

### RECORD OF MEETING

Meeting #42, 14 August 2024

VFA Queenscliff

**CHAIR:** Ian Knuckey

**MEETING COMMENCED:** 10:00 am

Present	Affiliation
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
Ross Bromley	Industry member (EZ)
Wayne Dredge	Industry member (EZ)
Alex Haberfield	Industry member (WZ)
Gary Ryan	Industry member (WZ)
Zeb Johnston	Industry member (WZ)
Matthew Wassnig	Seafood Industry Victoria member
Peter Galvin	VRFish member
Robert Timmers	Scuba Divers Federation Victoria member
Lawrence Moore	VRFish member
Craig Starrit	Recreational fishing observer
Scott Hadley	IMAS invited participant
Katie Creswell	IMAS invited participant
Melissa Schubert	Victorian Fisheries Authority observer
Steven Beaver	Victorian Fisheries Authority observer
Apologies	
Ben Scullin	VRFish member
Anthony Ciconte	Giant Crab Fishery industry member
Naomi Barry	Coastal Indigenous member
George Brocklesby	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 42<sup>nd</sup> 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 the public, via meeting minutes published on the Victorian Fisheries Authority (VFA) webpage.

Ian noted apologies and asked that all attendees introduce themselves and disclose any potential conflicts of interest. People may be asked to leave the room during discussions where a conflict of interest is identified. Ross Bromley identified his position with Atlantis Advisory as acting for Southern Rocklobster Limited with the Marne Stewardship Council (MSC) work as a potential conflict.

## 1.2. Adoption of agenda

Ian provided an overview of the meeting and called for additions to the agenda. Items 3 and 5 were switched to accommodate a presenter joining online. The agenda was otherwise 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 and were accepted as a true and accurate record. Ian confirmed Steven Beever (VFA) would take the minutes for this meeting.

Ewan Flanagan ran through the action items from the previous meeting noting that several items will be covered in today's presentations. In addition:

- Klaas advised that Action 5 will be delivered as part of the draft stock assessment results at the next RLRAG meeting.
- Ross queried the reasoning behind data being withheld due to the 5-fisher rule, noting that the application of the rule should be reconsidered. Specifically, data should not be denied in a scenario where more than five fishers are active but less than five have reported catch or interactions. This is particularly relevant in the release of data relating to bycatch and threatened and endangered species (TEP) reporting to inform the MSC pre-assessment. The VFA agreed to seek approval from Eastern Zone Rock Lobster Access Licence Holders to release the data that is required for the MSC pre-assessment currently constrained by this rule.

**Action: VFA to investigate a data sharing agreement for fishers in the Eastern Zone.**

**Action: VFA to review the release of data relating to bycatch and TEP interactions.**

## 1.4. Membership Update

Ewan confirmed that Matthew Harry had stepped down from his position as Eastern Zone industry representative and that expressions of interest to fill the position have been distributed to stakeholders. Matthew was acknowledged for his long service and valuable contribution to the group. The group supported the Ian's suggestion that he would write to

Matthew on behalf of the committee thanking him for his service.

**Action: Ian to send a letter of thanks to Matthew Harry on behalf of the RLRAG.**

## 2. Management Update

### 2.1. Commercial Port Meetings Recap

Ewan provided an overview of the commercial port meetings held in April this year.

A single Eastern Zone meeting was held in Queenscliff, reflective of the reduced services agreed to in this zone, and a total of 10 fishers attended. A summary of the key discussion points included the following:

- i. There was unanimous support for the proposed Total Allowable Commercial Catch (TACC) of 21 tonnes. The consensus amongst attendees was that recently low catch rates continued to be a concern and present a challenge to the fishery.
- ii. The proposed revisions to the sampling strategy targets were accepted as more achievable than the current targets.
- iii. The cost recovery model remains cost-prohibitive for this fishery and threatens its future viability.
- iv. The recreational reporting program statistics are under representative of the actual recreational harvest. Further, the 7-day reporting requirement is ineffective and needs to be amended to an at-landing requirement.

Two Western Zone meetings were held in Port Fairy and Port MacDonnell and a total 21 fishers attended. A summary of the key discussion points included the following:

- i. There was mixed support for the 242-tonne TACC recommendation. Some attendees suggested the justification for setting a TACC less than the level allowed under the existing harvest strategy was unclear.
- ii. Concerns were raised regarding the restrictions imposed on rock lobster fishers as a result of the South Australian abalone viral ganglioneuritis (AVG) outbreak.
- iii. The recreational reporting program statistics are under representative of the actual recreational harvest. Further, the 7-day reporting requirement is ineffective and needs to be amended to an at-landing requirement.

Ewan asked the group to comment on the 7-day reporting requirement in the recreational reporting program, noting that the GoFishVic RL app allows fishers to report without mobile reception. In total, reported catch has been significantly lower since moving to a digital program than when fishers were required to affix a tag at the place of landing. There was strong support from the majority of the RLRAG to amend the requirement to report at the place of landing. Those in support recognised the need to provide a motivation for fishers to report immediately and the difficulties associated with enforcement surrounding the 7-day allowance. It was further noted that fishers are more likely to forget to report if they are not required to do so immediately and that it will significantly improve the accuracy of the data collected.

Two members opposed amending the requirement, citing difficulties with the app and the

impedance on recreational fishers as the reasoning. In addition, it was noted it is too difficult for some to utilise phones whilst fishing for rock lobster. A further point was raised querying the success of the program and the validity in it continuing when phone surveys were more effective. In response, it was advised that the RLRA has previously supported this program and that phone surveys were considered less effective at obtaining an assessment of total recreational harvest; and had experienced a decline nationally in those willing to participate.

Further to amending the 7-day reporting requirement, some members advocated for the inclusion of a pre-report requiring fishers to record their intention to fish for rock lobster. This would improve data collection regarding effort and further enhance compliance capabilities. The commercial sector is already required to do this. Ewan reflected that this is unlikely to be supported by the VFA and wider community and may hinder the progression in introducing the requirement to report at-landing. Klaas further noted that Tasmania recently experienced significant push-back from recreational fishers when it attempted to include this requirement in its own recreational reporting program. In terms of the scientific benefit of pre-reporting, Klaas advised that while this is ideal in understanding catch and effort, it is not essential and would not offer significant benefits in the short-term collection of data. The primary aim is to obtain an accurate record of total catch.

Ian summarised that the majority of the group supported recommending the requirement be changed to report recreational rock lobster catch at the place of landing. Two members did not support this recommendation. Furthermore, approximately half of the group supported recommending the requirement to pre-report.

**Action: Recommendation to change the recreational reporting requirement to be presented to the VFA for consideration.**

## 2.2. Fisheries Research and Development Corporation (FRDC) AVG Project Update

Ewan provided an update on the South Australian AVG outbreak noting that it continues to spread west along the coast of South Australia. Positively, recent surveillance diving in Victoria near the South Australian border has not detected any infected abalone. At the commencement of the 2024/25 fishing season, travel restrictions relating to Port MacDonnell rock lobster fishers were removed, however, decontamination requirements for equipment remain in place.

Ewan advised that the FRDC AVG-potting project has been approved and a service provider appointed. A project team will be assembled shortly to progress this research.

In response to a query regarding why the virus was spreading west, it was advised this is likely due a variety of reasons, including human vectors of transmission such as fishing gear. It was further noted that the effect of AVG on rock lobster catch rates is unclear.

## 2.3. Recreational Reporting Program Update

Ewan provided an overview of the most recent recreational reporting program catch statistics. While the catch-to-date is greater than the previous season, it remains lower than the total estimated recreational harvest, which is based on the 2018/19 reporting season statistics. The low level of reporting is attributed to a reduction in effort, based on feedback from recreational fishing clubs and statistics from the VFA compliance team, as well as significant underreporting. Members reflected that the current app is simpler and more



functional to use than the previous version and that the app should not be the reason for under reporting. Members reiterated the importance of accurately collecting recreational catch to assess the total fishing mortality.

The RLRAG requested that a compliance representative attend the next RLRAG meeting to provide statistics on recreational rock lobster inspections and the observed level of non-reporting.

**Action: VFA compliance representative to attend the next RLRAG meeting (if available).**

#### 2.4. Length-weight conversion table update

Klaas provided an overview of the length-weight conversion table, noting the calculation differences between male and female rock lobster. The 159,000 rock lobster measurements used to develop this table were obtained in processors between 1998 and 2017 and came predominately from the Western Zone. Klaas noted that temporal and spatial variability was low and that the differences in inter-annual variability, while significant, was unlikely to impact assessment outputs.

Based on the data, a discussion was raised as to whether the table for the female size class should finish at 160mm. Members of the group noted that females have been observed as larger than this size, however, David noted that the majority of this data is from the Western Zone which generally records a lower average size. In addition, it was advised that there is a significant discrepancy in larger rock lobsters, with previous surveys in a single area recording an 800-gram difference in weight despite only a 5mm difference in carapace length. It was noted this weight difference can be dependent on shelling pattern.

Overall, the RLRAG agreed to endorse this table as an acceptable length-weight relationship. A member raised the possibility of requiring weights to be recorded in the app. It was noted that the relationship table is likely to produce more accurate results than relying on individual reports due to the accuracy and availability of scales. In addition, the RLRAG endorsed using a separate curve for males and females.

#### 2.5. Recreational Measuring Device Update

David provided an overview of the measuring device progress and an update on the VFA's distribution plan. In summary, the distribution will initially be based on rewarding diver effort during the current season, with the remainder to be distributed amongst clubs and recreational fishing organisations. If rulers were to be distributed to all fishers who signed up to the reporting program, it would require several thousand units. It is possible to offer these items in an ongoing nature for a small fee however they are not intended as a disposable item. It was clarified that it is not mandatory for fishers to carry a ruler when fishing for rock lobster. Overall, the RLRAG was supportive of the proposed distribution approach that rewards reporting effort.

### 3. FRDC Enhanced Data Collection Project

Scott Hadley provided an overview of the FRDC Enhanced Data Collection Project. The project focuses on developing an artificial intelligence platform to collect length frequency, sex and identification data on-board giant crab fishing vessels. It is important to giant crab fisheries due to the lack of available data on which to inform decision making. It aims to reduce the expenses and difficulty associated with on-board observing in offshore fisheries. Scott noted

that the project has developed from initially utilising a 2D camera system to incorporating a 3D system considered more accurate and fit-for-purpose. Throughout the project, the focus has been on developing a system that is simple and easy to use at sea.

Project testing has proven successful in collecting crab images, accurately estimating size and determining sex. The unique identification has proven fairly successful when tested on lobster, however, the effects of moulting are unknown.

In response to a query regarding the end goal of the project, Scott advised that it aims to determine size and sex information for data-poor fisheries and to improve the understanding of genetics for better management decisions. Furthermore, the project aims to reduce the difficulty in recruiting observers for offshore fisheries.

#### 4. Giant Crab Harvest Strategy

The giant crab harvest strategy is currently under review by a steering committee operating as a sub-committee of the RLRAG. The sub-committee will present recommendations to the RLRAG for final recommendation to the VFA. Klaas provided an overview of the draft Giant Crab Harvest Strategy which uses a tiered approach to guide the total allowable commercial catch (TACC) setting process (Table 1).

**Table 1: Draft giant crab harvest strategy tiered approach to guide the TACC setting.**

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
<b>Data Type</b>	Vic-eCatch	Level 1 plus mandatory L-F sampling* and verification of Vic-eCatch data (observer or camera)	Level 2 data for 3+ years and model-based assessment
<b>Analysis and assessment</b>	CPUE Trends	CPUE Trends	CPUE, stock assessment model
<b>HCR</b>	<b>Cap:</b> 10.5t <b>Increase:</b> Not Possible <b>Decrease:</b> Possible	<b>Cap:</b> 10.5t below target RP. No cap above target RP. <b>Increase:</b> Yes. Up to 20% every 3 years possible if CPUE has remained above target RP during the last 3 years. <b>Decrease:</b> Possible	<b>Cap:</b> 10.5t below target RP. No cap above target RP.  <b>Increase:</b> Yes. Up to 20% every year possible if CPUE has remained above target RP during the last 3 years and undersize abundance meets an established criteria.  <b>Decrease:</b> Possible
<b>Input Controls</b>	140pots, 140mm/150mm male/female size limit	Level 1	Input controls reviewed

Potential cost to licence holder/operator	Low	Low-Moderate	Moderate
<b>Summary</b>	Low level of data collection informing stock assessment, no scope to increase TACC beyond 10.5t, following stock depletion TACC may remain reduced, minimal cost to fishers.	Verified data increases confidence in assessment and permits TACC beyond 10.5t	The assessment model will provide an understanding of the stock status and dynamics that allows input and output controls to be flexibly set to meet industry needs.

The draft harvest strategy was summarised as follows:

- Level 1 provides the minimum required standards for this fishery and reflects the current harvest strategy requirements. It relies only on logbook data and does not allow for TACC increases, only decreases.
- Level 2 builds on Level 1 by considering length-frequency sampling data and verification of fisher catch and effort data. These can be through items such as the Enhanced Data Collection Project and Electronic Monitoring Program trial or by other means such as observer coverage. Level 2 allows for TACC increases, currently restricted to an increase of 20% every three years if the catch per unit effort has remained above the target reference point for the past three years. Klaas noted this ruling requires further consideration and without a stock assessment, it is difficult to understand the full impact on the TACC.
- Level 3 is achieved by meeting the requirements stipulated in Level 2 for three or more years as well as a formal stock assessment.
- The reference period selected is between 1995/96, accounting for the introduction of the legal minimum length, and 2013/14 which predates the period in which data is alleged to be compromised.
- The reference points are based on key catch rates within that reference period. The limit reference point reflects the lowest catch rate from which the fishery comfortably recovered; the threshold reference point is 1.5 times the limit; and the target reference point is currently listed as the peak observed.
- The sub-committee endorsed using a non-standardised catch per unit effort (CPUE), and a smoothed timeseries which aims to remove fluctuations in data that are not reflective of the biomass. This is considered appropriate for a low-productivity fishery with a low rate of change. The smoothed timeseries works on a 3-year average.

A query was raised regarding the provisions to move from level 2 and 3 and the costs of delivering a stock assessment. While this would need to be cost recovered, an empirical stock assessment can be run as a more cost-effective method.

A RLRAG member raised whether it would be possible to develop a giant crab hatchery for reseeded purposes. While possible, the slow growth rate of this species would essentially mean a 20-year wait for return on investment. In addition, this species is almost entirely

harvested by the commercial sector, meaning the commercial sector would likely need to fund this project.

A further query was raised regarding whether environmental impacts on this species had been recorded and if the trends in catch rates reflect those impacts. Klaas noted there is very little data to provide clarification on the environmental stressors impacting this species, however, the slow growth rate suggests it is a high-risk species. The management change triggers in the draft harvest strategy are conservative and should account for such impacts.

## 5. Rock Lobster Management Plan

Ewan provided an update on the draft management plan, advising that the plan is currently in discussion with the Victorian Fisheries Authority Executive and the Minister. The plan submitted to the Minister for declaration included a key change to that recommended by the steering committee and RLRAG. The total allowable recreational catch (TARC), which capped recreational catch in each zone at six tonnes, has been replaced with an assumed recreational catch of six tonnes. As such, the revised draft plan includes no capped recreational catch limits but remains within the parameters of the rebuild strategy while recreational catch remains under six tonnes in each zone.

In response, members of the RLRAG raised several concerns in response to this change, as summarised below:

- i. The process in developing the draft plan has been undermined and reduces confidence in the VFA. Ian clarified that the RLRAG functions to provide scientific review and advice for the rock lobster and giant crab fisheries and not the political complexities of fisheries management. The harvest strategy provides the context for the RLRAG's role in providing scientific recommendations relating to the development of harvest control rules discussed at previous meetings.

Ewan further reiterated that the steering committee and the RLRAG are advisory bodies that provide recommendations to the VFA and Minister for consideration. Ian advised that these points are stated at the commencement of every RLRAG meeting.

- ii. It is disappointing that the steering committee and RLRAG committed significant amounts of time to developing scientific policies driving this fishery, only to be ignored based on politically driven decisions.
- iii. The process followed by the VFA Executive in making material changes to the plan and then sending it to the Minister for approval without further consultation is not a good example of open and transparent governance.
- iv. Removing the recreational harvest control rules is poor fisheries management practice and neglects total fishing mortality. The draft plan recognises that recreational catch has the potential to increase as stock rebuilds. This has the capacity to undermine the rebuilding strategy and will have to be addressed through additional management measures or resource sharing considerations.

There are further concerns surrounding the resource sharing triggers discussed in point 7.5 of the plan and the uncertainty it introduces, to which the VFA advised it would take on notice.

- v. There should be greater accountability on the recreational harvest given the state of the fishery.



- vi. A member asked why the VFA had removed the TARC. Ewan advised that the executive based this decision on its current level of confidence in the recreational reporting program. Despite this, the VFA executive is committed to improving the reporting program and to the rebuild strategy. Members advised that they considered this a poor excuse and, if that is the case, more controls should be implemented into the reporting program to ensure the data is more robust.
- vii. Management of the fishery should be made on a stock level amongst multiple states to avoid politically driven decision making.
- viii. The commercial industry is the only sector contributing to the rebuild strategy as a result of the TARC cap removal.
- ix. Many members of the RLRAG were also members of the steering committee and advised that they did not agree with the removal of the TARC cap and, subsequently, did not endorse the revised draft plan.

Ian summarised that there was significant frustration and disappointment felt from members of the RLRAG, many of whom were also members of the steering committee. Ian reiterated that the committee is an advisory body but does not have the final decision-making power. A robust harvest strategy, once approved, makes it harder for politics to play a role as the rules are formally defined. While the recreational catch is not capped in the revised version of the draft management plan, there are still recreational controls in place in the form of bag and size limits. Ian further reiterated that the discussions in this agenda item are confidential and must be kept within the RLRAG at this time.

## 6. Monitoring Program Discussion

David provided an overview of the updated voluntary sampling strategy in place to collect length frequency data for the stock assessment. The revised strategy aims to better reflect the reduced number of operators and declining catch rates in the Eastern Zone. It focuses on measuring a smaller sample of approximately 800 lobsters, spread across fishing days. This figure has been derived from a review of the observer program. To achieve the revised total of lobsters measured, operators would need to record measurements from 7% of total pot lifts across the fishing season. To avoid any subconscious bias, it is critical that operators nominate pots in which to measure catch prior to hauling that pot. David advised that the next step will be to meet with Eastern Zone fishers to discuss participation in the program and provide an example of the proposed sampling log sheet. SIV has offered to support with fisher engagement. The RLRAG was then asked to provide comment.

The commercial representatives in the room indicated this strategy seemed appropriate for the fishery. A query was raised as to why lobsters can't be measured at a fish processor given many operators will sell to the same facility. David noted that this doesn't account for undersize lobsters returned to the water which is critical to the success of the reduced sampling size.

Positive feedback was received in response to the revised data sheet which only requires the area code and measurement. The previous requirement to record exact coordinates was considered burdensome, particularly in inclement weather conditions. It was further suggested that a simple app could be developed to record this information, as used in other fisheries. Ian offered to develop and provide a free app for trial. When asked which method was preferred, commercial representatives were divided. It was agreed that, in the short term, David would provide the waterproof datasheet and that the app could be considered

as a future option.

**Action: Ian to review development of a simple data recording app.**

## 7. Larval Dispersal and Connectivity Project

Katie Cresswell presented on the FRDC project, Larval Dispersal for Southern Rock Lobster to support management decisions. This project has enhanced existing larval dispersal models to account for factors that include temperature limits, survival rates, bathymetry and ocean currents on dispersal patterns. Katie provided the latest project results on connectivity patterns, linking the source of egg production with larvae settlements across Australian management zones. The results specific to Victoria indicate notably different connectivity patterns. Recruitment to the Western Zone predominately comes from South Australia, along with an estimated self-recruitment of 12%. Recruitment to the Eastern Zone predominately comes from Tasmania, with an estimated self-recruitment of 21%.

A query was raised regarding dispersal and survival rates, and the correlation with strong fishing years. While there is no direct evidence to support this correlation, as this research is a model-based study, theoretical evidence suggests a correlation exists. In response to a request from the RLRAG, Katie will add confidence intervals to the self-recruitment results.

Ian thanked Katie for her presentation and recognised the positive response from the group in relation to this research.

## 8. Southern Rocklobster Ltd MSC Update

Wayne Dredge provided an update on the progression of the MSC certification on behalf of Southern Rocklobster Ltd. Wayne advised that, based on the information provided by each state, Tasmania and South Australia are better placed to achieve certification than the Victoria Rock Lobster Fishery. Victoria has been unable to meet a number of criteria due to confidentiality requirements when releasing data. Wayne advised that there is a need for data relating to TEP interactions and bycatch across the fishery. The VFA agreed to review the release of this data internally and seek a confidentiality agreement from fishers. In addition, it was noted there are further issues that need to be addressed, including no current environmental risk assessment; no bycatch discard plan; no management plan; and a lack of transparency by the management authority. It was clarified that there is a current management plan which remains in place until a new plan is declared.

Wayne also provided an update on the funding arrangement in achieving this assessment, noting that FRDC has approved full funding for the formal assessment if and when it is triggered.

## 9. Other Business

No other business.

***The Chair called the meeting closed at 15:30.***

## Schedule 1: Actions from meeting 42

Action	Responsibility	Timing
<b>14 August 2024 Actions</b>		
1. Ewan to Circulate the draft minutes.	Ewan	August
2. VFA to investigate a data sharing agreement for fishers in the Eastern Zone.	Ewan	September
3. VFA to review the release of data relating to bycatch and TEP interactions.	Ewan	September / October
4. Letter of thanks to be sent to Matthew Harry on behalf of the RLRAG.	Ian	September
5. Recommendation to change reporting requirement to be presented to the VFA for consideration.	Ewan	August / September
6. VFA compliance representative to attend the next RLRAG meeting (if available).	Ewan	Next RLRAG
7. Develop app. to trial recording data at-sea	Ian	tba
<b>Ongoing Actions</b>		
1. Genevieve to provide update on OzLob model at December RLRAG.	Genevieve (Klaas)	Next RLRAG
2. Vessel Efficiency Factors to be considered annual at December RLRAG	Klaas	Next RLRAG