the Murray Mouth and into the Coorong.

About 50 boaties and Mr Brown gathered at Sugars Beach last Thursday to meet in front of metropolitan and local media to voice their protest.

Outside the meeting, Minister for the Murray, Karlene Maywald said the ban, which commenced October 2002, is in place to protect the boating public from the dredging project.

"Because the dredging operation involves cables and large sand disposal pipes that often span the channel past the mouth, it is imperative that we have in place the appropriate safety measures," Ms Maywald said.

However, boaties and tour operators believe the Murray mouth is safer now than before the dredging began, as they were allowed the opportunity to pass through the mouth for three days over the New Year weekend.

"Hundreds of boats went through the channel over New Year's. what we're asking is for commonsense to apply," Mr Brown said.

Rod Davis, a weekend resident on Hindmarsh Island agreed.

"We've been coming down for 25 years, I'm extremely frustrated because we all have boats and we want to use them, we had no problems over New Year's, the mouth was safe and deep and

yachts sailed through," Mr Davis said.

Now the frustrated group has called for a lift on the ban.

"We want a dedicated channel to go through, the government can set provisions, four knots, two knots, we're responsible, we'll do it so we can operate," Mr Davis said.

Likewise Goolwa yachtsman, Randal Cooper believes the Murray mouth is the only dredging operation in Australia where there is no navigation channel.

But Ms Maywald believes any access through the mouth would be detrimental to the environment and costly to the government.

"The cost of interrupting the dredging for those three days over New Year was \$60,000, which has been funded by State Government, and we're only allowed to close down the dredging for three days every three months," she said.

Meanwhile, the dredging operation has also been costly to local tour operators and fishermen.

Jock Veenstra, who operates Spirit of the Coorong, told *The Times* of a 25 to 30 per cent loss in tourist numbers since the ban.

"We understand the dredging has to continue to pump sand so the mouth retains environmental health but there should be a way commercial and recreational boats can operate through there in a limited way."

Other reported losses in business include Marina Charter Company, operator Andrew Chapman who estimated a 95 per cent loss in numbers.



"The Murray mouth and Coorong are in all the tourist brochures and when people ring up, that's where they want to go and when I tell them they can't I feel them getting deflated on the end of the phone," Mr Chapman said.

"I also believe if the mouth was open I'd have two more jobs for locals on offer," he added.

At a recent public meeting in Goolwa, where over 300 concerned boaties attended, Mr Brown estimated the ban has caused a loss of millions of dollars in the districts economy.

As Mr Chapman conceded, "If tourists aren't coming, they aren't buying local fuel or local tackle, they're not eating in restaurants or shopping in the

stores, there's a massive rolling effect."

However, Ms Maywald believes there would be even more of a detrimental effect on the local economy if the dredging weren't in operation.

She also said that a navigation channel would be "totally impractical."

"Having a channel would cost South Australian taxpayers even more money."

Ms Maywald said she is working closely with Alexandrina Council looking at ways to provide boat owners with more access.

"We're not sitting idle, but I can't really give a time-line because every time we find a solution a new problem arises,

the main problem is who will pay for it."

She added that one option could be to share costs between state government, local council, boat owners and businesses.

COORONG CLOSURE FACTS:

▶ **Jock Veenstra of the Spirit of the Coorong** estimates a loss of 25-30-percent in tourist numbers since the ban.

▶ **Andrew Chapman from the Marina Charter Company** says the loss is about 95-percent.

▶ The cost to cease dredging to allow boating access for three days last week was \$60,000.

▶ The ban on boating access through the mouth has been in place since October 2002.



▲ **BOAT OWNERS ANGRY ...** Frustrated yachtsman Randal Cooper and Spirit of the Coorong Operator Jock Veenstra with Member for Finnis Dean Brown (middle) at Sugars Beach.