

ROCK LOBSTER AND GIANT CRAB RESOURCE ASSESSMENT GROUP 2026/27 TACC RECOMMENDATION

The Rock Lobster and Giant Crab Resource Assessment Group (RLRAG) met on 27 February 2026 to review the 2024/25 Rock Lobster Fishery Stock Assessment Report. Based on the results of this assessment and application to the Harvest Strategy, the RLRAG provides the Victorian Fisheries Authority (VFA) with the following recommendations on setting the 2026/27 total allowable commercial catch (TACC).

ROCK LOBSTER – WESTERN ZONE

Assessment summary

The TACC for the Western Zone in 2024/25 was 245 tonnes, set under the Harvest Strategy.

Overall, the stock indicators in the Western Zone continue to show improvement. The standardised catch per unit effort (CPUE) increased from 0.78 in 2023/24, to 0.81 kg per pot-lift in 2024/25. The pre-recruit index (PRI) indicates the abundance of undersize lobsters and reached a record low in 2015/16. Despite increasing slowly, it remained close to this record low over the subsequent three years. In the last five years the PRI has been consistently above the threshold level. It was recorded at 2.11 undersize per pot-lift in 2024/25, which is well above the 1.67 undersize per pot-lift threshold level.

Egg production has gradually increased since the late 2000s, reaching 25.0% in 2024/25 which is well above the 20% limit reference point. A new alternative method used for calculating egg production confirms that egg production is above the 20% reference point with near certainty.

Biomass had been increasing slowly from a recent low in 2008/09. It reached 944 tonnes in 2024/25 which is the highest recorded level since 1986/87.

Application of the Harvest strategy

Decision Rule	2024/25 Stock Indicator Level	Outcome
Part 1: Egg Production		
Is the egg production above the limit reference point?	The 2024/25 egg production level is estimated at 25.0% of unfished levels.	Decision rule has been met. Go to Part 2
Part 2: TACC Determination		
a. Is standardised CPUE in a higher band than the previous season?	CPUE increased from 0.78kg/pot-lift in 2023/24 to 0.81kg/pot-lift in 2024/25. This is a higher CPUE band of 0.80-0.85.	CPUE is in a higher band.
b. Is the 2024/25 PRI at or above the threshold level?	The combined PRI was 1.82 in 2024/25. This was a slight reduction from the previous three years but remains above the threshold level.	The combined PRI is above the threshold level.
Outcome		Increase CPUE Band
RESULT		
The Western Zone moves from the 0.75-<0.80 CPUE band to the 0.80-<0.85 CPUE band. This results in a shift to Step 3 and gives a TACC of 245t in 2026/27.		

Recommendation

The RLRAG acknowledges that the application of the Harvest Strategy results in the zone progressing to the next CPUE band (0.80-0.95). This corresponds to a TACC of 245 tonnes, consistent with the current setting.

The RLRAG unanimously endorses continuing to set the TACC at 245 tonnes, as per the rules defined in Harvest Strategy and rebuilding plan. This recommendation ensures the zone remains in line with meeting the management goals of rebuilding the stock.

ROCK LOBSTER – EASTERN ZONE

Assessment summary

In 2023/24 the Eastern Zone TACC was reduced to 21 tonnes following consideration of the extended history of stock issues in the zone and additional consideration to align with the strategic direction of the new harvest strategy. This level was retained in 2024/25.

Both standardised and nominal CPUE have increased significantly in the last two years. Standardised CPUE, which provides a better indicator for stock status, has been increasing, rising from the recent low of from 0.35 kg/pot-lift in 2019/20 to 0.56kg/pot-lift in 2024/25. This positive sign must be treated with some caution as the reduced size of the fishery means there is less data for calculating the CPUE time series and the reliability of this is reduced. Nominal CPUE in 2024/25 was 0.52kg/pot-lift.

The pre-recruit index (PRI) reached a low of 0.08 undersize / pot-lift in 2018/19. In the following three years substantial increases were observed to a level exceeding the PRI threshold. However, in 2022/23 PRI fell to 0.09 undersize / pot-lift and has remained well below the PRI threshold since that time (0.03 undersize / pot-lift in 2024/25).

Egg production fell from a recent high of 27.2% in 2013/14 to 22.9% in 2021/22. In an effort to provide financial relief to the Eastern Zone Fishery, a full stock assessment process was not completed this year. However, a weight of evidence approach outlined here and evaluation against a CPUE based proxy indicates that it is highly likely to remain above the 20% limit reference point.

Application of the Harvest Strategy

Decision Rule	2024/25 Stock Indicator Level	Outcome
Part 1: Egg Production		
Is the egg production above the limit reference point?	The 2024/25 egg production level is likely to be above the 20% level based on the CPUE proxy and weight of evidence argument.	Decision rule has been met. Go to Part 2
Part 2: TACC Determination		
a. Is standardised CPUE in a higher band than the previous season?	CPUE moved from 0.57kg/pot-lift in 2023/24 to 0.56kg/pot-lift in 2024/25. This corresponds to the 0.55 -< 0.60 band	The CPUE band has remained the same.
b. Is the PRI at or above the threshold level?	The combined PRI was 0.03 in 2024/25. This is well below the threshold level.	The PRI is below the threshold level.
Outcome		TACC remains at the same level
RESULT		
The Eastern Zone remains in the same CPUE band (0.45-<0.50) with a TACC of 21t. A review of the harvest control rule is required due to the PRI result.		

Recommendation

The RLRAG noted that the second consecutive year of recording a high standardised CPUE is a positive sign for the fishery. Despite this, it recognised that the limited data available in the Eastern Zone Rock Lobster Fishery requires this figure to be considered with caution.

The RLRAG noted significant concern regarding the third consecutive year of very low PRI, well below the PRI threshold. It acknowledged that the harvest strategy requires a review of the harvest controls rules in the event that the PRI is below the PRI threshold of 0.25 undersize per pot-lift for two or more consecutive seasons. It further noted that the review conducted in 2025 regarding low PRI in the zone recommended a further review mid-2026.

Despite concerns, the RLRAG further noted that the zone is currently managed under a very conservative rebuilding strategy facilitated by low TACCs.

In considering the above, the RLRAG recommends the TACC remains in the same CPUE band and at 21 tonnes. The RLRAG further endorses a second review of the harvest control rules, triggered by the consecutively low PRI, to occur mid-2026. The RLRAG will consider data from the 2025/26 season in that review.