

Mr. Travis Baulch
Abalone Fishery Manager
Victorian Fisheries Authority
2A Bellarine Highway
QUEENSCLIFF VIC 3225

Dear Mr. Baulch,

Abalone Victoria Central Zone (AVCZ) wishes to thank you and the VFA for the opportunity to comment on the proposed *Fisheries (Central Abalone Zone) Notice 2021* as per Section 3A of the *Fisheries Act 1995*.

The 2020/21 Fishing Season has impacted the abalone industry like none other, with global markets coming to a standstill as a result of ongoing COVID outbreaks.

The abalone resource has had what is likely to be the lowest level of commercial fishing effort ever recorded over the last 12 months. By the traditional end date of the 2020/21 Fishing Season (31 March 2021) only 120t of blacklip abalone had been harvested from Central Zone waters.

As a result of extremely low market demand, during the 2020/21 Fishing Season AVCZ and its members took the responsible approach to extend the season from 12 to 15 months which has reduced overall fishing effort by a further 25% across the zone. From whichever angle this is viewed, the Central Zone quota owners and divers by making this decision have committed to leaving stock on the bottom for the benefit of the abalone resource. This decision demonstrates our commitment to long term sustainability and resource stewardship.

Abalone exports currently remain slow, and as a result, it is now extremely unlikely that we will catch the full allocation of quota during the 2020/21 Fishing Season. On account of these factors beyond the control of industry members, VFA have enacted quota roll over provisions to support quota holders, divers and processors which is greatly appreciated. AVCZ fully supports the roll over provision, especially the distribution of uncaught quota over a 5 year period. Spreading catch over this period of time will allow uncaught stock additional time to spawn and contribute to future biomass.

Further to the conservative measures discussed above, LMLs were also increased across many key SMUs for the 2020/21 fishing season. Whilst there is currently no quantitative data able to demonstrate the outcomes of these decisions, AVCZ are extremely confident that we will see the abalone resource improve in the coming years.

At an industry meeting held to discuss the 2021/22 TACC, the majority of quota holders in the Central Zone supported a continuation of last season's 252.6t TACC with a reduction in allocation for the Back Beaches SMU down to 40t, with this 7t of displaced catch spread across the Otway, Shipwreck and Surf Coast SMUs. Members feel that the extension of the fishing season, increased LMLs and allowing uncaught quota up to 5 years additional time to spawn prior to harvesting provide the resource a significant benefit and any further TACC reductions are not necessary.

The concentration of fishing effort at reef codes 14.02, 14.03 and 14.04 within the Phillip Island SMU remain a concern for AVCZ. Following consultation with members regarding this issue, and discussions at the 27th May 2021 FRAG meeting, AVCZ will develop a discussion paper on options for best managing this issue. We appreciate the offer from you to make adjustments to the Fishery

Notice within season if needed, and will continue to work closely with VFA in the coming weeks to develop a robust solution.

With regard to the 2021 Stock Assessment and TACC Forum, AVCZ were extremely disappointed at the lack of emphasis placed on the shell measuring data which was added to the assessment as an appendix only. Little to no reference was made to the data at the TACC forum despite initial assurances from MRAG that the data would be regarded as a tool to help support the decision making process and enhance the stock assessment.

Furthermore, AVCZ maintains the position that the current format of Fishery Independent Survey data collection is not representative of how the stock is performing as survey sites are no longer in areas where abalone is commercially harvested.


AVCZ in conjunction with WADA and EZAIA welcome the opportunity to investigate this issue further as part of the FIS Review Working Group and look forward to progressing discussions through the Working Group. As Dr. Duncan Worthington has raised previously, the current way in which the FIS pre-recruit data influences Harvest Strategy outputs suffers from serious hypersensitivity issues which leads to fluctuations in catch allocations when not necessary. This continues to be of concern to AVCZ, although we trust that some of these issues will be rectified as part of the FIS Working Group which we reiterate our strong support for.

As I have stated throughout this correspondence, our industry has taken significant steps to benefit the abalone resource over the last 14 months, and we feel that continuation of the 2020/21 Blacklip TACC of 252.6t and 3.4t of Greenlip would be the most appropriate outcome for the 2021/22 Fishing Season.

I once again wish to thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Draft *Fisheries (Central Abalone Zone) Notice 2021* and hope that our comments will be well considered by The Hon. Melissa Horne, Minister for Fishing and Boating as part of the decision-making process.

If you wish to discuss this issue in greater detail, feel free to contact me or AVCZ Executive Officer Josh Cahill via phone or email any time.

Yours sincerely



Tony De Domenico OAM
Chairman
Abalone Victoria (Central Zone)

27th May 2021