

RECORD OF MEETING v1

Meeting #38, 14 June 2023

Swan Bay Room, VFA, Queenscliff

CHAIR: Ian Knuckey

MEETING COMMENCED: 9:30am

Present	
Ian Knuckey	Chair
Toby Jeavons	Victorian Fisheries Authority (Executive Officer)
Klaas Hartmann	Institute of Marine and Antarctic Studies (IMAS)
Genevieve Phillips	Institute of Marine and Antarctic Studies (IMAS)
David Reilly	Victorian Fisheries Authority
Ewan Flanagan	Victorian Fisheries Authority
Ross Bromley	Industry member (Eastrock)
Gary Ryan	Industry member
Alex Haberfield	Industry member
Zeb Johnston	Industry member
Mathew Harry	Industry member
Matt Wassnig	Seafood Industry Victoria
Peter Galvin	Recreational fishing representative/ VRFish
Craig Starrit	Recreational fishing representative / VRFish
Apologies	
Matt Phillips	Industry member
Wayne Dredge	Industry member
Anthony Cicone	Giant Crab Industry Member
Ben Scullin	VRFish
Robert Timmers	Observer (Scuba Divers Federation of Victoria)
Lawrence Moore	Recreational fishing representative / VRFish
Justin Price	Industry Observer
George Brocklesby	Industry Observer
Rafael Leon	Institute of Marine and Antarctic Studies (IMAS)
Caleb Gardner	Institute of Marine and Antarctic Studies (IMAS)

1. Preliminaries

1.1. Welcome

Ian Knuckey, the Chair, opened the meeting by providing an Acknowledgement of Country and welcomed all attendees to the 38th meeting of the Victorian Rock Lobster and Giant Crab Resource Assessment Group (RLRAG). Ian advised that discussion held at the RLRAG is confidential until released to public (via meeting minutes published on the VFA webpage) and that people may be asked to leave the room during discussions where a conflict of interest is identified.

Ian welcomed Ewan Flanagan as the new VFA Rock Lobster and Giant Crab Fishery Manager. All attendees provided introductions, affiliations and potential conflicts of interest. Ian confirmed apologies.

1.2. Membership update

Toby provided an overview of the membership renewal noting this process is currently overdue but will be finalised shortly. Toby confirmed that this will include adding Rob Timmers as a recreational member from Scuba Divers Federation Victoria.

A question from the room was raised as to whether it would be possible to renew memberships for 24 months instead of the usual 12 months. Toby confirmed the aim is to put in place membership for the next 24 months.

1.3. Adoption of agenda

The Chair provided an overview of the meeting and the agenda was adopted as circulated. In Wayne Dredge's absence, it was noted Gary Ryan would provide the Southern Rock Lobster Limited (SRL) update in agenda item 8.

1.4. Minutes and actions from last meeting

The minutes from the last meeting were accepted as true and accurate and the chair confirmed Ewan would take the minutes for this meeting. Ewan ran through the actions from the last meeting.

1. Klaas confirmed actions pertaining to the Giant Crab Stock Assessment report update and Pre-Recruit Index (PRI) description in the stock assessment reports had been completed.
2. David provided an update on the clicker counters proposed by the VFA to assist commercial fishers in recording key data points for each pot-lift. David provided an example of a clicker bank and noted this topic had been discussed at the recent port meetings. The key feedback received was that the clickers would need to be made out of a non-corrosive material and that it would be beneficial to include suction caps as a mounting option. David advised that the next steps would be to order new prototypes to trial with commercial operators.
3. Toby advised there were no further progressions on the comparative analysis of the summer dataset. He recommended the group hold off on pursuing this analysis any further during the current management plan review process. Klaas noted that the data provided in this comparison offers little additional benefit to the harvest strategy and that seasonal data changes are considered in the standardised Catch Per Unit Effort (CPUE) process.

4. Klaas advised there has been no progress on the research project pertaining to south-easterly weather patterns and their impact on productivity in Victoria. Klaas noted this project is contingent on the FRDC project scheduled for completion at the end of this year.
5. David provided an update on the pre- and post-moult image from observer data. He confirmed Matt Harry had sent photos of the pre-moult through and he was now just waiting on the post-moult images. The room raised the idea that fisherman require a definition of classifications in separating soft-shell and hard-shell lobsters. It was also noted that the moulting duration is dependent on environmental conditions.
6. David provided an update on the length/weight conversion process noting it is still currently based on the Western Zone. David advised there is scope to setup a review in Eastern Zone through a processing facility.

2. Management Update

2.1. Management Plan Review and Timelines

Ewan provided an update on the management plan review which now includes the Draft Harvest Strategy. Final comments from the working group are due for submission at the end of this week. The next step will be to submit the Draft Management Plan to the Minister for approval to proceed with the 60-day public consultation process. Ian recommended that all members review the VFA's suggested amendments including the Harvest Strategy section. Toby noted no comments from the recreational sector had been submitted through the working group committee. In response, recreational representatives suggested a submission had been made to the VFA. Toby confirmed all final comments should come back through the working group. The room agreed that the VFA should circulate a revised version of the Management Plan outlining all changes made in response to feedback received during the public consultation process. The Management Plan Steering Committee should then meet to discuss those changes or suggest further amendments.

2.2. Summary of Port Meetings

Ewan provided a summary of the recent port meetings that occurred during April. Ewan advised the proposed Total Allowable Commercial Catch (TACC) in the Eastern Zone was generally supported, however, there was a consensus from industry that the current fee structure was inadequate. Matt Wassnig (SIV) advised that a poll conducted by the Victorian Rock Lobster Committee amongst Eastern Zone members, following these port meetings, suggested not all licence holders supported the proposed TACC. Matt Harry advised the support had significantly improved since that poll based on the fee relief provisions provided for the upcoming season.

Ewan advised that the proposed TACC reduction of 4 tonnes in the Western Zone was met with mixed responses given the current Harvest Strategy allowed for an increase. Matt Wassnig (SIV) noted that concern from licence holders was also related to locking in a 20-year rebuild strategy without the prospect of a TACC increase. Furthermore, there were additional concerns raised in response to the focus on obtaining Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certification in the absence of detail regarding the tangible benefit it could deliver to industry. Ewan advised that the VFA is pursuing a harvest strategy focused on world's best practice fisheries management. While aligning with MSC is considered a benefit

of this strategy, this is not the core focus for the VFA. Matt Wassnig (SIV) noted the importance of providing economic analyses when considering the implications of fisheries management decisions for industry. It was discussed that costs to commercial licence holders would be minimal, however, changes to practices that accommodate certification standards, such as the bait used, was likely to have a larger effect. The MSC pre-assessment planned by SRL Ltd will provide industry with more detail to consider.

2.3. Eastern Zone Service Reduction

Ewan provided an overview of the reduction in services to the Eastern Zone during the 2023/24 season in addition to the \$50,000 fee relief package provided by the VFA. These changes include reduced observer coverage; an adjustment to compliance services; and a reduction in the IMAS Stock Assessment. It was acknowledged that this is a temporary measure while the cost recovery model review package sits with the Minister's office. The VFA could not provide a timeframe on the final decision. Toby thanked Eastern Zone members for the discussions in finalising this package. Klaas provided an overview of the reduced services noting that the strategy implemented is appropriate for a small fishery with low exploitation, as is currently the case with the Eastern Zone. Toby reiterated that winding back these services was possible due to the strong rebuilding strategy being implemented. It was queried whether this could become a long-term strategy in the Eastern Zone, however, Ian noted less data means less knowledge. Ian cautioned the room on stepping away from a formal assessment entirely and Toby reiterated this structure was currently in place for one year. Klaas noted that to provide a 5-year Management Plan Review, at least one year of comprehensive stock assessment data was required.

The room queried whether voluntary data from fisherman for fixed sites would assist. It was agreed it would help but it hasn't happened in recent years. David confirmed he will follow up with Eastern Zone fishers for voluntary observer data. Matt Wassnig (SIV) reiterated that commercial operators will require guidance and assistance in providing voluntary data in the 2023/24 fishing year.

2.4. Development of Recreational Measuring Device

David provided an update on the proposed new recreational measuring tool which is intended to replace the current plastic gauge. This tool will provide greater accuracy in recreational length data and will play a big role in the revised recreational tagging program. David confirmed the aim is to have it ready by next season. The RLrag queried whether recreational fishers will have to report weight. The VFA advised only length would be necessary and weight will be determined via a length-weight conversion formula. RLrag members also queried whether it would be acceptable for use in commercial pot sampling. Consensus was that it would be fine other than the current prototype not providing sub-legal measurements.

David also presented a prototype of the new tool and advised members that the VFA would be distributing samples for field testing shortly. Craig noted safety concerns regarding the sharp edges and the possibility of resultant damage to scuba equipment. The VFA's intention is to collate and review all feedback following the trial period.

The Chair called morning tea at 11:00.

3. Australian lobster Model

Genevieve introduced the new stock assessment model, “OzLob”, and provided an evaluation of the model’s suitability for the Victorian Rock Lobster Fishery. Genevieve provided an overview of the testing process of the new model which included reviewing how well it replicated the current stock assessment model. Data inputs were used up to the end of season 2019/20 and were then re-run to the end of 2021/22, comparing how the model estimates match the input data. Importantly, this model will be more transferable across scientific providers and assessors, comparative to the model currently used for Victorian assessment. The RLRAG queried whether all jurisdictions should be utilising the same inputs. It was noted that the same approach is important but not necessarily the same inputs.

Genevieve advised that the results from the new model followed very similar trends to the existing model. It was noted the similarity in estimated biomass trends is more important than the absolute estimates of biomass, however, the absolute results were also similar. Values are likely to be different due to mathematical improvements to the model. In reference to CPUE and length-frequency testing, the trends and estimated values were almost identical. In testing the egg production estimates the actual values differed but the trends matched the current model. Genevieve explained that the actual value difference is due to the new model suggesting a greater virgin stock of eggs which could be either an over estimation in this model or an under estimation in the current model. For this reason, trend comparison is the most important factor. In reviewing these results, it was advised the testing was not to determine accurate actual values but to see if this model works and is appropriate for Victoria. The room queried whether Tasmania had produced similar results. Klaas clarified the Tasmanian testing was not at a point to provide that comparison.

Genevieve summarised that the OzLob model is appropriate for use in the Victorian Southern Rock Lobster Fishery. This model closely replicates the current model but is easier and quicker to run scenarios; has more flexibility and adaptability over time; has predictive capabilities; and has a reproduceable workflow. Based on these factors, IMAS recommended using this model concurrently with the existing model next season, followed by a shift to the new model in 2025/26 (2024/25 stock assessment), should it perform adequately.

Based on this information, the RLRAG agreed to moving on from investigating the MEZO model and agreed the OzLob model provided an improved approach to both the MEZO and current models. Genevieve took on notice several questions from the room and will provide answers to these at the next RLRAG. A query was raised as to whether the more efficient method could yield benefit regarding reduced cost, however, it was noted this is unlikely. Genevieve will now look to complete a comparison with Tasmanian results and bring different model scenarios to the next RLRAG. Klaas also noted taking on this new model will not affect the TACC and standardised catch rate set in the current harvest strategy.

4. Harvest Strategy Development

4.1. Drafting of Harvest Strategy

Toby provided an overview of the Draft Harvest Strategy process noting there had been minimal feedback received and the draft was now included into the Draft Management Plan. Toby thanked the Chair, Eastrock and SIV for their feedback. Toby also acknowledged there was an issue with the submission provided by VRFISH and noted that this would be

considered. Toby provided a summary of key indicators for each zone including the Limit Reference Point, PRI Threshold and Target Reference Point. Toby provided a review on rebuilding timeframes in each zone noting the current levels are well below the target reference points in each zone. Ian commented that these figures are based on a 5-year management plan despite the 20-year timeframe adopted in the rebuilding strategy. However, it was advised it wouldn't be possible to meet the rebuilding strategy within that 5-year timeframe. The room discussed the possibility of meeting the TACC rebuild targets earlier than anticipated. The general consensus was to stick to the rebuild strategy and focus on the improved efficiencies derived from an increased biomass. Matt Wassnig noted that the stakeholder perception of the strategy may improve if it is recognised that TACCs may increase earlier if the 20-year target is ahead of schedule.

Toby also reviewed the recreational control harvest rules and advised that this will be the first time that recreational catch will be formally factored into the planning for this fishery. It was noted that in the Eastern Zone, when the TACC reaches 32 tonnes the Harvest Strategy allows for a review of the Total Allowable Recreational Catch (TARC) cap. A concern was raised regarding the TARC table still following the 20-year trajectory while the revised commercial strategy is now based on a 10-year plan. Toby clarified that the 20-year plan highlights the maximum possible amount under this strategy and that the commercial sector, through the Management Plan Steering Committee, had supported a more conservative 10-year rebuilding plan in the Eastern Zone. Matt Wassnig (SIV) requested confirmation that the TARC would only be reviewed at 32 tonnes if the TACC for the remainder of the harvest plan was not compromised. Toby confirmed, as per the wording in the draft Harvest Strategy, that the recreational allocation in the Eastern Zone would be reviewed at this catch level to determine if an increase to the recreational allocation can be made without impacting the rebuilding trajectory. The room queried when the hard-cap TARC will be introduced to which Toby noted it would follow 2-years of data, as per the Harvest Strategy.

The chair thanked everyone for their input on this important step in the fishery and the meeting broke for lunch at 13:15.

5. Puerulus Monitoring Program Review

David provided an update and overview of the puerulus monitoring program. He noted the program currently only operates in Apollo Bay harbour and uses a combination of crevice collectors and basket collectors. David provided a comparison of the two noting the latter is a community-run project and therefore has the added benefits of reduced costs and community engagement. David advised the group of the VFA's intention to phase out the crevice collector method and asked whether an appetite exists to implement a calibration period where both collector types are used, given it will likely cost \$30,000 for 12 months. It was noted that the puerulus count isn't an input into the stock assessment model and doesn't necessarily translate into fishery recruitment. The room had mixed opinions and the idea was put forth to run a voluntary commercial fisher deployment and retrieval program. It was also put forth that basket collectors could be deployed alongside the South Australian crevice collectors to provide a comparison. In summary, the room didn't support progressing with the locally based calibration but would consider utilising the South Australian program if possible. David and Klaas will coordinate future discussions and report back at the next RLRAG.

6. Giant Crab Strategy Development

6.1. Recap on updates to GC Harvest Strategy

Klaas provided a summary of the Giant Crab Harvest Strategy including the corrected CPUE data over the last 10 years. Klaas also discussed setting reference points, providing three potential periods on which to base this analysis. These included the initial peak period; the first rebuilding period; and the contemporary and relatively stable fishing period. The initial period was utilised in this review. In considering this data, Klaas noted the sharp CPUE jumps in the figures are not consistent with a slow-growing species like giant crab, indicating that the CPUE was being influenced by factors other than stock abundance. Klaas also provided an overview of a 4-tier system for setting TACCs based on the availability of data, the stock assessment analysis provisions and the costs to the fishery.

Klaas provided an update of the Status of Australian Fish Stocks (SAFS) 2023 and discussed the shifts in assumptions about the spatial aspects of biological stocks. It was noted the future strategy of the fishery, at the current time, is hindered by the recent compliance issues and lack of data impacting on CPUE. The verified data is considered important in designing the new harvest strategy. Klaas noted the FRDC project will be important in feeding absolute data into future stock assessments. Klaas noted that in considering the tiered strategy previously discussed, the fishery would currently be at level 2 due to the project's verifiable data.

The chair recommended a sub-committee be created for discussion specifically on the Giant Crab Harvest Strategy. The room agreed the invitation should be open to all Giant Crab licence holders.

7. Stock Assessment Continual Review

7.1. Considering a vessel efficiency factor

Klaas provided an overview of utilising a vessel efficiency factor in CPUE standardisation. He noted that between 1978/79 and 2021/22, in the Western Zone, there was an increased nominal CPUE of approximately 33%. Klaas acknowledged that were several factors that could account for increased efficiencies and noted it was difficult to calculate which factors were specifically responsible. This is potentially more difficult in the Eastern Zone where there are fewer vessels. Klaas advised that the vessel efficiency factor could be improved by collecting baseline data for current fishing boats within each zone.

7.2. Strategic plan for tag recapture program

Klaas provided an overview of the draft proposal noting two key aspects: the assessment of the tagging program in Victoria and Tasmania; and the development of methods to increase the proportion of captured tags.

Industry members advised that immediate feedback after reporting would be a positive inclusion and that a commercial reporting app would be beneficial. The room agreed that the most appropriate method of reporting would be to photograph the tag and provide basic details of that lobster. The room also agreed fishers were more likely to complete tag returns than processors. Fishers are also more likely to do this if an incentive exists, such as a dollar amount paid per tag reported. Klaas asked whether tagging legal-size lobsters would be likely. In response industry members noted that at current catch rates fishers

weren't throwing back any legal catch. A concern was further raised regarding the impact of tags, and the resultant holes/markings, on the beach price.

8. Other Business

8.1. SRL Update

Gary reminded the group that the next meeting is coming up on the 25th of July in Adelaide as part of the Trans-Tasman Conference.

8.2. Giant Crab e-monitoring trial update

David provided an overview of the Giant Crab e-monitoring trial program and confirmed trials using 3D camera equipment were currently underway. He confirmed the equipment is expected to be rolled out for testing in Victorian, South Australia and Western Australia later this year.

8.3. Trial of equipment

There was no uptake from industry members to trial equipment to test environmental water conditions, such as water temperature and salinity levels.

The Chair called the meeting closed 3:50pm.

Schedule 1: Actions from meeting 38

Action	Responsibility	Timing
14 June Actions		
1. Ewan to send out invites for next RLRAG meetings (Likely to be held in September 2023).	Ewan	July
2. Ewan to Circulate the workplan with the draft minutes.	Ewan	July
3. Create standing item to review the previous year at first RLRAG meeting.	Ewan	February 2024
4. Genevieve to attend the next RLRAG to present ARL development. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review different input values Bring different scenarios to next RLRAG Provide answers to questions regarding deviation from current model (egg production / biomass estimates) Provide quantitative comparison of performance compared to existing model Provide comparison with Tas. Preliminary results 	Genevieve	September
5. Genevieve to provide optimal OzLob model alongside next year's stock assessment. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review different input parameters / sensitivity analyses 	Genevieve	February 2024
6. David to explore developing and providing a practical 'clicker counter' that assists fishers to manage tallies under the various data collection requirements. David to purchase prototypes for port meetings.	David	September
7. David to raise future enhancement to Vic-eCatch to include functionality to report under voluntary pot program.	David	Ongoing (Scheduled for 28 November)
8. David to discuss setting up length/weight conversion with processors.	David	September
9. David to follow up with Eastern Zone fisherman regarding voluntary observer data.	David	September
10. Puerulus Program <ul style="list-style-type: none"> VFA/IMAS to consider calibration options for puerulus collection methods David to review extending program to other sites 	David/Klaas	September
11. Klaas to design plan for vessel data collection in relation to vessel efficiency and review at the next RAG.	Klaas	September