

RECORD OF MEETING

Meeting 45, 17 December 2025

VFA, Queenscliff & Online

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
Melissa Schubert	VFA Observer
Ross Bromley	Industry member (EZ)
Anthony McGrath	VRFish Executive Officer
Peter Galvin	Recreational fishing representative/ VRFish member
Lawrence Moore	Recreational fishing representative / VRFish member
Rob Timmers	Scuba Divers Federation Victoria member
Rohan Nicol	VFA observer and minute taker
Online	
Wayne Dredge	Industry member (EZ)
Apologies	
Naomi Barry	Coastal Indigenous Member
Anthony Ciconte	Giant Crab Fishery industry member
George Brocklesby	Industry observer
Craig Starrit	Recreational fishing representative observer
Gary Ryan	Industry member (WZ)
Zeb Johnston	Industry member (WZ)
Alex Haberfield	Industry member (WZ)

1. Preliminaries

1.1. Welcome

Ian Knuckey, Independent Chair, opened the meeting with an Acknowledgement of Country and welcomed all attendees to the 45th 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 Rohan Nicol (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. Ewan to Circulate the draft minutes.	Ewan	Completed
2. VFA to organise a compliance report be provided to the RLRAG every 6 months either via the presence of a compliance officer at meetings or a compliance presentation being provided to be presented at meetings.	Ewan	Members agreed that this action continue and that next report will be provided at the next RLRAG meeting.
3. A summary of the RLRAG's concerns regarding the proposed VFA restructure to be presented to the VFA.	Ewan	Edited to reflect appropriate outcome. Action completed following the release of the RLRAG 44 minutes.
4. VFA to finalise draft vessel survey form to consider for implementation at February/March RLRAG meeting in 2026.	David	To be reviewed at next RLRAG.
5. Klaas to provide a simplified explanation of nominal and standardised catch per unit effort (CPUE) to attendees at port meetings.	Klaas	To be discussed during section 4 of this meeting and outlined in the final stock assessment document.

6. Klaas to analyse historic catch rates and subsequent impacts on biomass and present at the next RLRAG meeting.	Klaas	To be presented at the next RLRAG meeting and in the release of the final stock assessment.
7. Next RLRAG meeting to have allocated time to discuss Eastern Zone harvest control rule review.	Ewan	Completed during dedicated RLRAG sub-committee meetings.
8. Ewan to circulate Katie's presentation to the group, noting it is not yet available for public release	Ewan	Completed
9. Katie to research the effects of La Nina and El Nino weather patterns on larvae connectivity.	Katie (Klass)	Klaas to follow up with Katie on the progress of this research.

2. Management Update

2.1. Future direction of RLRAG / MAC

Ewan Flanagan provided an overview of the new Rock Lobster and Giant Crab Management Advisory Committee (RLMAC) and revised RLRAG structure to be introduced in early 2026. The introduction of a RLMAC follows a key objective in the current management plan to deliver best practice fisheries management. The new structure, and associated draft terms of reference, have been developed with reference to the applicable Australian Fisheries Management Authority guidelines.

Key objectives of the new strategy include:

- Maintaining an independent resource assessment group, the RLRAG, focused on providing scientific advice.
- Broadening stakeholder input in assessing best practice fisheries management principles for the Rock Lobster and Giant Crab fisheries through the creation of the RLMAC.
- Allowing for separation between groups through independent chairs and, where possible, membership.
- Operating two meetings per year for each group, with the option for additional meetings and sub-committees as required.

The Chair requested comments from RLRAG members regarding the proposed new strategy. Comments are summarised as follows:

- i) Members noted that there was no mention of a quorum, which is usually set at two thirds of the membership. It was suggested that a quorum should be defined in the terms of reference regarding all recommendations by that committee/group.
- ii) A query was raised regarding the working relationship between the RLRAG and the RLMAC. The proposed new strategy suggested that the two committees operate independently of each other and consist of different members, where possible. RLRAG members expressed concern that there may not be enough willing participants from industry to fill two different committees. Further concerns were raised regarding the possible disconnect between the groups if there was no

overlap in membership. It was suggested that the wording surrounding the two committees was changed from 'independent' to 'different'.

The VFA clarified that this was an objective of the new structure but not a requirement and is not specified in the terms of reference documents. Where possible, the intention is that the groups will maintain a level of independence to ensure the focus of each is not compromised. It was further noted that the RLRAG Chair and dedicated scientist will be listed as members of the RLMAC, in addition to VFA members, thereby ensuring committee overlap.

- iii) It was suggested that the Terms of Reference should define sitting fees for members and the Chair where applicable.

The VFA clarified that, consistent with the current RLRAG arrangements, sitting fees would not be available to members, however, travel expenses would be claimable. This does not include the appointed chair which is a paid position.

- iv) It was noted that in the proposed terms of references, minor changes to the committee or group required approval from the VFA Executive. It was suggested that operational decisions be approved by fisheries management.
- v) It was suggested that there needs to be more explicit language within the RLMAC and RLRAG Terms of Reference regarding the remit and responsibilities of each. It was noted that there are only two listed categories of people to attend meetings: attendees and observers. There should also be provisions for participants invited as presenters or for their expertise.
- vi) It was proposed that the RLRAG Terms of Reference should more explicitly state that the RLRAG will assess the potential for further development of stock assessment models, encourage the peer review of stock assessments and evaluate different harvest strategies and models.

In response, it was noted that the Terms of Reference was drafted to be deliberately broad in its scope. Specific items to be reviewed by the RLRAG could be addressed in annual work plans.

- vii) It was proposed that the RLMAC terms of reference more explicitly define the role of the committee, including providing advice and recommendations on changes in policy, ERA risk assessments, compliance standards, export approvals, broader government policy and regulatory policy changes.

In response, it was noted that the Terms of Reference was drafted to be deliberately broad in its scope. Specific items to be reviewed by the RLMAC could be addressed in annual work plans.

- viii) In response to a query, it was confirmed that the RLMAC Terms of Reference and revised RLRAG Terms of Reference will be finalised prior to the committees being formed.

The VFA confirmed that it will be a priority over the next few months to finalise the new committee structure and invite expressions of interest from stakeholders.

Action: VFA to consider RLRAG feedback in finalising RLMAC and RLRAG Terms of Reference.

2.2. Giant Crab Harvest Strategy Outcomes

Ewan provided an overview of the new Harvest Strategy, implemented in June 2025. The final strategy is consistent with the version endorsed by the RLRAG in the March 2025 meeting. Notably, the tiered structure implemented in the strategy provides greater opportunity for growth in the TACC with increased data collection. The 2024/25 Stock Assessment, and subsequent 2026/27 total allowable commercial catch (TACC), is the first to be guided by the new strategy. Further, a Giant Crab Management Plan review is planned to commence in 2026. Noting that the RLRAG had already endorsed this strategy out-of-session, no further comments were provided.

2.3. Eastern Rock Lobster Catch

Ewan provided an update of possible changes to managing Eastern Rock Lobster catch. These changes follow a further objective of the Management Plan which aims to provide increased opportunity for targeting Eastern Rock Lobster.

Current advice from New South Wales Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development suggests that catch of Eastern Rock Lobster in Victoria through fishing effort is unlikely to impact the key breeding stock for this species in northern NSW. To ensure an appropriate level of precaution, initial management of the Victorian Eastern Rock Lobster stock will likely be on a 12-month trial basis.

Feedback from commercial members suggested that landing Eastern Rock Lobster will be purely bycatch as the population is not large enough to be targeted. Noting the importance of accurately recording each species, members suggested this shouldn't be difficult to achieve given that the species are visually very different when alive. RLRAG members supported implementing a bycatch provision for Eastern Rock Lobster, separating the species from current quota provisions.

A query was raised regarding whether the changes would be applied to the commercial and recreational rock lobster fishery. The VFA noted that the initial proposal focused on commercial harvest and it would need to consider any changes to recreational catch in further detail.

2.4. Recreational Reporting Program

Ewan provided a summary of the data collected during the 2024/25 recreational rock lobster reporting season, outlined in Table 1. This data is further presented in the Victorian Recreational Rock Lobster Reporting Program Summary Report 2025.

Table 1: 2024/25 Recreational Reporting Program Season Summary

	Total	East	West
Total Registered Users	2,148		
Total RL Caught	2,328	1,118	1,210
Total Male	1,693	720	973
Total Female	607	378	229
Average Length (cm)	14.84	15.08	14.63
Average Weight (kg)	1.77	1.89	1.66
Total Weight (kg)	4,128	2,113	2,015

Key takeaways from this season include the following:

- i) The total number of registered users reduced over the last 12 months and remains significantly lower than the initial four years of the program.
- ii) The total catch recorded increased for the second consecutive year, with total recorded harvest reaching above 4 tonnes for the first time since transitioning to the digital reporting platform.
- iii) Consistent with previous seasons, the reported size distribution continues to be most prevalent between 11 and 15cm carapace lengths; and larger lobsters, 18cm and over, are more commonly harvested from the Eastern Zone.

There was a notable shift to a greater average size recorded, particularly within the Western Zone, comparative to previous seasons.

- iv) Consistent with previous seasons, most of the catch was reported in December and January, which is likely to be associated with more favourable weather and diving conditions. Notably, the 2024/25 season also reported a very high catch in November, which was thought to be weather related.

Concerns were raised noting that the recreational reporting data is likely to underrepresent the recreational harvest since transitioning to digital reporting. Further to discussions for potential improvement in the reporting program, it was suggested that the VFA and VRFish will work together to promote the use of the reporting app and seek improvement in reporting accurately and quickly.

A member suggested the implementation of a fisher diary approach, citing success with the project in the Tasmanian fishery. It was noted that this approach is unlikely to improve the effectiveness of understanding total harvest. Further, burdening recreational fishers with a secondary reporting requirement is unlikely to be supported by the recreational fishing community.

A member noted that the compliance report presented at the last RLRAG suggested a lot of fishers don't know that it is a requirement to record rock lobster catch digitally. A member requested that there be some analysis conducted on the difference in time between catch date and the date that catch is reported.

RLRAG members cited the importance of accounting for all fishing mortality and reiterated recommendations from previous meetings that requiring catch to be reported at landing is likely to improve the quality of data collected. It was reinforced that an education campaign, supported by VRFish, would be the best current tool to address issues around rock lobster reporting.

Action: VFA and VRFish to meet to consider opportunities for improving participation in the Recreational Reporting Program.

Action: VFA to review reporting data to assess the time between the date of capture and date of reporting.

3. Monitoring Program Update

3.1. Season Results

David Reilly presented a monitoring program summary for the 2024/25 season.

Eastern Zone

Fixed site surveys were conducted at two of the three sites in the Eastern Zone during August/September 2025. A survey was not undertaken at the Torquay site due to poor weather conditions. Signs were more positive than the previous season, with a greater number of undersized lobsters observed during the survey.

There was a 70% increase in the number of lobsters measured from the Eastern Zone, mostly as a result of the increased participation of fishers in the voluntary pot sampling program.

It was noted that a number of fishers have recently reported numbers of small lobsters (60mm – 80 mm carapace length) at Torquay, Cape Schank, San Remo and further east. It is hoped that these observations are supported in the length frequency data collected during the 2025/26 season and signal a future increase in recruitment of lobsters into the fishery.

Western Zone

Fixed site surveys were conducted at seven of the eight sites in the Western Zone during February 2025. The site near Cape Bridgewater was not surveyed due to difficulties in finding a fisher willing to undertake the work at this time. Overall, results were promising, with the catch rates of undersized lobsters above the long-term average for all sites, except Warrnambool and Port Fairy.

David explained that in recent years it has been increasingly difficult to find fishers willing to undertake surveys at a number of the sites. Reasons for this include fishers finding it difficult to justify surveying areas with low catch rates; fishers electing not to fish deeper sites, yielding lighter coloured lobsters that tend to elicit a lower beach price; and fishers catching their quota quickly and finishing fishing before the survey starts in February. It was suggested that this should be a topic for discussion at the next RLRAG.

There was a good amount of length data collected through the on-board observer program during 2024/25, with the only area for improvement being some more survey days in the Apollo Bay region. This will hopefully be addressed through the recruitment of an observer who is located in the area.

Interest in voluntary pot sampling in the Western Zone has waned in recent years and as a result, fishers did not collect length data for the 2024/25 season. Whilst more important in the Eastern Zone where there is a lack of length data, an opportunity exists in the Western Zone to collect more data. The RLRAG agreed to consider potential strategies to improve data collection at its next meeting.

Action: RLRAG to consider opportunities for improved voluntary data collection in the Western Zone at next meeting.

Puerulus monitoring

The Southern Otway Landcare Network continue to undertake the monthly servicing of the puerulus collectors in Apollo Bay. Observed puerulus numbers were extremely low and the observed peak in settlement in August/September was absent for the 2024/25 season.

Recreational Rock Lobster Ruler

David reported that feedback received from the participants in the initial ruler trial was mostly positive. Fishers who report catch this season will be sent rulers if they are not already part of the trial.

4. Rock Lobster Stock Assessment Results

4.1. 2024/25 Western Zone Rock Lobster Results and Harvest Strategy Application

Klaas Hartman presented the stock assessment results for the Western Zone, 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.

Klaas presented an update on the Harvest Strategy application, and the TACC determination. The Chair suggested that it was worth writing up the CPUE band management approach, as it is unique to the Victorian fishery.

Members requested that Klaas provides an explanation of standardised CPUE compared to nominal CPUE within the stock assessment and further elaborate at the upcoming commercial port meetings.

It was noted that, should the fishery continue to rebuild, CPUE could be influenced by pot capacity wherein lobsters may be less likely to enter a pot already containing a high number of lobsters. This may cause a resultant impact on CPUE reaching a maximum threshold in the future.

It was further requested that axis labels be included in the biomass vs exploitation rate graph to clarify whether it is a representation of total biomass or total exploitable biomass.

Action: Klaas to include an explanation outlining the difference between standardised and nominal CPUE in the stock assessment report, and for discussion at port meetings.

Action: Klaas to rectify the outcome wording in the decision rule table in part 2a, which incorrectly states that CPUE has remained in the same band.

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

4.2. 2024/25 Eastern Zone Rock Lobster Results and Harvest Strategy Application

Klaas presented the stock assessment results for the Eastern Zone, 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 reached a record low of 11 active vessels in 2024/25. 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.

Members agreed that data collection guidelines need to be reinforced for voluntary fishers, ensuring that all rock lobsters are measured.

Klaas presented the RLRAG with an update on the Harvest Strategy Application, and the Harvest Control Rule TACC Determination. Given that the combined PRI remained below the threshold level, the Harvest Control Rule remains in the same band, with the same allocated TACC. It was noted that the harvest control rule will be reviewed again in June/July 2026, once further information is available.

Members noted that the decision rule wording in part 2b, relating to the PRI outcome, needs to be corrected to reflect the correct assessment season. The RLRAG endorsed the previous PRI sub-committee recommendation to consider the impacts of further data collection and a greater spread of fishing effort in its next PRI Harvest Control Rule review.

A member noted that a recent larval dispersal study, completed by the University of Tasmania, suggests the Eastern Zone stock has limited self-recruitment. As such, fishing of mature stocks is unlikely to have an impact on recruitment in the zone, and further TACC decreases are unlikely to improve pre-recruits. Members further noted that this study suggests stock health or egg production in other jurisdictions may be more likely to impact recruitment in the Victorian Eastern Zone. It was noted that the SAFS stock assessment egg production considers the whole Southern Rock Lobster stock.

In conclusion, members agreed that they share the same concerns as previous years for the zone, noting that the fishery does not rely on a self-sustaining population for recruitment.

Action: Klaas to rectify the outcome wording in the decision rule table in part 2b, which incorrectly states the assessment year.

RLRAG members endorsed following the Harvest Strategy, 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.

5. Giant Crab Stock Assessment Results

5.1. Stock Assessment Results and Harvest Strategy Application

Klaas provided a summary of the Giant Crab Fishery stock assessment results. The small number of operators and the slow growth rate of giant crabs create challenges in assessing the fishery.

Total catch remained very similar to levels observed over the previous 15 years. The mean weight increased slightly comparative to the previous season but has remained relatively constant for several years.

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 presented the Harvest Control Rule for the fishery. The Tier 1 control rule still applies due to limited length-frequency data currently collected. Tier 2 is not available until mandatory length-frequency sampling is introduced. 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 three-year CPUE running mean is nearing the target reference point, which could mean a move to the second tier of the harvest strategy if fishers invest in length frequency data collection. The importance of recording undersize and legal-sized discards was further noted.

Seafood Industry Victoria (SIV) will discuss the outcomes of the strategy with those in the industry who may like to consider additional data collection practices that will allow the fishery to achieve the Level 2 Harvest Control Rule.

Action: SIV to provide feedback to RLRAG regarding discussions of voluntary data collection with Giant Crab fishers.

RLRAG members supported following the Harvest Strategy by keeping the Giant Crab TACC at 8.5 tonnes under the Harvest Strategy.

6. Other Business

6.1. Seafood Industry Victoria Update

Matthew Wassnig provided an update from SIV. SIV continues to advocate for research into the impacts of offshore marine developments on rock lobster stocks and commercial fishing operations.

The Trans-Tasman Rock Lobster Conference, held in Victoria in August, was highly successful, attracting over 300 attendees and featuring strong presentations.

An MSC (Marine Stewardship Council) workshop was held in Port Fairy with participation from commercial fishers, Southern Rock Lobster Limited, MSC, VFA, Atlantis Fisheries Consulting Group, and representatives from other Australian lobster jurisdictions. The workshop clarified what MSC certification involves how the Victorian fishery compares to the current MSC standard, including where further improvement is likely needed.

While Victoria is well positioned to pursue MSC certification, it was concluded that the benefits must be considered. Options for the industry to consider include pursuing certification independently or supporting a whole-stock application across South Australia, Tasmania and Victoria. A whole-stock application is likely to be more cost-effective for Victorian fishers.

The Victorian Seafood Industry Awards will be held in March 2026 in Port Campbell with tickets and nomination forms currently available on the SIV website.

Finally, in preparation for the state election, SIV is developing objectives, strategies, and key priorities to present to members of parliament.

6.2. VRFish Update

Anthony McGrath provided a brief update as the new Executive Officer of VRFish. The focus is currently meeting with various recreational fishing groups in the lead up towards the next state election.

The Chair called the meeting closed at 14:45.

Schedule 1: Summary of meeting actions

Action	Responsibility	Timing
1. VFA to circulate the draft minutes.	Ewan	January
2. VFA to consider RLRAG feedback in finalising RLMAC and RLRAG Terms of Reference.	Ewan	January
3. VFA and VRFish to discuss options to improve community engagement the Recreational Rock Lobster Reporting Program.	Ewan, Anthony McGrath	April
4. VFA to review reporting data to assess the time between the date of capture and date of reporting.	Ewan	March/April
5. RLRAG to consider opportunities for improved voluntary data collection in the Western Zone.	David	Next RLRAG
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	Next RLRAG / port meetings
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	Next RLRAG
8. Klaas to rectify the outcome wording in the decision rule table in part 2b, which incorrectly states the assessment year	Klaas	Next RLRAG
9. Klaas to rectify minor errors in stock assessment.	Klaas Hartman	January
10. SIV to provide feedback to RLRAG regarding discussions of voluntary data collection with Giant Crab fishers.	Matt Wassnig	June/July
Items carried over		
11. VFA to organise a compliance update for the next meeting.	Ewan	Next RLRAG
12. Klaas to analyse historic catch rates and subsequent impacts on biomass and present at the next RLRAG meeting.	Klaas	Next RLRAG

Schedule 2: Summary of key recommendations

1. RLRAG members endorsed setting a TACC of 245 tonnes for the Western Zone Rock Lobster Fishery.
2. RLRAG members endorsed setting a TACC of 21 tonnes for the Eastern Zone Rock Lobster Fishery and further endorsed a secondary meeting to review the Harvest Control Rule relating to PRI.
3. RLRAG members endorsed setting a TACC of 8.5 tonnes for the Giant Crab Fishery.