

RECORD OF MEETING

Meeting 43, 6 December 2024

VFA, Queenscliff & Online

CHAIR: Ian Knuckey

MEETING COMMENCED: 10:00 am

Present	
Ian Knuckey	Chair
Ewan Flanagan	Victorian Fisheries Authority / Executive Officer
David Reilly	Victorian Fisheries Authority member
Klaas Hartmann	Institute of Marine and Antarctic Studies (IMAS) member
Matthew Wassnig	Seafood Industry Victoria member
Ross Bromley	Industry member (EZ)
Wayne Dredge	Industry member (EZ)
Ben Scullin	VRFish member
Lawrence Moore	Recreational fishing representative / VRFish member
Robert Timmers	Scuba Divers Federation Victoria member
Craig Starrit	Recreational fishing representative observer
Steven Beever	Victorian Fisheries Authority observer
Online	
Zeb Johnston	Industry member (WZ)
Gary Ryan	Industry member (WZ)
Peter Galvin	Recreational fishing representative/ VRFish member
Apologies	
Alex Haberfield	Industry member (WZ)
Naomi Barry	Coastal Indigenous Member
Anthony Ciconte	Giant Crab Fishery industry member
George Brocklesby	Industry observer
Karlie McDonald	IMAS invited participant
Lynn Casement	Industry observer

1. Preliminaries

1.1. Welcome

Ian Knuckey, the Chair, opened the meeting with an Acknowledgement of Country and welcomed all attendees to the 43rd 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 Victorian Fisheries Authority (VFA) webpage. People may be asked to leave the room during discussions where a conflict of interest is identified.

The following potential conflicts of interest were declared:

- i. Ross Bromley declared his position with Atlantis Advisory as acting for Southern Rocklobster Limited with the Marne Stewardship Council (MSC).
- ii. Ian Knuckey declared that he has been contracted by Seafood Industry Victoria (SIV) and VRFISH to complete a seismic testing project relating to southern rock lobster.

1.2. Adoption of agenda

Ian provided an overview of the meeting and called for additions to the agenda. The agenda was adopted as circulated.

1.3. Minutes and actions from last meeting

The minutes from the last meeting had been circulated and revised out of session after the last meeting. Prior to accepting this document as a true and accurate record, a concern was raised regarding the summary of Agenda Item 5: Rock Lobster Management Plan. Some members believed the record failed to capture that members did not endorse the plan based on a key change to the draft version submitted by the VFA to the Minister for approval. While members were not formally asked for endorsement at the meeting, it was agreed that the majority expressed significant concerns regarding the changes, and the lack of consultation on these changes, prior to submission to the Minister. In summary, the RLRAG agreed that a point be added to the minutes for meeting 42 reflecting this discussion. The Chair confirmed Steven Beever (VFA) would take the minutes for this meeting.

Key actions from the previous meeting were discussed as follows:

- i. Action Items 2 and 3: Ewan confirmed the VFA had investigated a data sharing agreement for Eastern Zone fishers and advised that this could be formally requested at any time.
- ii. Action 4: Ian confirmed a letter of thanks will be sent to Matt Harry in the coming weeks.
- iii. Action 5: Ewan confirmed that a recommendation to amend the recreational reporting requirements had been submitted to the VFA for consideration and was not supported.
- iv. Action 6: Ewan advised that a compliance representative was unavailable to attend this meeting and will be invited to the next meeting.
- v. Action 7: Ian advised that development of a simple reporting app to capture data for the commercial monitoring program is possible but will likely require further consideration regarding funding. Ewan confirmed that the VFA has a commitment

to the current eCatch application. As such, additional apps will require external funding sources. A request was made for the VFA to investigate the costs to include voluntary data collection in eCatch.

- vi. Action 8: Klaas advised that, due to staffing changes at IMAS, developments in the OzLob model will be presented at the next RLRAG meeting.

Action: VFA to seek costings to include voluntary data collection in eCatch.

2. Management Update

2.1. Management Plan Update

Ewan Flanagan provided an update on the new Management Plan, declared by the Minister on 27 October 2024. The final version is consistent with the version presented at the last RLRAG meeting. It will be released publicly in the coming weeks including being sent to key stakeholder groups and uploaded to the VFA website along with the results of the consultation process. A request was made that the letters to stakeholders, specifically commercial licence holders, outline the key changes to the final plan and an explanation as to why these changes occurred.

3. Recreational Reporting Program

Ewan provided a summary of the data collected during the 2023/24 season, outlined in Table 1. The full season results are outlined in the *Victorian Recreational Rock Lobster Reporting Program Summary Report 2024*.

Table 1: 2023/24 Recreational Reporting Program Summary

	Total	East	West
Total Registered Users	2,734		
Total RL Caught	1,951	833	1,118
Total Male	1,405	541	864
Total Female	546	292	254
Average Length (cm)	14.21	14.38	14.08
Total Weight (kg)	3,020	1,336	1,684

Noting these results remain considerably lower than the initial seasons of the program, some RLRAG members commented that recreational rock lobster diving activity had reduced in this period due to the availability of rock lobster; and that fishers had chosen to target other species over rock lobster. Other members commented that there was likely a large amount of underreporting given the reduction directly correlated with a move from physical tagging to the digital reporting platform. Members reiterated that amending the requirement to report catch at the place of landing, in place of the current 7-day reporting requirement, would likely improve underreporting and subsequently improve the accuracy of data used to inform management decisions. In addition, some members supported the introduction of a pre-reporting requirement for recreational fishers. Further to Action Item 5, it was again advised that any changes to reporting requirements were not supported by the VFA executive team at this time.

The Chair summarised that a combination of reasons could explain why reported catch under this program has reduced, however, it is difficult to determine based on the current data. Most RLRAG members agreed that as recreational catch impacts the overall mortality in the fishery and is included in each zone's rebuilding trajectory, improvements in the accuracy of the reporting program are needed. A member suggested that the VFA work closely with VRFish to determine how communications to recreational fishers can be improved.

Action: VFA to meet with Ben Scullin (VRFish) to consider improvements to communications with recreational rock lobster fishers in relation to the recreational reporting program.

Members further requested that compliance statistics be presented to the RLRAG regarding inspections and enforcement outcomes associated with the rock lobster fishery. Ewan advised that attendance from a member of the compliance team at the RLRAG is dependent on availability but agreed that compliance statistics can be requested.

Action: Ewan to request a compliance representative present, or provide for presentation, compliance statistics relating to the rock lobster fishery at the next meeting.

4. Monitoring Program Update

4.1. Monitoring Program Results

David Reilly presented data from the monitoring program relating to the 2023/24 season, noting that revisions to the program will be discussed with Eastern Zone fishers shortly. A member raised concerns regarding the delay in the VFA meeting with commercial fishers in the Eastern Zone to discuss revised monitoring program targets and guidance on achieving these targets. David advised that other items were prioritised given the lack of fishing activity that occurred during this period and that meetings were booked in with fishers over the following week.

In the Eastern Zone, a total of 12 onboard observer days were recorded, all of which were based in the Queenscliff region. All of the zone's three fixed sites were surveyed over 16 days and a total of 642 lobsters were measured across the program for the Eastern Zone.

In the Western Zone, the 15 days of observer coverage was predominantly completed in the Warrnambool region. Six of the zone's eight fixed sites were surveyed across 24 days. While the number of lobster recorded across the monitoring program was high, totalling 5,734 lobsters, the catch wasn't evenly spread across the zone.

4.2. Recreational Rock Lobster Ruler Trial

David provided an overview of the rock lobster ruler trial, noting that expressions of interest were sent to 420 recreational fishers who reported catch during the 2023/24 season. Of these, 200 had responded and feedback to date was positive. This was further supported by some members in the room who had trialled the tool. The VFA will send a questionnaire to those trialling the tool, likely in March, requesting formal feedback. In addition, a length-to-weight conversion application had now been added to the VFA website as part of a multi-species estimator. This conversion is based on the length-to-weight formulas used in the reporting program.

4.3. Puerulus Monitoring Program

David provided a summary of the puerulus monitoring program, noting the community led project in Apollo Bay continues to be a success. Consistent with previous seasons, the program experienced a spike in puerulus recorded during August. A total of 18 puerulus were recorded, at a rate of approximately 1.5 puerulus per collector. The program recorded a peak last year of approximately 4.5 puerulus per collector. It was noted that it will take approximately four years for these puerulus to enter the fishery and there is no direct correlation between high puerulus counts and high recruitment.

5. Rock Lobster Stock Assessment Preliminary Results

5.1. Rock Lobster Western Zone Stock Assessment Results

Klaas Hartmann presented the stock assessment results for the Western Zone. Effort continues to trend downwards whilst catch has remained relatively consistent in recent seasons. Nominal catch per unit effort (CPUE) has continued to increase while standardised CPUE remained consistent this season at 0.78. The difference between the nominal and standardised CPUE reflects improvements in efficiencies across the fishery. On a regional basis:

- i. Portland recorded a decrease in effort and a 17-tonne reduction in catch comparative to the previous season. The nominal CPUE increased while the standardised CPUE decreased slightly.
- ii. Warrnambool recorded an increase in catch and effort; and a significant increase in nominal CPUE comparative to a slight increase in the standardised CPUE. It was suggested this may be due to less fishing during winters months.
- iii. Apollo Bay recorded a slight decrease in both catch and effort. Nominal and standardised CPUE increased slightly, comparative to last season.

Industry members commented that these results are consistent with their observations.

The total number of vessels in the Western Zone fleet continues to fall, reaching a record low of 30 vessels in 2023/24. It was noted that this trend is likely due to improvements in vessel efficiencies but would also be impacted by the difficulties in attracting deckhands. As expected with this trend, the catch per vessel continues to increase.

The length frequency data results continue to spread more broadly across carapace lengths suggesting a greater proportion of legal sized lobster are being left in the water. Overall, the pre-recruit index (PRI) has remained fairly constant over the last four years and above the threshold of 1.67. The 2023/24 season recorded a PRI of 1.82.

Despite a decrease in biomass over the last four years, it is likely this the result of an assumed precautionary estimate. As such, the biomass estimate is considered most reliable up to three years before this assessment. This result does not directly affect the harvest strategy as it is reliant on catch rates and not a biomass. It was noted that the Australian Lobster Model, currently under development, may improve this reporting parameter.

Egg production was recorded at 22.4% of the unfished level. It has reduced slightly over the last couple of seasons but remains above the limit reference point. There was a slight increase in the recruitment to lobsters 60mm or greater, but a decline in the recruitment to legal size. It was further advised that female sexual maturity occurs at a 90mm carapace

length in the Western Zone and 112mm in the Eastern Zone.

Applying the Harvest Strategy, the zone met Harvest Control Rule Part 1 as it was above the limit reference point for egg production. Under Control Rule Part 2, the CPUE remained in the same band and the PRI was above the threshold of 1.67 undersize per pot lift. As such, it is recommended that the zone remains within the same CPUE band of 0.75 to <0.80, resulting in a total allowable commercial catch (TACC) of 245 tonnes. Despite declines in certain results, Klaas confirmed the Western Zone remains on its rebuilding trajectory.

Action: Katie Creswell to present a summary of the final report for the larval dispersal project at one of the next two RLRAGs.

5.2. Rock Lobster Eastern Zone Stock Assessment Results

Klaas presented the stock assessment results for the Eastern Zone, noting that catch had increased slightly this season to 18 tonnes. Effort across the zone continued to decline to a total of 40,000 pot-lifts. Both the nominal and standardised CPUE increased significantly, the latter rising from 0.48 to 0.60 kg/pot-lift. On a regional basis:

- i. Queenscliff continues to record the largest amount of catch and effort, accounting for 14.7 tonnes of catch. Nominal and standardised CPUE increased consistent with the total zone results.
- ii. San Remo accounted for 3.3 tonnes and continued to record reduced effort. Nominal and standardised CPUE experienced similar increases to that of Queenscliff. An industry member noted that fishing has been strong in the early stages of the current season including higher levels of pre-recruits.
- iii. Lakes Entrance provided very little data, accounting for only 139kg of catch.

Vessels to report catch reached a record low of 11 and, subsequently, catch per vessel and days fished per vessel increased. Due to the low numbers, average catch per vessel is heavily influenced if one fisher's average changes.

The length frequency data presented concerning results for undersize lobsters. The PRI reached a record low of 0.02 undersize per pot-lift and was below the threshold reference point for a second consecutive season. Egg production was not provided this season as a model-run stock assessment was not completed. However, it is likely that egg production is above the limit reference point based on it being well above during the last model-run assessment in 2021/22; and that the CPUE proxy of 0.25 kg/pot-lift has been met.

Applying the harvest strategy, the zone successfully meets the harvest control rule part 1, relating to egg production. Under part 2, while the CPUE has increased from 0.49 to 0.60, the PRI has remained below the trigger reference point. As such, the zone remains in the same CPUE band of 0.45-<0.50 and maintains the same TACC of 21 tonnes. The harvest strategy also requires a review of the harvest control due to the PRI sitting below the threshold for two consecutive seasons. The required review is deliberately vague to allow flexibility in the approach applied.

While members agreed the data was concerning, the zone has employed a very conservative rebuilding strategy. While the higher number of legal-sized lobsters should continue to support egg production, recruitment remains the primary concern. As the levels of fishing are already very low, members agreed that this is likely due to environmental factors external to the fishery. For this reason, it was noted that changing the minimum legal length is unlikely to have an impact. In addition, very little data has been recorded

providing some uncertainties in the results.

In summary, members agreed that the fishery should maintain the current protocols and reconsider the approach after the current season.

Action: David to review logbook undersize data.

6. Giant Crab Stock Assessment Results

6.1. Stock Assessment Results

Klaas provided a summary of the Giant Crab Fishery stock assessment results. The small number of operators and subsequent level of fishery-dependent data continue to pose challenges in assessing this fishery. During 2023/24, total catch was slightly less than previous seasons but was still close to the TACC. CPUE has fallen following consecutive years of increases. Industry advice suggests that this likely due to an increase in legal-sized discards caused by reduced market demand for larger crabs. High grading practices that result in legal discards are not accounted for in the CPUE which only considers retained catch.

6.2. Application of Harvest Strategy

The current harvest strategy does not allow for TACC increases, only decreases based on the CPUE relative to the limit reference point (0.52kg/pot-lift day) and trigger reference point (0.42 kg/pot-lift day). The 2023/24 CPUE of 0.66 kg/pot-lift remains above these points and, as such, TACC reductions are not required.

7. Draft Giant Crab Harvest Strategy

Klaas presented an overview of the draft Giant Crab Harvest Strategy, noting the following key changes to the draft presented at the previous RLRAG meeting:

- i. CPUE will be reviewed based on a three-year running mean. This aims to provide improved stability in the TACC setting process as it reduces the rate of reaction to CPUE fluctuations.
- ii. The reference period selected reflects the timeseries following the introduction of the legal minimum length but prior to the period in which effort data is considered unreliable.
- iii. The limit reference point selected is the lowest CPUE point during the reference period of 0.435 kg/24-hour pot-lift (based on the three-year running mean). If the mean CPUE falls below this point, the TACC is reduced by 50-100%.
- iv. The threshold reference point is 1.5 times the limit reference point, of 0.653 kg/24-hour pot-lift. If the mean CPUE falls below this point, the TACC is reduced by up to 50%.
- v. The target reference point factors in economic considerations and therefore requires greater industry input. Industry requested that this be set at 1.0 kg/24-hour pot-lift which is considered reasonable for a long-lived species such as Giant Crab.

Applying the draft harvest strategy to the 2023/24 season data, the three-year average

CPUE would be just below the target reference point. Without the three-year average, it was noted the fishery would have been above the target reference point last year, and eligible for a TACC increase, but be back on the threshold reference point this year, possibly resulting in a TACC reduction.

Based on industry's comments regarding high-grading practices, the CPUE data was also reassessed to consider legal discards. These results suggested that the CPUE would have declined less than the unadjusted results suggested.

Ewan provided an explanation on the starting TACC noting that industry had requested it return to the 10.5 tonne TACC set prior to the issues surrounding effort. The VFA did not consider this appropriate given that the corrected CPUE would have fallen below the threshold reference point under the draft harvest strategy, thereby warranting a cut of up to 50%. Despite this, the VFA noted improvements in the CPUE in recent seasons and agreed to starting the TACC at 8.5 tonnes. Members noted that there was confusion regarding the TACC cap of 10.5 tonnes in Tier 1 of the strategy, and the starting TACC of 8.5 tonnes, given TACC increases couldn't occur under Tier 1. It was clarified that this cap would only apply in the event that the fishery moved back to Tier 1 from Tier 2. Members requested that this be clarified in the strategy's wording.

In summary, members agreed that the strategy seemed appropriate but required additional time to provide feedback.

Action: Amend the Giant Crab Harvest Strategy to provide an explanation outlining the difference between the cap of 10.5 tonnes in Tier 1, and the starting TACC.

Action: RLRAG members to submit feedback on the draft harvest strategy by a date set by the RLRAG Executive Officer.

8. Vessel Efficiency Discussion

David provided an overview of the vessel survey data collected in Victoria during the 1993/94 season. The data collected provided an understanding of vessel constructions and onboard equipment collected from 75% of rock lobster fishers at that time. The Victorian stock assessment was found to be sensitive to increases in effort of between 1.5% and 3%.

Members were asked to comment on whether they considered ongoing vessel efficiency factors to be a research priority and, if so, the types of data that should be collected. A member noted that the rate of vessel efficiency gains was slowing and may have less of an impact in the future.

In summary, members agreed that it was worthwhile to send a simple survey to fishers to collect the data, however, the RLRAG does not consider this research to be a high priority.

Action: VFA to create vessel survey in collaboration with the Chair.

9. Other Business

9.1. Southern Rocklobster Limited Update

Wayne Dredge provided an update on behalf of Southern Rocklobster Limited (SRL). While the Chinese economy is likely to reopen soon, SRL does not expect the demand to be as

strong as it was before the COVID-19 pandemic. Other markets, such as the Vietnamese lobster market, are now supplying significant quantities of lobster to China.

A current FRDC project is completing a desktop study to review the level of risk that rock lobster pots act as a vector of transmission for the abalone viral ganglioneuritis (AVG). This project has completed its first milestone: Draft one of the literature review.

The Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certification pre-assessment process is now complete and a gap analysis has been developed for each jurisdiction. A member noted that Victorian rock lobster fishery data relating to bycatch and threatened and endangered species interactions, unavailable for public release, was important to demonstrate the fishery has a low impact in these areas. Further to action items 2 and 3, the VFA confirmed that a data sharing agreement can be presented to fishers requesting the release of confidential data. It was further noted that the MSC standards change in June 2026 and are expected to require higher standards. As such, if a full MSC certification application is supported by stakeholders, it is beneficial for the fishery to complete its application prior to the introduction of the new standards. It was further noted SRL will consider opportunities to rectify research and data gaps identified in the pre-assessment.

9.2. Seafood Industry Victoria Update

Matt Wassnig provided an overview of SIV's recent priorities in relation to the Victorian Rock Lobster Fishery, as summarised below:

- i. A study, funded through SRL, is progressing to assess the potential impacts of seismic surveys in shallow water. This is identified as a research gap and is pertinent to a current seismic survey proposal.
- ii. Further to the 12 wind farm feasibility licences granted in Eastern Victoria, a joint engagement group (OG12) has been established to improve and simplify stakeholder engagement. SIV has met with the group and conveyed industry concerns regarding potential impacts of offshore wind infrastructure to RL stocks and access to productive fishing grounds
- iii. The draft south-east Marine Park Management Plan did not include any overlap between changes to management plan zoning and Victorian commercial fishing activity in the last seven years.
- iv. A working group is currently underway to consider the VFA's proposal to change the way levies are applied to commercial fisheries, moving from the current cost recovery model to a Gross Value of Production (GVP)-based model. A GVP model potentially offers significant savings to some fisheries while greatly increasing the costs applied to others. This variation applies within the Rock Lobster Fishery, under which the Eastern Zone licence holders are likely to find the model more cost effective while Western Zone licence holders are likely to find a GVP model increases licencing costs. In considering a GVP model, Matt noted that it is important to consider that businesses have been structured based on the costs under the current cost recovery model. Changing to a GVP model could have significant impacts on the economic viability of certain fisheries and the businesses that operate within them
- v. The Trans-Tasman Rock Lobster conference has been confirmed in Victoria for August next year and SIV expects to increase communications regarding the event early in the new year.

The Chair called the meeting closed at 15:30.

Schedule 1: Summary of meeting actions

Action	Responsibility	Timing
1. Ewan to Circulate the draft minutes.	Ewan	December
2. VFA to seek costings to include voluntary data collection in eCatch.	David	February / March
3. VFA to meet with Ben Scullin (VRFish) to consider improvements to communications with recreational rock lobster fishers.	Ewan	January / February
4. Ewan to request a compliance representative present, or provide for presentation, compliance statistics at the next meeting.	Ewan	Next meeting
5. Katie Creswell to present a summary of the final report for the larval dispersal project at one the next two RLRAGs.	Klaas	February or June RLRAG
6. VFA to review logbook undersize data.	David	February / March
7. Amend Giant Crab Harvest Strategy to provide explanation outlining the difference between the cap of 10.5 tonnes in Tier 1, and the starting TACC.	Klaas	January / February
8. RLRAG members to submit feedback on the draft harvest strategy by a date set by the RLRAG Executive Officer.	Ewan / all	December
9. VFA to create a vessel survey in collaboration with the Chair.	David / Ian	February / March