

2025/26 WESTERN ZONE ABALONE STOCK ASSESSMENT AND QUOTA SETTING WORKSHOP

WESTERN ABALONE DIVERS ASSOCIATION MEETING SUMMARY

Date: Friday, 9 May 2025

Attendees: **Chair:** Dr Nicole Hancock

Commercial sector stakeholders:

Craig Fox (WADA Chairman, WZ owner and diver), Travis Baulch (WADA Executive Officer), , Dr Duncan Worthington (AMBRAD - Industry Scientist), Andrew Rowe (WZ owner and diver), Jo Plummer (WZ owner), Lou Plummer (WZ owner and ex-diver), Murray Petersen (WZ diver), Phillip Plummer (WZ diver) Jaiden Plumber (WZ diver), Cleave Thiele, Sandra Downes (WZ owner), Len McCall (WZ owner), Wade Thiele (WZ diver).

Victorian Fisheries Authority (VFA): Luke O'Sullivan (Director Fisheries Management), Anthony McGrath (Fishery Manager), Cameron McCallum (Fisheries Officer) and Maartje Egberink (Fisheries Officer)

WADA Science Provider: Duncan Worthington

Apologies: Ian Parks (VFA) Peter Riddle (WZ) Mac Riddle (WZ)

ITEM 1: WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

Craig Fox, Western Abalone Divers Association (WADA) Chairman, opened the workshop and welcomed attendees. He introduced Dr Nicole Hancock, Executive Officer of the South Australian Western Abalone Zone, as the Independent Chair of the workshop and noted her significant experience in the commercial fishing industry.

Craig outlined the purpose of the workshop and indicated that the Victorian Fisheries Authority (VFA) representatives would provide their updates prior to the stock assessment and quota setting component, which would be led by the Independent Chair.

ITEM 2: VFA STRUCTURAL CHANGE PROCESS UPDATES

Luke O'Sullivan, VFA Director Fisheries Management, provided an update on the VFA structural change process, noting that the government required the VFA to reduce its annual operating budget by \$10M. Despite other measures taken to date, meeting the \$10M target required a reduction in staff numbers. Luke described the process undertaken, including consultation with staff, and noted that the proposed changes did not affect the current number of Fisheries Officers in the Portland or Warrnambool stations.

After some discussion on the topic, WADA members requested that the meeting record reflect that the divers wanted more Fisheries Officers in Victoria, not less. Craig reiterated WADA's ongoing support for Fisheries Officers.

ITEM 3: VFA MANAGEMENT UPDATE

Anthony McGrath, Abalone Fishery Manager, provided the VFA management update.

Abalone Viral Ganglioneuritis update

In February 2024, Abalone Viral Ganglioneuritis (AVG) was detected at Port MacDonnell in South Australia by abalone divers. The Department of Primary Industries and Regions, South Australia recently closed the Southern Zone abalone fishery for 12 months but has indicated it may be longer.

There are currently no known detections in Victoria and the VFA maintains control measures to prevent the spread the virus into Victoria. This includes the prohibition of unprocessed abalone from South Australia into Victoria and requires Port MacDonnell based rock lobster fleet to disinfect and dry all equipment in the presence of a VFA Fisheries Officer before entering Victorian waters. Recreational fishers are also required to Check, Clean and Dry all recreational fishing and diving equipment before entering Victoria.

Medium Sales Permit

In response to the current market conditions and the requirement for abalone fishers to sell their catch to holders of an Abalone Receiver licence, or in small sales up to 5kg, the VFA has been working with interested fishers on a 12-month trial for a medium sales permit. The permit allows eligible fishers to explore the domestic abalone market for live or fresh abalone in sales amounts up to 50kg and utilise a possession limit of 500kg in a commercial premises. Permits will be issued on a case-by-case basis and interested fishers should contact Anthony directly with their proposal.

ITEM 4: COMPLIANCE UPDATE

Fisheries Officers Cameron McCallum (Portland) and Maartje Egberink (Apollo Bay), provided the VFA compliance update. They outlined the compliance approach and explained the split of resources between recreational and commercial fisheries, marine safety, marine parks, aquaculture, and fish receivers. They also provided an overview of compliance actions from 2024/25 to date and congratulated industry on excellent compliance levels in the Western Zone.

The officers outlined several abalone related compliance actions that had occurred across the zone and noted there has been an increase in recreational abalone offending. The officers reiterated the importance of reporting to 13FISH as local reports made by WADA members have led to apprehensions.

ITEM 5: OVERVIEW AND BACKGROUND

Craig handed the meeting over to the Independent Chair, Dr Nicole Hancock, who formally opened the workshop by acknowledging the Western Zone's long demonstrated stewardship of the fishery and outlined the workshop objectives to determine the total allowable commercial catch (TACC) recommendations for each spatial management unit (SMU), the optimal targets for individual reef codes, and the TACC for 2025/26.

ITEM 6: HARVEST STRATEGY

Duncan Worthington, WADA science provider, provided an update on the Harvest Strategy and noted that the Western Zone has been in a conservative setting for the purpose of rebuilding since 2015/16 and the reference points continue to guide towards rebuilding the stock over 20-23 years.

The harvest strategy standardisation model has been applied to the Western Zone in a manner consistent with the other Victorian abalone zones, with an aim to smooth data trends by filtering abnormalities from the data and removing new divers first 50 days. The model has been developed through the Abalone Scientific Working Group (ASWG), which includes representatives from industry, the VFA and its science partner, MRAG, .

Similarly, a new Fishery Independent Survey (FIS) methodology has been developed for all three zones, with implementation already underway in the Western Zone. Despite this, due to incomplete data sets, the harvest strategy continues to use data from the 2020 FIS work. The remaining FIS work includes the continued installation of additional shallow water survey sites by WADA divers, which is reliant on suitable weather conditions.

Duncan presented the information from the 2020 FIS and the heat map system used by WADA to assess where effort has been focused on areas within reef codes. The technology supports divers in assessing where to fish and assists in spreading effort across a reef.

Some divers indicated that they are not influenced by the heatmaps, or do not check the heat maps before fishing, however others relied on it to inform their fishing plans.

ITEM 7: BLACKLIP SMU STOCK ASSESSMENT AND TACC

Overview

Duncan presented an overview of the data streams that inform the stock assessment, including catch reporting, FIS abundance (2020), vessel monitoring system (VMS), depth loggers and shell measurers. He encouraged industry to use the *Diver obs.* app developed by the Abalone Council Victoria and frequently used in the Eastern Zone. The app collects qualitative information during diver trips that can then be compared to diver information in the TACC workshop.

Harvest strategy outcomes

Duncan presented the 2020/21 FIS estimates for mature biomass, legal biomass and pre-recruits for each SMU and noted that these had also been used in the 2022 to 2024 TACC forums because new data was not yet available.

Many of the TACC-related decisions were made using a combination of old and new data sources, but the consensus was that the fishery was in good shape. He indicated that parts of the fishery appeared to have recovered from previous AVG outbreaks, whilst others were still recovering.

Meeting participants were of the view that they had observed a recovered biomass across the fishery. They felt that whilst the 130mm legal minimum length (LML) had worked well to recover the stock, it was now appropriate to move to a spatial management approach in selecting suitable LML's to allow some fishing to be undertaken, thereby relieving pressure on the bigger fish that had been targeted in better performing SMU's.

It was agreed that WADA would develop a LML proposal to be presented to the ASWG later in the year for consideration.

Portland SMU

- **Recommended TACC – 6.5 tonnes**

Prior to the 2024/25 (current) season, the Portland SMU had a 0 tonne blacklip allocation for many years to allow for stock recovery following AVG outbreaks. Whilst survey and surveillance work found that the area had recovered considerably, it was acknowledged that diver catch per unit effort (CPUE) data would be needed to inform and set a TACC. As such, WADA introduced a conservative allocation of 7.5 tonnes across several reefs to allow catch data to be collected on reefs largely unaffected by previous AVG outbreaks.

It was acknowledged that the set amounts were not practical in consideration of weather conditions and spreading effort across the SMU. Some fishers also felt that a reduction of 1.0 tonnes should be implemented.

A consensus was reached to recommend a 6.5 tonne TACC be allocated to Portland SMU with the following specific conditions:

- 500kg Optimal Target set for reef code 1.04 Blowholes.
- 300kg Optimal Target set for reef code 1.02 Whites Beach.
- 300kg Optimal Target set for reef code 2.10 Lawrence Rocks.
- 300kg Upper Limit for all other reef codes.
- Canned product only.
- Divers to maintain two sets of gear. One set for Portland to be hot washed, disinfected and dried after each use, and one set for the rest of the zone.

WADA agreed to write to the VFA seeking advice on the suitability of this management to protect the biosecurity of the fishery.

Lady Julia Percy Island SMU

- **Recommended TACC – 4.8 tonnes**

This recommendation has remained consistent since 2022/23 season.

Over recent years divers have expressed greater reluctance to fish around the island due to the increased risk of shark encounters. As such, WADA will consider purchasing a shark cage that can be used by divers wishing to fish in this area.

This SMU remains considerably under-caught and will finish the season like this due to the shark risk.

Port Fairy SMU

- **Recommended TACC – 15.2 tonnes.**

This recommendation is a 700kg increase from the current season, following a 1.0 tonne increase from the 2023/24 season. There was some discussion about increasing by 1.0 tonne or maintaining the same, however catch rates supported an increase.

- 500kg to be applied to Craggs (reef code 3.05) which is supported by a consistently increasing catch rate of 102kg/hour, the highest in the zone.
- 200kg to be applied to Burnetts (reef code 3.06).
- Other reef codes to be maintained at the current settings.

There was additional discussion among members about the potential to review the size limits in this area in the future, as well as considering a new reef code between 3.07 and 3.08, due to the distinctly different stocks in the area. These options will be presented to the ASWG for consideration.

Warrnambool SMU

- **Recommended TACC – 16 tonnes**

All fishers present were supportive of increases in TACC allocations to Mills, Killarney and The Cutting and agreed to recommend a 1.0 tonne increase from the current season's Optimal Target. This SMU also received an additional 3.5 tonne from the 2023/24 season, increasing the quota by 4.0 tonnes over two years.

Further to this, some fishers shared an interest in shifting more current season fishing into the area to offset some of the uncaught quota from the Portland and Julia Percy Island SMU's. Whilst this is considered sustainable and within current fishing rules, it was noted that careful attention should be shown to the productive reef codes within the Warrnambool SMU over the 2025/26 fishing season.

Changes include:

- Increase by 500kg Mills 3.09
- Increase by 500kg Killarney 3.10,
- Increase by 500kg The Cutting 3.11
- Reduce by 500kg Thunder Point 3.12

For the current season, the size limit on the Killarney, the Cutting and Mills reefs had been decreased size limit by 5mm, to 125mm. Despite this, the average size data shows fishing has maintained averages between 135mm and 140mm at each of these reefs.

New fishery independent data at that these reefs should be implemented into the next stock assessment and considered before any further future increases.

Summary or recommended SMU TACC for 2025/26

Spatial management unit	Recommended changes	Recommended TACC
Portland	Decrease 1.0 tonne	6.5 t
Julia Percy	No Change	4.8 t
Port Fairy	Increase 0.7 tonne	15.2 t
Warrnambool	Increase 1.0 tonne	16 t
2025/26 WZ TACC	Increase 0.7 tonne	42.5 t

Recommended management changes in 2025/26

The WADA members present agreed on several other management changes applicable to the Portland SMU for the 2025/26 season:

- Canned product only.
- 0.5 tonne Optimal Target set for reef code 1.04 Blowholes.
- 0.3 tonne Optimal Target set for reef code 1.02 Whites Beach.
- 0.3 tonne Optimal Target set for reef code 2.10 Lawrence Rocks.
- No allocated catch for all other Portland reef codes, but a 0.3 tonne upper limit to allow exploratory fishing.
- Divers to maintain two sets of gear. One set for Portland to be hot washed, disinfected and dried after each use, and one set for the rest of the zone.

ITEM 6: GREENLIP TACC

Duncan introduced the greenlip TACC discussion and invited divers to provide comment on their observations while fishing over the season. The comments highlighted a lack of interest in greenlip as the combination of poor weather conditions and a slow market meant that catching their small allocation was not a profitable option.

There was consensus that the 2025/26 TACC should be maintained at 1.05t.

WADA recommended an allocation of 75kg of greenlip per quota unit and a voluntary minimum length of 140cm.

ITEM 9: SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

The Independent Chair thanked all participants for the constructive discussion and the consensus reached at each reef code, SMU, and zone level. The Chair outlined the next steps, with public consultation due to occur in coming weeks.

Anthony noted that Tasmanian Seafoods was not represented at the meeting and that the VFA would undertake consultation with them regarding the proposed TACC prior to public consultation.

Craig, on behalf of WADA, acknowledged the hardships experienced in the Western Zone and thanked attendees for their passion, stewardship, and long-term commitment to recovery.

Meeting closed at 4:00 pm

ACTIONS:

1. WADA to write to the VFA seeking advice on the suitability of changes to gear disinfection proposal for AVG biosecurity management
2. WADA to develop a LML proposal to be presented to the ASWG later in the year for consideration.
3. WADA to consider a proposal to implement a new reef code between 3.07 and 3.08, due to the distinctly different stocks in the area. Any proposal to be further developed with VFA and presented to the ASWG for consideration.

Summary or Portland SMU TACC for 2025/26

<i>SMU</i>	<i>Reef code</i>	<i>Reef name</i>	<i>2024/25 OT (t)</i>	<i>Recommended 2025/26 OT (t)</i>
Portland (6.5 tonnes allocated to SMU)	1.01	Discovery Bay	0	0
	1.02	Whites Beach	1.0	0.3
	1.03	Water Springs	1.5	0
	1.04	Blowholes	1.0	0.5
	1.05	The Tits	1.5	0
	1.06	Bully Cove/South Bridgewater	0.5	0
	1.07	Seal Caves	0	0
	1.08	Horseshoe	0	0
	2.01	Murrels	0	0
	2.02	Jones Bay	0	0
	2.03	Outside Nelson	1.0	0
	2.04	Devils Kitchen	0	0
	2.05	Inside Nelson	0	0
	2.06	Killer Waves	0	0
	2.07	Yellow Rock	0	0
	2.08	Cape Grant	1.0	0
	2.09	The Passage	0	0
	2.10	Lawrence Rocks	0	0.3
	2.11	Blacknose	0	0
	2.12	Hospital Reef	0	0
	2.13	Dutton Way	0	0
	2.14	Julia Bank	0	0
	2.16	Minerva Reef	0	0

Summary of other SMU TACC for 2025/26

<i>SMU</i>	<i>Reef code</i>	<i>Reef name</i>	<i>2024/25 OT (t)</i>	<i>Recommended 2025/26 OT (t)</i>
Julia Percy	3.01	JP North	0.6	0.6
	3.02	JP Northeast	0.6	0.6
	3.03	JP East	0.6	0.6
	3.04	JP Prop Bay	3.0	3.0
Port Fairy	2.15	Yambuk	0.0	0.0
	3.05	Crags	9.0	9.5
	3.06	Burnets	2.5	2.7
	3.07	Water Tower	2.0	2.0
	3.08	Lighthouse	1.0	1.0
Warrnambool	3.09	Mills	1.5	2.0
	3.1	Killarney	4.5	5.0
	3.11	The Cutting	3.0	3.5
	3.12	Thunder Point	3.5	3.0
	3.13	Lady Bay	0.0	0.0
	3.14	Levys Point	2.5	2.5