2025/26 CENTRAL ZONE ABALONE STOCK ASSESSMENT AND QUOTA WORKSHOP - MEETING SUMMARY

Date: Thursday, 10 April 2025

Attendees: **Chair:** Ian Cartwright

Commercial sector stakeholders: Nick Gall (CEO of Abalone Victoria Central Zone (AVCZ)), Jeremy Prince, Vin Gannon, Rene Strauss, Jake Morris, Brandon Cole, Sean Buck, Owen Shannessy, Jamie Espie, Darvin Hansen, Warren Threlfall, Anthony Quarrell

Victorian Fisheries Authority (VFA): Melissa Schubert, Ian Parks, Anthony McGrath, Mark Asplin and Rod Barber

Apologies: Luke O'Sullivan

MRAG Asia Pacific: Dr. Cameron Dixon

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Central Zone total allowable commercial catch (TACC) workshop was held on 10 April 2025 in Queenscliff.

The workshop's primary role was to consider and provide advice on the stock assessment and the results of the application of the harvest strategy based on that assessment. The stock assessment scientist (Cameron Dixon – MRAG) expressed cautious optimism that the decline in abalone abundance at most SMUs had been arrested, noting that most of the fishing had occurred in shallower waters than was usual.

In general, there was agreement to maintain the status quo in most areas of the fishery and agreed to in principle by VFA.

From those present, there was a clear division of participant views, with one side favouring additional small increases in TACC in line with harvest strategy outcomes, while others would prefer an overall reduction in the TACC be driven through increasing and harmonising Legal Minimum Lengths (LML's).

The VFA has referred all discussions regarding LML's to the Abalone Scientific Working Group.

Acknowledging an incorrect data reporting issue that had previously resulted in Cape Liptrap receiving a reduction in TACC, 2.7t was returned to the TACC to amend the previously decision.

It was not possible for consensus agreement to be reached on a recommendation for the TACC at this forum due to considerable different views in the room. Despite this, the VFA recommends a TACC of 228.8 tonnes for the 2025/26 season. This is comprised of 219.0 tonne, plus 9.8 tonnes of carryover.

2025/26 is the last season that carry-over is to be applied.

ITEM 1: WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

The Chair opened the workshop and set clear expectations around respect and behaviour during the meeting and the need to put the sustainability of the fishery first. The Chair then asked each participant to introduce themselves and declare their interests in the meeting.

ITEM 2: OVERVIEW

The Chair noted the agenda for the day and recommended that consensus would be sought on individual spatial management unit (SMU) targets and the resultant TACC for 2025/26. He advised that Cameron Dixon, MRAG Asia Pacific (MRAG) scientist, would present the stock assessment for each spatial management unit (SMU) and then comments and diver observations would be sought from meeting participants. Commentary for each SMU would be noted and included in the meeting summary.

The Chair outlined that all attendees and other interested stakeholders will have another opportunity to comment during the public consultation phase.

ITEM 3: FISHERY MANAGEMENT UPDATE

Introduction

Anthony McGrath, Abalone Fishery Manager, introduced himself and provided the VFA management update.

Abalone Viral Ganglioneuritis (AVG) update

AVG was detected at Port MacDonnell in South Australia by abalone divers in February 2024. The Department of Primary Industries and Regions, South Australia has recently closed the fishery for 12 months, but that may be longer. There are currently no known detections in Victoria and the VFA maintains control measures to prevent the spread the virus into Victoria. This includes the prohibition of unprocessed abalone from South Australia in Victoria and requires Port MacDonnell based rock lobster fleet to disinfect and dry all equipment in the presence of at VFA Fisheries Officer before entering Victorian waters. Recreational fishers are also required to Check, Clean and Dry all recreational fishing and diving equipment before entering Victoria.

Abalone Scientific Working Group (ASWG)

The ASWG was established as an extension to the Fishery Independent Survey Review Working Group. The objective of the group is to utilise the experience and expertise of independent scientific personnel, fishery managers and abalone industry members to provide recommendations on how best to assess and monitor the Victorian Wildharvest Abalone Fishery. The ASWG is the primary reviewer and decision-making vehicle for scientific changes across the fishery. The ASWG has worked through several items over the past year including the review of the standardisation applied to CPUE data which has been used in this year's stock assessment and harvest strategy.

Carryover provisions

Anthony outlined the central zone COVID carryover provisions and noted the current amounts to be applied. The 2025/26 season is the final season of carry over.
The amounts are 9,772.19kg of blacklip and 156.56kg of greenlip, which are allocated to affected fishers.

Medium Sales Permit

In response to the current market conditions and the requirement for fishers to sell their catch to an Abalone Receiver (AR) licence, or in small sales up to 5kg, the VFA is working with interested fishers on a 12-month trial for a medium sales permit. This will allow eligible fishers to explore the domestic abalone market for live or fresh abalone in sales amounts up to 50kg, with a possession limit of 500kg in a commercial premises.
Permits will be issued on a case-by-case basis and interested fishers should contact the fishery manager directly with their proposal.

There was considerable discussion about this, with many fishers in the room interested in making the most of the opportunity.

ITEM 4: COMPLIANCE UPDATE

Mark Asplin and Rod Barber - Senior Fisheries Officers, provided the VFA compliance update. They outlined the compliance approach and explained the split of resources between recreational and commercial fisheries, marine safety, marine parks, aquaculture, and fish receivers. Mark and Rod provided an overview of compliance actions from 2024/25 to date and congratulated industry on excellent compliance levels in the central zone.

The officers outlined compliance actions in the recreational sector and explained the importance of reporting to 13FISH, as there has been a notable increase in abalone offending with many offenders caught, leading to several prosecution briefs.

Industry questioned the impact of the proposed VFA structural changes and noted the commercial sectors support and respect for the Fisheries Officers.

ITEM 5: STOCK ASSESSMENT OVERVIEW

MRAG Scientist – Cameron Dixon provided an overview of the CZ stock assessment.

Overview

The commercial catch for 2023/24 was 222.3 t (222.9 t TACC).

Industry/government/researcher cooperation and coordination has improved markedly, allowing for adaptive approaches to managing the fishery based on improved data. The knowledge base on which to make decisions, which has been based primarily on CPUE is improving, with a better understanding of recent operational changes in the fishery (spatial contraction of the fishery concentrating heavily on shallow water, high catch-rate reefs) factored into the stock assessment.

The 2025 assessment of stock status looks positive for the stock.

- CPUE remains the primary measure of stock status and is slowly increasing
- A new CPUE standardisation approach was implemented but uncertainty remains
- Commercial length frequency data continues to show positive trends
- FIS surveys were incomplete at the time of writing and new surveys to begin in mid-2025.

All zonal measures were positive or stable in the 2023/24 assessment. This gives greater confidence in the weight of evidence assessment outcomes. Despite this there are some concerns regarding large shifts in catch distribution among some reefcodes, likely driven by market conditions. Similarly concerning are the increasing catches of greenlip abalone at reefcode 14.02, Cat Bay. Which has now contributed 37% of total reported greenlip catch. This also raises questions about correct recording of greenlip/blacklip fishing time in eCatch.

While all measures are positive, there remains a relatively low biomass in historic terms.

This assessment provides the strongest evidence to date that biomass is likely recovering. However, it should be noted that stocks likely remain well below the conceptual target of biomass at Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY). The forum was recommended to continue with a precautionary approach to management by maintaining the TACC at levels that will continue to promote stock recovery under the assumption that recruitment to stock remains consistent.

Abalone Scientific Working Group

The ASWG has made several recommendations during 2024 and 2025 that have been implemented into this Stock Assessment and Draft Harvest Strategy reports for both the eastern zone and the central zone. These include:

- Established new data filters to attempt to remove some data outliers for CPUE analysis.
- Developed an improved CPUE standardisation model that includes a seasonal component, written in R.
- Developed a new Mean Daily Catch standardisation model similar to the CPUE model.
- Examined alternative Performance Indicators in the Harvest Strategy

Harvest Strategy

Below are the results of the application of the harvest strategy, with suggested catch ranges, as presented to the Forum.

The Harvest Strategy remains reliant on CPUE inputs and whilst the CPUE standardisation model recently updated, the harvest strategy requires review of reference points and reference period.

SMU	4yr gradient	Primary Indicator	2yr ratio (% change)	Secondary Indicator	Primary Category	Tertiary Indicator	Final Category	2024/25 Target Catch (OT, t)	Total catch, Lower (t)	Total catch, Upper (t)
BACK BEACHES		Increasing		Stable	Increasing	NA	Increasing	41.5	41.5, 43.6	47.7, 51.9
CAPE LIPTRAP		Increasing		Stable	Increasing	NA	Increasing	9.4	9.4, 9.9	10.8
CAPE OTWAY		Stable		Stable	Stable	NA	Stable	49.0	46.6	51.5
CLIFFY GROUP		Increasing		Stable	Increasing	NA	Increasing	4.7	4.7, 4.9	5.4
FLINDERS		Increasing		Increasing	Increasing	NA	Increasing	20.5	20.5, 21.5	23.6, 25.6
KILCUNDA		Increasing		Stable	Increasing	NA	Increasing	9.3	9.8	10.7
PHILLIP ISLAND		Increasing		Stable	Increasing	NA	Increasing	34.0	34.0, 35.7	39.1, 42.5
PROM EASTSIDE		Increasing		Stable	Increasing	NA	Increasing	4.8	4.6	5.0
PROM WESTSIDE		Stable		Stable	Stable	NA	Stable	21	20.0	22.1
SHIPWRECK COAST		Increasing		Stable	Increasing	NA	Increasing	29.2	29.2, 30.7	33.6
SURFCOAST		Increasing		Stable	Increasing	NA	Increasing	1.7	1.7, 1.8	2.0
Total								225.1		

MRAG recommendations

It is unequivocal that the spatial extent of the fishery has contracted substantially in the last two decades, and the fishery now concentrates heavily on shallow water, high catch-rate reefs. Prior to the 2024 stock assessment, there was little confidence in the assessment of stock status on these shallow water reefs and thus precautionary management advice was provided. This report provides the strongest evidence to date that biomass is likely recovering. However, it should be noted that stocks likely remain well below the conceptual target of biomass at Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY).

It is recommended that the continuation of a precautionary approach be applied by maintaining the TACC at levels that will continue to promote stock recovery under the assumption that recruitment to the stock remains consistent

The Chair thanked Cameron and the MRAG team for the work done on the stock assessment and thanked participants for their feedback.

ITEM 6: GREENLIP ABALONE ASSESSMENT

The group discussed the greenlip abalone TACC and with concerns raised about reef code 14.02 Cat Bay. Over the past 5 years there has been a steady increase in greenlip catch from 19% of the Greenlip TACC to 32%, with the past two consecutive seasons seeing the highest catches since the mid 1980's, raising concerns of serial depletion in this area. Divers noted that over the past three seasons (including current season), weather conditions were forcing blacklip abalone fishing into this area, with divers taking greenlip as part of the same trip. Divers also reported that there is a significant population of undersized greenlip in this area.
Concensus was reached to maintain current settings at 3.0t (3.46t including carryover), with a recommendation that fishery managers may need to introduce management interventions at 14.02 in the future.

ITEM 7: BLACKLIP ABALONE SPATIAL MANAGEMENT ASSESSMENT

Legal Minimum Length's

The issue of changes to Legal Minimum Lengths (LMLs) was raised at the beginning of the blacklip assessment discussions. VFA stated that changes to LML's would not be changed based solely on recommendations from the forum. Due to the impact on the fishery and long term data trends, more detailed consideration and analysis would be required before changes could be implemented.

It was agreed that industry could recommend LML changes, and these would be considered by the ASWG.

It was noted by the Chair of AVCZ that his group were seeking to increase LML's whilst maintaining a stable TACC, in an effort to maximise the benefit to the fish stocks, whilst the global market is experiencing a downturn. This opinion was not supported by all attendees.

Stock status and optimum targets, by SMU

MRAG introduced each SMU discussion with historic context, the stock assessment outcomes and harvest strategy results, providing a recommended range for a proposed TACC. VFA recommendation was sought and comments from industry participants. SMU discussions are summarised in Appendix 1.

ITEM 8: SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

Meeting Actions

1. VFA to consider proposals for changes to size limit which are to be presented and discussed at the next ASWG.
2. VFA to clarify the role of the ASWG and the Central Zone RWG in respect of input and influence within VFA in respect of scientific issues, including monitoring and assessment
3. VFA to review data management arrangements of zonal bodies with a view to provide better transparency of their own data to fishers

TACC summary

VFA presented the following table outlining the discussions of each party raised in the forum. It was agreed that this was an accurate representation.

2025/26 Summary of discussions

	SMU	TARGET 2024-25	Views 1	view 2	VFA	Final?	Carry over (applied to target)	PROPOSED TARGET 2025/26	Potential review of LML change
Central	Shipwreck Coast (4.01-5.03)	25.3	status quo	status quo	status quo	status quo	3.9	29.2	2mm
Central	Cape Otway (6.01-8.01)	45.1	status quo	status quo	status quo	status quo	3.9	49.0	2mm
Central	Surf Coast (8.02-10.05)	1.7	status quo	status quo	status quo	status quo	0	1.7	2mm
Central	Port Phillip Bay (11.01-11.18)	0.0	status quo	status quo	status quo	status quo	0	0.0	2mm
Central	Back Beaches (12.01-12.05)	41.5	status quo	up 2	up 1	up 1	0	42.5	2mm
Central	Flinders (12.06-13.07)	20.5	status quo	status quo	status quo	status quo	0	20.5	1mm
Central	Phillip Island (14.01-14.11)	34.0	status quo	up 2	status quo	status quo	0	34.0	3mm
Central	Kilcunda (15.01-15.05)	8.3	status quo	up 1	status quo	status quo	1	9.3	2mm
Central	Cape Liptrap (16.01-16.06)	8.4	status quo	up 2.7	up 2.7	up 2.7	1	12.1	2mm
Central	Prom Westside (16.07-17.13)	21.0	status quo	status quo	status quo	status quo	0	21.0	2mm
Central	Prom Eastside (18.03-18.09, ex 18.08)	4.8	status quo	status quo	status quo	status quo	0	4.8	2mm
Central	Cliffys (18.08)	4.7	status quo	status quo	status quo	status quo	0	4.7	2mm
	CENTRAL TACC	215.3					9.8	228.8	

The VFA proposes the following TACC for consultation.

2025/26 with Carry Over — carry over amounts added to target

Zone	Spatial management unit	Lower limit	Lower threshold	TARGET	Upper threshold	Upper limit	UL change	Carry over (applied to target)
Central	Shipwreck Coast (4.01-5.03)	26.3	27.7	29.2	30.7	32.1	10% UL	3.9
Central	Cape Otway (6.01-8.01)	44.1	46.6	49.0	51.5	53.9	10% UL	3.9
Central	Surf Coast (8.02-10.05)	1.0	1.2	1.7	2.5	5.0	Maintain current UL	0
Central	Port Phillip Bay (11.01-11.18)	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.5	5.0	Maintain current UL	0
Central	Back Beaches (12.01-12.05)	40.4	41.4	42.5	43.6	44.6	Maintain current 5% UL	0
Central	Flinders (12.06-13.07)	18.5	19.5	20.5	21.5	22.6	Maintain current 10% UL	0
Central	Phillip Island (14.01-14.11)	32.3	33.2	34.0	34.9	35.7	Maintain current 5% UL	0
Central	Kilcunda (15.01-15.05)	8.4	8.8	9.3	9.8	10.2	10% UL	1
Central	Cape Liptrap (16.01-16.06)	10.9	11.5	12.1	12.7	13.3	Maintain current 10% UL	1
Central	Prom Westside (16.07-17.13)	18.9	20.0	21.0	22.1	23.1	10% UL	0
Central	Prom Eastside (18.03-18.09, ex 18.08)	4.3	4.6	4.8	5.0	5.3	10% UL	0
Central	Cliffys (18.08)	4.2	4.5	4.7	4.9	5.2	10% UL	0
CENTRAL ZONE TOTAL CATCH TARGET (TACC + CARRYOVER)				228.8				9.8
			Greenlip	3.46	3.46			

The Chair thanked all participants for a constructive process this year and explained that VFA will draft the meeting summary for stakeholder comment, with public consultation due to occur within the next month.

Meeting closed at 4:15 pm.

Appendix 1. Spatial management unit discussion breakdown

SMU	Catch		Recommendations and comments
	Target (OT + carryover) 2024/25 (t)	Target (OT + carryover) 2025/26 (t)	
Cape Otway (6.01-8.01)	49.0	49.0	Current OT: 49.0 tonnes Suggested OT range: 46.6 – 51.5 tonnes Primary Indicator: Stable Secondary Indicator: Stable Final category: Stable While FIS recruits and pre-recruits have increased. Commercial mean size has increased. Harvest Strategy suggests stable OT. General agreement to retain status quo, with a suggestion to reduce TACC by 2t Differing views on size limits; one to increase by 2mm another noting that some areas are underfished/not fished due to the size limit meting being too high. Noted that it was not prudent to lower the overall size limit to access pockets of slower-growing abalone, which could prejudice the stock status of the overall SMU.
Back Beaches (12.01-12.05)	41.5	42.5	Current OT: 41.5 tonnes Suggested OT range: 42.5t-51.9 tonnes Primary Indicator: Increasing Secondary Indicator: Stable Final category: Increasing Noted that FIS recruits are stable and pre-recruits have increased dramatically. Commercial mean size has increased. It was suggested that a 2 tonne increase in OT would be appropriate, given the positive status of the resource and results the harvest strategy. Another view was for a reduction of 2 tonnes, based on i) the opportunity provided by current market conditions and the likelihood of a significant undercatch and ii) the need to continue to rebuild the resource towards a MSY target. Current size limit is 119m. General agreement this could be increased to 120mm. It is believed by some that an incremental size limit increase of 2mm in each SMU this year would be appropriate.
Shipwreck Coast	29.2	29.2	Current OT: 29.2 tonnes Suggested OT range: 29.2, 30.7,33.6 tonnes

SMU	Catch		Recommendations and comments
	Target (OT + carryover) 2024/25 (t)	Target (OT + carryover) 2025/26 (t)	
(4.01-5.03)			Primary Indicator: Increasing Secondary Indicator: Stable Final category: Increasing Catches been highly variable with carry-over allowances. CPUE has increased. FIS variable. Commercial mean size has increased. Harvest Strategy suggests increase but that was based on low CPUE in 2020. General agreement to retain status quo, with a suggestion to reduce TACC by 2t Noted that low catches in 4.01 were due to weather. Suggestion to increase LML by 2mm.
Phillip Island (14.01-14.11)	34.0	34.0	Current OT: 34.0 tonnes Suggested OT range: 34.0t-42.5 tonnes Primary Indicator: Increasing Secondary Indicator: Increasing Final category: Increasing CPUE, FIS recruits and pre-recruits and commercial mean size have increased. While stocks look positive some concern regarding distribution of catches among reefcodes. It was suggested that a 2 tonne increase in OT would be appropriate, given the positive status of the resource and results the harvest strategy. Another view was for a reduction of 2 tonnes, based on i) the opportunity provided by current market conditions and the likelihood of a significant undercatch and ii) the need to continue to rebuild the resource towards a MSY target. Some general support for an increase in LML from 112mm to 115mm would be appropriate, particularly given the current size frequency data of the commercial catch.
Flinders (12.06-13.07)	20.5	20.5	Current OT: 20.5 tonnes Suggested OT range: 20.5 – 23.6 tonnes Primary Indicator: Increasing Secondary Indicator: Increasing Final category: Increasing CPUE has increased. FIS recruits are low but pre-recruits have increased. Commercial mean size has increased. Catches

SMU	Catch		Recommendations and comments
	Target (OT + carryover) 2024/25 (t)	*Target (OT + carryover) 2025/26 (t)*	
			are well below historical levels. General agreement to retain status quo, with a suggestion to reduce TACC by 2t. A suggestion that the LML be increased by 1mm.
Prom Westside (16.07-17.13)	21	21	Current OT: 21.0 tonnes Suggested OT range: 20.0 – 22.1 tonnes Primary Indicator: Stable Secondary Indicator: Stable Final category: Stable Catches have been high following the low catch in 2019. CPUE has increased but mostly because of a low value in 2019. FIS recruits and pre-recruits are low. Commercial mean size has marginally increased General agreement to retain status quo, with a suggestion to reduce TACC by 2t. Issue with two size limits, with 117mm being too high for some reefs
Kilcunda (15.01-15.05)	9.3	9.3	Current OT: 9.3 tonnes Suggested OT range: 9.3, 9.8, 10.7 tonnes Primary Indicator: Increasing Secondary Indicator: Stable Final category: Increasing Low CPUE in 2020 drives suggested increase under the harvest strategy General agreement to retain status quo.
Prom Eastside (18.03-18.09)	4.8	4.8	Current OT: 4.8 tonnes Suggested OT range: 4.6-5.0 tonnes Primary Indicator: Increasing Secondary Indicator: Stable Final category: Increasing

<table>
<tr><th rowspan="2">SMU</th><th colspan="2">Catch</th><th>Recommendations and comments</th></tr>
<tr><th>Target (OT + carryover) 2024/25 (t)</th><th>Target (OT + carryover) 2025/26 (t)</th><th></th></tr>
<tr><td></td><td></td><td></td><td>Recent low catches

General agreement to retain status quo.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Cape Liptrap (16.01-16.06)</td><td>9.4</td><td>12.1</td><td>MRAG acknowledged an issue that had been identified by industry involving previous incorrect reporting of effort at Cape Liptrap which had resulted in a reduction in TACC. As a result, 2.7t was returned during this TACC forum.

Current OT: 9.4 tonnes
Suggested OT range: 9.4, 9.9, 10.8 tonnes
Primary Indicator: Increasing
Secondary Indicator: Stable
Final category: Increasing

Catch variable but mean size has increased. CPUE increased in the last 2 years.

General agreement to retain status quo.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Cliffys (18.08)</td><td>4.7</td><td>4.7</td><td>Current OT: 4.7
Suggested OT range: 4.5,4.9, 5.4 tonnes
Primary Indicator: Increasing
Secondary Indicator: Stable
Final category: Increasing

Catch and CPUE are low. OT not caught last two years. Shell size not good in 2021.

General agreement to retain status quo.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Surf Coast (8.02-10.05)</td><td>1.7</td><td>1.7</td><td>Current OT: 1.7 tonnes
Suggested OT range: 1.7,1.8,2.0 tonnes
Primary Indicator: Increasing
Secondary Indicator: Stable
Final category: Increasing

Catches remain well below historical levels. Little information to assess the stock.</td></tr>
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SMU	*Catch*		*Recommendations and comments*
	Target (OT + carryover) 2024/25 (t)	*Target (OT + carryover) 2025/26 (t)*	
			General agreement to retain status quo.
Port Phillip Bay (11.01-11.18)	0	0	OT=0 in 2024/25. Zero catch in 2023/24. 530 kg caught YTD in 2024/25 General agreement to retain status quo.
Total	**222.9**	**228.8 (incl. 9.8t carryover)**	**VFA recommended total catch target: 219.0 tonne (plus 9.8 t carryover)**