

RECORD OF MEETING

Eastern Zone PRI Working Group, 3 July 2025

Online

CHAIR: Ian Knuckey

MEETING COMMENCED: 09:30 am

Present	
Ian Knuckey	Independent Chair
Ewan Flanagan	Victorian Fisheries Authority (VFA) / Executive Officer
David Reilly	VFA scientific member
Klaas Hartmann	Institute of Marine and Antarctic Studies (IMAS) member
Wayne Dredge	Industry member (EZ)
Ross Bromley	Industry member (EZ)
Anthony Cicone	Industry member
Matthew Wassnig	Seafood Industry Victoria member
Ben Scullin	VRFish member
George Brocklesby	Industry observer
Matthew Harry	Industry observer

1. Preliminaries

1.1. Welcome

Ian Knuckey, the Chair, opened the meeting with an Acknowledgement of Country and welcomed all attendees. Ian provided an overview of the meeting noting that it will run as a sub-committee of the Victorian Rock Lobster and Giant Crab Resource Assessment Group (RLRAG). Consistent with all RLRAG meetings, the discussion held is confidential until released to the public via meeting minutes published on the Victorian Fisheries Authority (VFA) webpage. Further, the discussions held at this meeting will be presented to the broader RLRAG for consideration prior to submitting any recommendations to the VFA. 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.

1.2. Adoption of agenda

Ian provided an outline of the meeting agenda and called for any additions to be made. The agenda was adopted as circulated.

2. Harvest Strategy Review

2.1. Overview of PRI in Harvest Strategy

Klaas Hartmann provided an overview of the Pre-Recruit Index (PRI) and its role in the harvest strategy. The harvest control rule within the strategy is based on standardised catch per unit effort (CPUE) in setting the total allowable commercial catch (TACC) but also includes a threshold reference point based on PRI. Under the harvest control, if the PRI is below the threshold for two consecutive seasons, it triggers a review of the rule. The Eastern Zone PRI has been significantly below the threshold over the last two seasons, recording almost no recruitment in the zone, and has hit this trigger resulting in the meeting today.

This rule exists due to the assumptions made under the rebuilding plan within this strategy. The CPUE-TACC table is based on assumptions that recruitment in each zone will be consistent with the long-term average level. Extended periods under the threshold are unlikely and potentially indicate these assumptions are no longer appropriate. Consequently, rebuilding timeframes and levels used to develop the harvest strategy may no longer be feasible.

It was noted that although the PRI is at very low levels, the standardized CPUE in the zone has increased for the last five years. As such, there appears to be a disconnect between PRI, as an indicator of stock abundance, and CPUE.

3. Data Review

3.1. Recent Data and Ongoing Trends

Klaas provided an overview of the recent data trends in the zone. The decrease in catch across the Eastern Zone has played a significant role in ensuring catch rates have remained high despite ongoing low recruitment. Consecutive low TACCs have enabled the zone to harvest lobsters from previous recruitments, however, the TACC has not been fully harvested in recent seasons.

Data obtained through the Observer Program has recorded a larger spread of sized rock lobsters, comparative to previous years, but only one undersize; albeit from a very low sample size. Similarly, the Fixed Site Program recorded very few undersize. Consistently, the two programs have indicated there is almost no undersize observed within the zone, ultimately resulting in a very low PRI. Noting that there is no evident correlation between egg production and recruitment, a query was raised regarding the relevance of the egg production limit reference point. Klaas advised that the recruitment area for a rock lobster fishery can change. As such, relying on wide-spread egg production is considered an important and precautionary measure.

Klaas further provided an overview of the results recorded in the Larval Dispersal Project, previously presented to the RLRAG. In summary, the areas significant in providing lobster larvae to the Eastern Zone include the Northwestern and Northern coasts of Tasmania; Southern South Australia; and, most prominently, Victoria's Western Zone. This research considers the period between 2004 and 2021. It was noted that while a more refined look at the most recent years could be beneficial, it may not be appropriate for this model. Despite this point, the group recommended a more focused analysis be conducted specific to the period aligning with the reduction in PRI in the Eastern Zone.

Action: Klaas to request a more detailed review of larval dispersal specific to the period associated with low PRI.

A query was raised regarding the limitations of the larval dispersal model. Klaas noted that coastal areas can present some issues as larvae may be retained in eddies and other land features. This issue is more prevalent in species with short larval periods. Given rock lobster has a longer larval period, the species is likely to be released into the pelagic environment eventually. This does, however, remain a limitation for lobster as the model assumes larvae is released directly into the pelagic environment without delay. Unfortunately, this issue is very difficult to ground truth.

Further research presented a significant correlation between the larval dispersal results and puerulus settlement data, however, this project doesn't consider any post-settlement survival impacts. Klaas clarified that while good settlement does not guarantee good recruitment, poor settlement will result in low recruitment.

3.2. On-water Observations

Following the review of recent data, industry representatives were asked to provide on-water observations. In summary, fishers are consistently seeing increased numbers of lobster just under or over the legal minimum length. It was noted that this observation correlates to the spike in PRI recorded in 2021/22.

The group agreed that low PRI over multiple seasons is concerning, but noted the low level

of data collection presents limitations in the ability to adequately assess recruitment in the fishery.

Two key issues were the limited spatial coverage of PRI data, predominantly collected from the western part of the Eastern Zone, and minimal participation from fishers in voluntary sampling to date. While it was noted the updated methodology in the voluntary sampling program was only provided to fishers in late 2024, adoption of voluntary sampling by fishers over the past few years remained very low across the zone.

Wayne Dredge advised he intends to commence fishing again in the Lakes Entrance region this season and is willing to provide significant length-frequency data. In addition, industry members proposed the following changes to the voluntary data collection:

- George, Matt Hary and Warne committed to daily sampling efforts.
- Wayne proposed increasing his sampling rate from three to five pots daily.
- There was consensus on adopting more structured and randomized sampling methods.
- To improve coverage, the group agreed to aim for sampling 10% of pot lifts. There was broad recognition that robust, representative sampling, rather than sheer volume, was essential.

A query was raised regarding the use of electronic monitoring within the fishery to provide digitally collected length frequency data. While this technology is considered an acceptable collection and verification tool, and offers an alternative to onboard observers, it is a complicated and costly program to implement and requires a willingness from fishers to participate. It is therefore unlikely to be a solution for this fishery in the short-term.

4. Future Role of PRI

4.1. Ongoing Role of PRI in Harvest Strategy

Considering the data presented, the Chair asked the group to consider options in response to the lack of recruitment recorded in the zone. It was noted that the zone currently has a very conservative TACC which has provided an additional layer of protection to the current biomass. Given the lack of data available, it was suggested that the focus should be on improving PRI data collection over the next six to twelve months. In addition, the current voluntary data collection could be refined to better collect samples.

Action: Dave to reconsider voluntary pot sampling program in collaboration with Matt Harry, George and Wayne.

Further to the voluntary data collection, Anthony proposed a single-vessel independent survey be conducted to collect the comprehensive length-frequency data assessment across the zone. The group agreed that this would be beneficial, particularly if implemented on an ongoing basis. Ewan noted that if the survey was to be cost-recovered, it would need to be organised through a tender process. If it was privately funded, including through an FRDC grant, approval would be acquired through the provision of a research permit. Ewan confirmed this data would be considered as an independent survey and could be utilised in the stock assessment.

Action: Anthony to investigate private research survey.

5. Chair Summary

The Chair provided a summary of the meeting as follows:

- The purpose of the meeting was to conduct a review that had been triggered in the harvest strategy due to consecutive years of PRI below the threshold reference point.
- Two key issues were identified in the zone's data collection:
 - i. The total lack of length-frequency data collected.
 - ii. The small spatial scale from which that data was collected.
- The current TACC is extremely precautionary, providing additional protection to the zone's biomass. In addition, the increase in catch rates is positive.
- Based on a range of considerations, the group recommended the following:
 - i. An increased focus on expanding the spatial extent of data collection, likely achieved through increased activity in the Lakes Entrance region.
 - ii. A revised voluntary pot sampling program to enhance representative data collection.
 - iii. An increase in the number of voluntary participants in the zone, noting that this was an element of the fee relief package currently in place.
 - iv. No further management response at this time, other than to reconsider the data collected in 12 months.
 - v. Anthony to consider feasibility of an independent survey across the Eastern Zone.

Action: David and Matt Wassnig to promote voluntary data collection involvement of Eastern Zone fishers.

The Chair thanked everyone for their involvement. The next steps will be to seek endorsement from the RLRAG on the outcomes above and present a recommendation to the VFA for consideration.

The Chair called the meeting closed at 12:00.

Schedule 1: Summary of meeting actions

Action	Responsibility	Timing
1. Draft minutes provided to group for review.	Ewan	July
2. Request a more detailed review of the larval dispersal data specific to the period associated with low PRI.	Klaas	Next RLRAG
3. Reconsider pot sampling program in collaboration with George, Matt Harry and Wayne.	David	Next RLRAG
4. Anthony to investigate private research survey.	Anthony	Next RLRAG
5. Contact Eastern Zone fishers to encourage participation in voluntary data collection program.	David / Matt Wassnig	Next RLRAG
6. Outcomes of meeting presented to RLRAG (electronically) for endorsement.	Ewan	July
7. RLRAG recommendations presented to VFA for consideration.	Ewan	October