

Poker sites are flush with Aussie players

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US poker sites rake in \$68 million a year. Photo: Rodger Cummins

NEARLY 130,000 Australians are playing illegal internet poker games, with US operators raking in \$68 million in one year, according to research.

Online casino games, including poker, are illegal in Australia. But in May the federal government released an interim review of interactive gaming laws which recommended legalising internet poker games as part of an overall liberalising of the industry. Other casino games would remain banned and poker would be trialled over several years.

Despite being illegal, foreign websites offering poker are freely available to Australian punters.

In a submission to the review, German research group Academicon says in 2010 129,714 Australians played online poker, with US operators taking \$68 million.

Dr Ingo Fiedler from the University of Hamburg, which has an online poker database, said 36,000 people in New South Wales were playing and 31,915 in Victoria. He said 2010 data were the most recent figures available.

Dr Fiedler said Academicon was evaluating online gambling regulations and consulted on how best to regulate internet gambling. "Our advice is based on academic research and objective data. A key advantage is that we do not have a stake in the gambling industry," he said.

"Most industry reports on internet gambling overestimate its prevalence and market size for lobbying reasons."

A Productivity Commission investigation in 2010 estimated that up to \$800 million could be spent on online gambling, with \$249 million being on online poker alone. It also said there were 363,100 poker accounts active in Australia in 2008.

Dr Fiedler said most punters played only occasionally, for small amounts, for just a short while and at only one table.

"If people get addicted to slot machines [pokies] they are more likely to play online poker, and the other way around."

The opposition and independent senator Nick Xenophon have publicly denounced the push to liberalise online gambling.

Senator Xenophon told *The Age* liberalising online gambling would create more problem gamblers.

"If online poker was given the seal of approval there would be an explosion in its use and with it all the associated issues of problem gambling," he said.

Monash University public health expert Charles Livingstone said the figures were unsurprising but suggested that it was likely the figure was on the low side of current use.

"In any event, the data held by the University of Hamburg's database is undoubtedly useful, but probably not as a source of overall prevalence or expenditure figures," Dr Livingstone said.

He said the research available for online poker suggested that many online poker players played for relatively small takes and tended to win or lose only modestly. About \$12 billion is estimated to be spent on poker machines every year.

"Liberalisation of online gambling is feasible and should start, as the PC suggested, with liberalisation of online poker, but not before serious and nationally consistent harm-minimisation measures are properly regulated by the federal government, not the states," Dr Livingstone said.



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