

RECORD OF MEETING

Meeting 46, 26 February 2026

VFA, Queenscliff

CHAIR: Ian Knuckey

MEETING COMMENCED: 10:00 am

Present	
Ian Knuckey	Independent Chair
Ewan Flanagan	Victorian Fisheries Authority (VFA) member / Executive Officer
David Reilly	VFA scientific member
Klaas Hartmann	Institute of Marine and Antarctic Studies (IMAS) member
Matthew Wassnig	Seafood Industry Victoria member
Gary Ryan	Industry member (WZ)
Ross Bromley	Industry member (EZ)
Lawrence Moore	Recreational fishing representative / VRFish member
Craig Starrit	Recreational fishing representative observer
Steven Beaver	VFA observer and minute taker
Sophie Fletcher	Invited participant / presenter
Julian Tagell	Observer (Recreational Fisher)
Apologies	
Naomi Barry	Coastal Indigenous Member
Anthony Ciconte	Giant Crab Fishery industry member
Alex Haberfield	Industry member (WZ)
Zeb Johnston	Industry member (WZ)
Wayne Dredge	Industry member (EZ)
Anthony McGrath	VRFish Executive Officer
Peter Galvin	Recreational fishing representative/ VRFish member
Rob Timmers	Scuba Divers Federation Victoria member

1. Preliminaries

1.1. Welcome

Ian Knuckey, Independent Chair, opened the meeting with an Acknowledgement of Country and welcomed all attendees to the 46th meeting of the Victorian Rock Lobster and Giant Crab Resource Assessment Group (RLRAG). Ian advised that the 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. Attendees were asked to introduce themselves and disclose any potential conflicts of interest.

Ian followed by mentioning all apologies for the meeting.

1.2. Adoption of agenda

Ian provided an outline of the meeting agenda, calling for any additions to be made. 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 and were accepted as a true and accurate record. Ian confirmed that Steven Beever (VFA) would take minutes for this meeting.

Key actions from the previous meeting, and subsequent comments, are summarised as follows:

Action	Responsibility	Comments / Outcomes
1. VFA to circulate the draft minutes.	Ewan	Completed
2. VFA to consider RLRAG feedback in finalising RLMAC and RLRAG Terms of Reference.	Ewan	Completed
3. VFA and VRFish to discuss options to improve community engagement the Recreational Rock Lobster Reporting Program.	Ewan, Anthony McGrath	Ewan and Anthony have commenced discussions and will present back at the next RLRAG meeting.
4. VFA to review reporting data to assess the time between the date of capture and date of reporting.	Ewan	To be covered in today's agenda.
5. RLRAG to consider opportunities for improved voluntary data collection in the Western Zone.	David	To be covered in today's agenda.
6. Klaas to include an explanation outlining the difference between standardised and nominal CPUE in the stock assessment report, and for discussion at port meetings.	Klaas	To be covered in today's agenda.

7. Klaas to rectify the outcome wording in the Western Zone decision rule table, part 2a, which incorrectly states that CPUE has remained in the same band	Klaas	Completed
8. Klaas to rectify the outcome wording in the decision rule table in part 2b, which incorrectly states the assessment year	Klaas	Completed
9. Klaas to rectify minor errors in stock assessment.	Klaas	Completed
10.SIV to provide feedback to RLRAG regarding discussions of voluntary data collection with Giant Crab fishers.	Matt	Matt to action across the next few months and report at the next RLRAG meeting.
11.VFA to organise a compliance update for the next meeting.	Ewan	To be covered in today's agenda.
12.Klaas to analyse historic catch rates and subsequent impacts on biomass and present at the next RLRAG meeting.	Klaas	To be covered in today's agenda.

2. Management Update

2.1. 2025 RLRAG Overview

Ewan Flanagan provided an overview of the key items discussed during the various 2025 RLRAG meetings. Summarised, these included the following:

1. **Recreational Reporting Program results and ongoing improvement**
2. **Compliance Summary – 2024/25 Results**
3. **2023/24 Stock Assessment – final endorsement**
4. **Larval Dispersal Connectivity Project update**
5. **Giant Harvest Strategy Development**

Meeting Comments:

It was noted there remains issues with collecting length frequency data and progressing to level 2 of the harvest strategy. It is incumbent on industry to collect this data should it wish to move from Level 1, where increases in the total allowable commercial catch are prevented.

6. **Eastern Zone Pre-Recruit Index review**
7. **2024/25 Stock Assessment– preliminary review of draft results**

Meeting Comments:

It was confirmed that the direction of the fishery, in terms of future arrangements for Total Allowable Commercial Catch (TACC), will be guided by the principles in the current management plan and the application of the harvest strategy. The current arrangements will be assessed during the next review and development of the new plan.

8. **Management Advisory Committee development**

2.2. 2026 RLRAG Workplan

Ewan provided an update on items in the 2026 RLRAG Workplan, distributed to members prior to the meeting. Key items are summarised as follows:

Activity	Timing
1. Assess and review Draft 2025/26 Stock Assessment	December
2. Eastern Zone Pre-Recruit Index Review	July
3. Improvement of recreational catch and biological data	July / December
4. Reviewing monitoring program plan	July
5. Continual stock assessment improvement (OzLob)	July
6. Research priorities	Review at July meeting
7. Climate change risks/issues	Consider annually (July)
8. Export Approval	February
9. Giant Crab Management Plan development	July – December
10. MSC Review (if required by industry)	As required

It was suggested that, at the commencement of the new RLMAC and RLRAG structure, an induction session be run in the first meeting to provide education on the harvest strategy, meeting structures, membership expectations and an overview of the terms of reference. RLRAG members supported this suggestion.

Action: Ewan and Ian to meet and discuss possible structure of induction meeting for RLMAC and RLRAG.

2.3. 2026 Port Meetings

Ewan provided an overview of the 2026 port meeting schedule which will be sent to commercial stakeholders in the coming days.

2.4. Export Approvals Update

Ewan provided an overview of the recent export approvals submitted for the Rock Lobster Fishery and Giant Crab Fishery to the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW). The export approval application for the Rock Lobster Fishery was submitted in 2025 in preparation for the current approval expiry in August 2026. Responses from DCCEEW have identified concerns regarding potential seal interactions in the fishery. The RLRAG considered the possible impact of mandating seal mitigation devices in commercial pots in areas near to seal colonies, noting that the practice is already reflected in the Victorian Rock Lobster Fishery Code of Practice. The VFA should seek broader commercial stakeholder advice regarding the feasibility and impacts of any new regulations. This matter will be discussed in further detail at the upcoming rock lobster port meetings.

The Giant Crab Fishery application was submitted recently in preparation for the same expiry date in August 2026. It was noted that bycatch data in this fishery is very limited and likely underreported based on data collected from observer coverage and the Electronic Monitoring System program. The VFA will reiterate to active fishers the requirement to report bycatch and consult on any identified issues with industry members and the RLRAG as required. It is important to improve reported bycatch data across all fisheries, including in

the Rock Lobster Fishery.

It was suggested that bycatch reporting requirements be presented at the port meetings to re-educate fishers on their requirements, noting their importance in seeking certifications such as export approval.

Action: VFA to provide education to fishers on bycatch requirements at the upcoming port meetings.

3. Compliance Update

3.1. 2025/26 Season Compliance Statistics

Sophie Fletcher presented a compliance report on recent statistics in the Rock Lobster Fishery. Following the restructure of staffing across the VFA, total inspections have fallen across the zone comparative to previous years. In particular, it was noted that recreational rock lobster inspections have fallen from 547 during 2024/25 to 106 during 2025/26. This is partially a result of total officers available for inspections, and partially a result of a change in focus to major crime.

Based on a total of 74 inspections (from a target of 60) across the commercial Western Zone Fishery, the compliance rate was 95%, which is consistent with the previous year. Based on 5 inspections (from a target of 20), the Eastern Zone compliance rate fell from 93% in 2024/25 to 80% in 2025/26. The recreational fishery compliance rate across both zones also fell from 88% to 75% during this period. The primary infringement for recreational fishers was a fail to register an intent to fish for lobster (i.e. not downloading and registering via the mandatory online app).

RLRAG members expressed their concerns with the significant fall in total inspection numbers. It was noted that member consider compliance to be a critical component of sustainably managing fisheries and that the reduction in numbers poses significant concerns for the sustainability of fishery stocks across Victoria.

4. Recreational Reporting Program

4.1. Data Review

David Reilly presented recreational reporting program data in response to Action 4. The analysis considered the difference between date of catch and the date that catch was reported across four seasons. Fishers must report all lobster catch within seven days. Results showed that fishers most commonly reported catch on the date of capture (averaging approximately 55%); and the second most the day after the date of capture (averaging approximately 18%). Very few fishers wait more than a day to report catch. This is positive and demonstrates that those who are reporting catch are willing to do so at the time of capture or shortly after.

Members of the RLRAG noted that these results were positive, but issues still remain regarding non-reporting. Members suggested further action is needed to improve program adoption. Multiple members of the RLRAG agreed the VFA should commit to increasing compliance by providing official warnings to those who have failed to register an intent to fish and penalties to repeat offenders.

5. Monitoring Program

5.1. Fixed Site Surveys

David provided an update on the Fixed Site Survey program noting that it is increasingly difficult to find commercial fishers willing to conduct surveys at certain sites in the Western Zone. This is likely due to increased operating costs associated with completing fixed sites that require greater travel or are in less productive fishing grounds. The program has run since 2002 in the Western Zone and was reduced from 12 sites to the current 8 sites in 2017. David noted that due to financial pressures, in order to maintain the current monitoring levels, fees paid to fishers to complete the surveys needed to increase. The VFA has covered the required increase for the current fishing year, however the increase would need to be cost recovered from industry going forward. David requested the RLRAG consider whether maintaining the current level of fixed sites is a priority for the monitoring program.

Members agreed that further consideration was required before the RLRAG could provide a recommendation, and the reporting program should be considered holistically to identify areas of improvement. It was suggested data collection in the monitoring program be listed an agenda item at the next meeting and that a paper be submitted to members for consideration prior to that meeting.

5.2. Rock Lobster Tagging

David further presented an update on the tagging program noting that tag recapture data provides information on lobster growth and movement. The program has faced ongoing challenges in maintaining levels of tag recapture reporting. Given it is a time-consuming program to manage, and the number of reported recaptures is low, David suggested the program be discontinued in its current form. If required, a more targeted approach could be introduced in the future.

Consistent with the previous item, RLRAG members advised they required greater detail prior to determining whether to continue with this program.

Action: David to lead a review of the monitoring program at the next RLRAG, detailing all current data collection methods, to identify any areas for efficiencies and/or improvements. David to provide supporting papers prior to that meeting.

6. Rock Lobster Stock Assessment Results

6.1. Final stock assessment and TACC outcome

Western Zone

Klaas Hartmann presented an overview of the Western Zone stock assessment results, summarised as follows:

- i) Effort continues to be on a downwards trend, whilst catch has remained relatively consistent in recent seasons.
- ii) The nominal and standardised CPUE increased, continuing the upwards trend since 2009/10.
- iii) The total number of active vessels in the Western Zone fleet remains at a record low of 30 vessels in 2024/25.

- iv) The pre-recruit index (PRI) has remained fairly consistent in recent years and above the threshold of 1.67. It saw an increase from last year's values.
- v) Egg production in the fishery has increased slightly again, continuing the upward trend from previous years.
- vi) Both fixed site and observer programs are showing strong numbers of male and female pre-recruits.
- vii) A direct application of the decision rules in the harvest strategy specifies that the fishery moves up one CPUE band to 0.80-<0.85. This results in a shift to step 3 and maintains a TACC of 245t.

Observations from members noted the Western Zone experienced low PRI between 2014 and 2018, followed by a period of recovery to current levels. This potentially provides hope of recovery from the low PRI currently recorded in the Eastern Zone. In response, it was noted the Western Zone recovered PRI level that was still significantly greater than current record-low Eastern Zone PRI. It was noted that egg production is only one of the factors contributing to PRI levels. As larvae settlement likely comes from other jurisdictions, egg production is not necessarily the biggest concern for the low PRI levels. Recruitment is influenced by a number of factors including favourable habitat, currents and surface winds facilitating the transport of larvae from the place of spawning to settlement areas.

A query was raised regarding whether the model would recognise if fishers stopped fishing an area, such as deeper waters, or would it assume a reduction in biomass. Klaas noted the model does not differentiate areas fished within each region of a zone.

RLRAG members endorsed the Harvest Strategy application, resulting in an unchanged TACC of 245 tonnes for the Western Zone Rock Lobster Fishery.

Eastern Zone

Klaas further presented an overview of the Eastern Zone stock assessment results, summarised as follows:

- i) Total catch remained similar to the previous season, recording a slight increase.
- ii) Effort continued to decline.
- iii) Nominal CPUE increased, and standardised CPUE remained relatively stable in comparison to last year.
- iv) Vessel numbers remained at a record low of 11 active vessels in 2024/25. Average catch per vessel increased to 1.8 tonnes from 1.5 tonnes in 2023/24.
- v) The length frequency data generated concern regarding the number of undersized lobsters, however, the increased level of voluntary length-frequency reporting is positive. The PRI came in just above the record low of 0.02 in 2023/24. The PRI remains below the trigger reference point for the third consecutive year.
- vi) Egg production was not provided this season as a model-based stock assessment was not undertaken due to the cost saving measures employed for the Eastern Zone. 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.

The low PRI level remains a very significant concern for members. There are no clear answers from the data to suggest the key drivers that may be responsible. It is likely a number of environment factors impacting larval dispersal and settlement. Recreational

members noted that observations from divers are consistent with current and historical results. Divers noted considerable sightings of undersized lobsters that correlated to the spike during 2013-2015. Likewise, in recent seasons, there have been few undersized lobsters observed.

Further to the comments regarding egg production above, it was noted that egg production in the Eastern Zone is not considered a limiting factor. The greater concern is the post-settlement survivability driven by broader environmental factors.

RLRAG members endorsed the Harvest Strategy application, resulting in an unchanged TACC of 21 tonnes for the Eastern Zone Rock Lobster Fishery.

Members further endorsed a secondary review of the Harvest Control Rule based on the low PRI, consistent with the recommendation from the RLRAG's PRI sub-committee review in 2025. It was noted that more of the TACC is likely to have been caught in the current fishing year across a wider geographical range, which may provide valuable data to inform the secondary review process.

6.2. Australian Lobster Model Update

Klaas provided a brief update on the progression of the Australian Lobster Model, advising that model development has recommenced and will be presented at the next RLRAG meeting.

Action: Klaas to present Australian Lobster Model development at the next RLRAG meeting.

6.3. Historic Catch Rate Analysis

In response to Agenda Item 12, Klaas presented a historic catch rate analysis of the Western Zone, demonstrating an assessment of estimated biomass comparative to standardised CPUE; and exploitation rate compared to CPUE.

The results demonstrate that, despite recoveries to record-high standardised CPUE experienced in 1978/79 in the Western Zone, biomass is significantly lower than the 1978/79 level. This demonstrates a fall in productivity across the fishery and is reflective in the adjusted Target Reference Points within the harvest strategy, which accepts the fishery will likely never return to the pre-fishing biomass level. The Exploitation Rate-Standardised CPUE comparison presented similar results, recording a lower current exploitation rate at the comparative high standardised CPUE.

RLRAG members noted that these results provide an effective representation of the changes in productivity across the fishery and further support the need for conservative management approaches. Members suggested a simplified analysis be presented at the upcoming port meetings.

Action: Klaas to present a simplified historic catch rate analysis at the upcoming port meetings.

7. Giant Crab Stock Assessment Results

7.1. Final stock assessment and TACC outcome

Klaas presented the final results of the Giant Crab Fishery stock assessment. In summary:

- i) Total catch has remained steady over the past 15 years.
- ii) The mean individual weight increased slightly but is relatively consistent to previous seasons.
- iii) CPUE recovered this season following a large decline during the 2023/24 season. Given that Giant Crab have a very slow growth rate, large changes in catch rates are unlikely to be reflective of stock abundance. For this reason, a three-year average has been applied in the new Harvest Strategy.

Klaas incorporated the assessment results into the Harvest Control Rule for the fishery. The Tier 1 (most precautionary) control rule still applies due to no length-frequency data currently collected. Tier 2 is not applicable until fishery-wide length-frequency sampling is adopted. Furthermore, the three-year CPUE running mean remains below the target reference point. Therefore, following the Tier 1 Harvest Control Rule, the TACC recommendation is to remain at 8.5 tonnes.

Members noted that the collection of length-frequency data should be achievable for this fishery and would likely result in financial gain following TACC increases.

RLRAG members supported the application of the Harvest Strategy and subsequent TACC of 8.5 tonnes.

8. Other Business

8.1. Southern Rocklobster Limited (SRL) Update

SIV provided an update regarding the ongoing discussion amongst industry for Marine Stewardship Council certification which has been undertaken with the support of SRL Ltd. Discussions are ongoing in all three southern rock lobster producing states and any applications are at the discretion of each jurisdiction. Victoria is likely to revisit the certification should the Tasmania and South Australian Rock Lobster fisheries wish to pursue it collectively under a stock-wide assessment.

8.2. Seafood Industry Victoria (SIV) Update

Matthew provided an update from SIV, as summarised below:

- i) A key focus for SIV is developing election priorities to present to members of parliament, in preparation for the November election.
- ii) There is concern from its members regarding Victorian commercial fisheries and aquaculture businesses receiving adequate focus and support from the Government following the recent announcement that the VFA will merge into a broader government department, Outdoor Recreation Victoria.
- iii) The Victorian Seafood Industry Awards will be held in Port Campbell on Saturday, 21 March 2026, following the Crayfest event.
- iv) SIV is currently working on a proposal with the Melbourne Convention Bureau to host the World Seafood Congress in Victoria in 2030.

The Chair called the meeting closed at 15:30.

Schedule 1: Summary of meeting actions

Action	Responsibility	Timing
1. VFA to circulate the draft minutes.	Ewan	March
2. Ewan and Ian to meet and discuss possible structure of induction meeting for RLMAC and RLRAG.	Ewan	April/May
3. VFA to provide education to fishers on bycatch requirements at the upcoming port meetings.	Ewan/David	March
4. David to lead a review of the monitoring program at the next RLRAG, detailing all current data collection methods, to identify any areas for efficiencies and/or improvements. David to provide supporting papers prior to that meeting.	David	Next RLRAG
5. Klaas to present Australian Lobster Model development at the next RLRAG meeting.	Klaas	Next RLRAG
6. Klaas to present a simplified historic catch rate analysis at the upcoming port meetings,	Klaas	March
Items carried over		
7. VFA and VRFish to discuss options to improve community engagement the Recreational Rock Lobster Reporting Program.	Ewan, Anthony McGrath	Next RLRAG
8. SIV to provide feedback to RLRAG regarding discussions of voluntary data collection with Giant Crab fishers.	Matt Wassnig	Next RLRAG

Schedule 2: Endorsements

1. RLRAG members endorsed the Harvest Strategy application, resulting in an unchanged TACC of 245 tonnes for the Western Zone Rock Lobster Fishery.
2. RLRAG members endorsed the Harvest Strategy application, resulting in an unchanged TACC of 21 tonnes for the Eastern Zone Rock Lobster Fishery. Members further endorsed a secondary review of the Harvest Control Rule based on the low PRI, consistent with the outcome from the RLRAG's PRI sub-committee review in 2025.
3. RLRAG members endorsed the application of the Harvest Strategy, and subsequent TACC of 8.5 tonnes for the Giant Crab Fishery.