

RECORD OF MEETING

Meeting #40, 6 December 2023

Online

CHAIR: Ian Knuckey

MEETING COMMENCED: 10:00 am

Present		
lan Knuckey	Chair	
Ewan Flanagan	Victorian Fisheries Authority / Executive Officer	
David Reilly	Victorian Fisheries Authority	
Klaas Hartmann	Institute of Marine and Antarctic Studies (IMAS)	
Genevieve Phillips	Institute of Marine and Antarctic Studies (IMAS)	
Ross Bromley	Industry member (EZ)	
Matthew Harry	Industry member (EZ)	
Alex Haberfield	Industry member (WZ)	
Zeb Johnston	Industry member (WZ)	
Gary Ryan	Industry member (WZ)	
Anthony Ciconte	Giant Crab Fishery industry member	
Matthew Wassnig	Seafood Industry Victoria	
Peter Galvin	Recreational fishing representative/ VRFish	
Lawrence Moore	Recreational fishing representative/ VRFish	
Robert Timmers	Scuba Divers Federation Victoria representative	
George Brocklesby	Industry observer	
Craig Starrit	Recreational fishing representative observer	
Apologies		
Wayne Dredge	Industry member (EZ)	
Ben Scullin	VRFish	
Naomi Barry	Coastal Indigenous Representative	

1. Preliminaries

1.1. Welcome

Ian Knuckey, the Chair, opened the meeting with an Acknowledgement of Country and welcomed all attendees to the 40th 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 the public, via meeting minutes published on the Victorian Fisheries Authority (VFA) webpage. Ian 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. A record of all attendees, apologies and affiliations is listed at the commencement of this document.

Ian also made note that this meeting had been moved to an online format to allow for greater attendance during a busy time of year for the industry.

1.2. Adoption of agenda

Ian provided an overview of the meeting and the agenda was adopted as circulated. Ian also called for additions to the agenda.

Peter Galvin raised the inclusion of puerulus translocation as an agenda item, referencing a presentation that had been put together by Len Joyce on the topic. Ian recommended that the item be submitted for Len to present at the next RLRAG. Klaas Hartmann noted that a study had been considered on this topic in Victoria, however, the practice wasn't considered viable at the time. Peter asked if it would be possible to have an ongoing update on the Tasmanian program. Klaas advised that this program had stalled in recent years.

1.3. Membership update

Ian provided a membership update confirming that Naomi Barry had taken on the position of Coastal Indigenous Representative. Naomi was an apology for the meeting.

1.4. 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. The chair confirmed Ewan Flanagan, Executive Officer, would take the minutes for this meeting.

Ewan ran through the action items from the previous meeting, noting several would be covered in today's agenda. In summary:

- 1. In response to Action 4, Genevieve Phillips advised that the OzLob model was on track to presented alongside the final stock assessment results at the next RLRAG.
- 2. In response to Action 5, David Reilly noted that enhancements to e-Catch were still under review by the VFA and not yet finalised.
- 3. In response to Action 6, David advised that the priority for length/weight conversion data was not to be focused on the voluntary commercial program. Klaas confirmed that while processor data would be helpful, it was not essential given the small sample size likely to be measured.
- 4. In response to Action 9, David confirmed that the crevice collectors used in the

puerulus program had now been retired in favour of the basket collectors. David noted the positive response to the program involving the Otway Landcare Group and thanked that group for its contribution.

2. Management Update

2.1. Management Plan Review and Timelines

Ewan provided an update on the Management Plan timelines, reminding the group that the Management Plan consultation process closes for comment on Sunday, 10th December 2023. Ewan advised that the intention is to conduct a final meeting with the Rock Lobster Management Plan Review Steering Committee early next year to consider all responses received during consultation.

2.2. AVG Update

Ewan provided an update on the recent Abalone Viral Ganglioneuritis (AVG) outbreak, noting it is now considered an endemic disease. A very small sample size of infected abalone was identified at Point Danger near Portland in August this year. In response, the VFA implemented a control notice which closed all high-risk fishing activities within the designated area for a three-month period. Rock lobster fishing was included in the prohibited activities. Intensive surveillance diving also commenced immediately to determine further signs of the outbreak. In positive news, no further signs of the virus were identified and all fishing activity has now resumed within this area.

The request submitted to FRDC regarding rock lobster-AVG research is currently under consideration. This project specifically aims to consider the level of risk associated with rock lobster potting acting as a vector of transmission for AVG.

2.3. Recreational Reporting Program Update

Ewan provided an overview of the rock lobster reporting program results since the season opened on 16 November 2023. In summary, as at the 5 December 2023, a total of 200 participants had signed up, of which 121 fishers had recorded catch. A total of 135 and 208 rock lobster had been caught in the Eastern Zone and Western Zone respectively. Of these, an average length of 13.87cm was recorded, which equated to 474kg in total.

The rock lobster recreational fishing App has been updated recently to allow fishers to select a species. This was introduced to account for the increasing percentage of eastern rock lobster caught on the north-eastern coast of Victoria. Ewan advised that comments received to date had been positive and he requested feedback from any members that had trialled the app.

Rob Timmers advised he had reported two rock lobster in the Eastern Zone that had automatically defaulted to *Western Zone* on his home screen. Ewan agreed that this needed to be investigated by the App developers. Overall, Rob advised that he found the app easier to use, however, he was concerned about the low uptake. Rob also queried how the weight figure was derived and raised concerns about using an average weight. David Reilly confirmed that the formula was based on carapace length, applied to each individual rock lobster.

Craig Starrit asked if the length/weight conversion formula was different for the eastern

rock lobster species. Ian noted that New South Wales (NSW) fisheries has a formula used for this species. Ian suggested contacting NSW Fisheries to request information on this topic. Klaas advised there was no evidence to suggest sustainability concerns regarding eastern rock lobster given the low over levels landed.

Lawrence Moore asked if it was still the intention to separate eastern rock lobster quota, to which the VFA advised that is planned for the next TACC setting.

Action: Ewan to follow up with the App developers to ensure the zone recorded did not default to the West when the East was entered.

Action: Ewan to contact NSW Fisheries to discuss Eastern Rock Lobster quota limits and length/weight conversions.

2.4. Recreational Measuring Device Update

David Reilly provided an update on the proposed rock lobster measuring device, noting the device was a ruler only and is in addition to the current gauge. This decision reflected feedback that suggested the ruler was not suitable to carry whilst diving. The VFA is currently considering quotes for production of a stainless tool comparative to an alternative plastic option. The VFA and VRFish have also discussed producing the stainless tool as an ongoing saleable product via the VRFish online store.

Rob raised the concern that the VFA had removed plastic tags from the reporting program in an effort to reduce plastic, yet now it was considering producing a plastic tool. David advised that production costs is a significant consideration. Ian further noted that the plastic tags were single-use items unlike this tool.

3. Monitoring Program Update

David provided an overview of the monitoring program. In summary, the Eastern Zone measured 450 rock lobsters, of which 75 came from on-board observers, 345 from fixed sites and 30 from the voluntary fisher log. This number is significantly less that the target of 2,500 measurements, presenting ongoing issues in obtaining length frequency data in the Eastern Zone.

David noted it is important to boost the number of fishers collecting length frequency data in this zone. While fixed sites are important, collecting the majority of data from fixed site surveys does not provide a good overall representation of the fishery.

Matt Wassnig commented that it is important to acknowledge the low catches across a large spatial extent of the Eastern Zone fishery and the difficulty in absorbing costs associated with a comprehensive commercial data collection regime. David agreed that the size of the zone presented challenges but also noted the importance of the data collected.

Matthew Harry reflected the current target of 2,500 equates to approximately 25% of the total allowable commercial catch (TACC). This target is therefore no longer realistically achievable. David noted that this target was considered realistic and required when originally developed for a fishery of significantly higher catches. Encouraging greater involvement from more fishers should now be the focus. Klaas confirmed that this target was reflective of the requirements for a fishery with much higher catches. The conservative approach now employed within this fishery is less data intensive. However, while 2,500

samples are no longer necessary, a greater number of samples that that currently collected would be better. A smaller amount of data across several pots provides a better indication of the fishery than larger amounts of data from the few fixed sites. Ian suggested that a meeting be held out of session to consider a more realistic set of targets for the Eastern Zone.

David provided a similar overview of the Western Zone. In summary, a total of 10,171 rock lobsters were measured. Of these, 3,271 were part of the on-board observer program, 6,621 were from the fixed sites, and 279 were part of the voluntary log program. The majority of the observer program data comes out of the Warrnambool region. David advised that it would be good to improve the spread of observer days across the zone and encourage greater participation in the voluntary pot program. Ian suggested that the VFA also conduct a meeting with a Western Zone representative to assess targets.

David provided an overview of the commercial logbook data for the 2022/23 season. In the Eastern Zone, the Queenscliff region accounts for over 80% the total catch. In the Western Zone, the Portland region accounts for over 50% of the total zone's catch.

Craig Starrit requested an update on the progress of the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) Certification. Matt Wassnig advised that Southern Rocklobster Limited (SRL) was leading the application to undertake an MSC pre-assessment. Seafood Industry Victoria (SIV) will seek to represent the views of its members throughout the pre-assessment process. In response to a query regarding the recreational sector's involvement, Klaas advised that it is uncommon for MSC certifications to include the recreational fishery. Klaas also confirmed all members of the public can provide comment during the assessment stage but not generally during pre-assessment.

Action: VFA to propose meeting time with Klaas, Matt Wassnig and an Eastern and Western Zone representative to review monitoring program targets for each zone.

4. Rock Lobster Stock Assessment Preliminary Results

4.1. Rock Lobster Western Zone Stock Assessment Results

Klaas Hartman provided an overview of the preliminary stock assessment results in the Western Zone. Catch has remained relatively steady across the zone while effort consistently reduced in recent years. The reduction in effort is consistent with factors such as reduced fleet size and increased efficiency. The nominal catch rate has continued to increase, more so that the standardised catch per unit effort (CPUE). This is not unexpected given the strength of the Western Zone fishery and can likely be attributed to factors such as high grading, fishing to size and fishing during periods of higher demand.

Considering the regions, the Portland region has followed similar trends to the zone overall. Similarly, in the Warrnambool region the effort is significantly down while the CPUE results are significantly higher, particularly in regard to the nominal CPUE. The Apollo Bay region has followed similar trends to the rest of the zone. Klaas referred to the industry members in the room for further comment who agreed these figures were reflective of on-water observations.

Klaas provided an overview of the length frequency data, comparing recent seasons with the 2011/2012 season. Klaas noted the number of lobsters recorded in the exact bin corresponding to the legal minimum length was consistently low. It was suggested this may

be reflective of a rounding error in data recording rather than actual length frequencies. Klaas advised that this discrepancy has little impact on the harvest strategy. David confirmed that there is no directive to round data differently at the legal minimum length and that all measurements should be rounded down to the nearest millimetre. A question was raised as to whether this could be reflective of the fact that most observer data is derived from the Warrnambool region, however, this is considered inconclusive. Klaas advised that the spread of size classes represents a healthier fishery than when samples are grouped closer to the legal minimum length. Klaas advised that the female data provided less spread across larger size classes which is reflective of the slowing rate of growth in older female rock lobsters.

Klaas provided an overview of the undersize catch rate, taking into consideration the observer program and fixed sites which provide the final Pre-Recruit Index (PRI). The Fixed Site Surveys experience the same issue regarding recorded length frequencies at the legal minimum size. The last three seasons have experienced consistently high PRI levels before dropping back slightly over the last year. Klaas noted that as biomass builds up, the stock is less reliant on a higher PRI each year. Despite the reduction, Klaas confirmed he is confident the Western Zone will be above the 20% threshold. A concern was raised noting that the zone is currently sitting at only 22%. The current state is considered acceptable given that recruitment is likely being affected by other factors such as settlement. Recruitment to the 60mm size class has been averaging at a lower rate since the early 2000s. Data is only available up to 2015/16 as the indicator estimation relies on multiple years. Klaas noted that recruitment to the legal-size class is slightly lower in recently years and has potentially been affected by the lower legal size class data.

4.2. Application of Harvest Strategy for the Western Zone

Klaas discussed the application of the harvest strategy based on the stock assessment results. While not finalised, at the time of the meeting, the zone will very likely meet part 1 of the Harvest Control Rule and be above the limit reference point of 20 percent of the virgin level of egg production with a 90 percent probability. Part 2 of the Harvest Control Rule considers the TACC determination. CPUE has increased comparative to the previous year and the PRI is above the threshold level of 1.63 undersize per pot-lift. As such, the Western Zone will move to band 2 of the harvest strategy. While the TACC will remain at 242 tonnes, Band 2 will result in a quicker drop in TACC if the CPUE falls.

Gary Ryan referred to Southern Rocklobster Limited's application for MSC certification in relation to the rebuilding strategy and queried whether it would be possible to see a 20-year trajectory. Klaas agreed that it would be beneficial to highlight how the zone is tracking and advised he would provide one at the next RAG.

Action: Klaas to provide a trajectory of how the zone is tracking under the rebuild strategy at next RAG.

4.3. Rock Lobster Eastern Zone Stock Assessment Results

Klaas provided an overview of the Eastern Zone stock assessment results. While nominal CPUE has declined, standardised CPUE has risen substantially. Generally, stocks in the Eastern Zone are of concern but are considered to be in a better position that what was expected given apparent low recruitment.

The Queenscliff region accounted for the majority of catch. It therefore provided the most

robust data and the most accurate reflection of the zone. While nominal CPUE remained consistent for this region, the standardised CPUE has increased. The San Remo region has experienced a slight reduction in nominal CPUE but a slight increase in standardised CPUE. The Lakes Entrance region was not fished during the past season. As there is limited data coming out of the San Remo and Lakes Entrance regions, this data does not provide a strong assessment of the zone and undermines the method of averaging catch rates across the zone. Klaas referenced the CITES report which suggests all regions should contribute the same proportions of overall catch. The heavy proportion of effort and associated catch in the Queenscliff region warrants reconsideration of how CPUE is calculated for this zone.

Matthew Harry noted that current market conditions and fuel prices are a critical component in determining areas fished. Given the Lakes Entrance region has had little effort recently, catch rates should be high when it is next fished. Matthew questioned how the future strategy will account for the lack of fishing, particularly within the Lakes Entrance region. Klaas noted this will need to be considered in the final Harvest Strategy discussion.

Rob asked how this would affect the recreational sector. Klaas noted this is problematic for the recreational allocation, however, there are also issues in basing the recreational allowance on biomass alone. Further to Rob's query, Ewan confirmed the VFA has no intention to unnecessarily close the fishery to the recreational sector.

Actions:

VFA to consider data agreement with the fishers in the San Remo region.

VFA and IMAS to consider the effects of areas with no fishing effort on the new Harvest Strategy.

4.4. Application of Harvest Strategy for the Eastern Zone

Klaas discussed the application of the harvest strategy for the Eastern Zone based on the stock assessment results. There is no formal assessment this season in the Eastern Zone and it is difficult to make observations based on the limited observer and fixed sites data. PRI results, however, produced a low level of undersize rock lobster. Voluntary sampling is important and will assist in providing a bigger picture. Matthew Harry commented that he had observed a consistent number of undersize rock lobsters this season as in previous seasons. Fixed sites may be affected by larger rock lobster in these areas dominating territory, particularly once they enter pots (agnostic behaviour).

Klaas summarised that the Eastern Zone had a minimal increase in standardised CPUE (0.001kg per pot lift). CPUE in the Queenscliff region has reduced slightly. As the PRI has remained below the threshold level and the CPUE has remained in the current CPUE range, there is no change to the Eastern Zone CPUE band. If the PRI is below the threshold level for a second consecutive year, this will trigger a review of the harvest control rule. As such, a review may be required next year.

Ross Bromley commented that it is concerning that the CPUE is flat, the PRI is declining and total catches are approximately half of the TACC. Modelling is based on the notion that the total TACC is harvested yet, despite the lower catches, the zone doesn't appear to be improving. A number of members agreed that this is a concerning sign in the Eastern Zone fishery.

Matthew Harry commented that the size of the Eastern Zone fishery is playing a large role in these results. A lack of fishing effort from key operators in the Lakes Entrance region is

greatly affecting data. Matthew further noted the market influences have played a large role in determining where operators are fishing. While all the effort has been in Queenscliff, this region has remained relatively steady.

Further comments in the room suggested the data did not provide a positive picture, particularly considering the PRI had declined over the past two years. Ian commented that a lack of recruits is concerning and that the fishery needs to consider a management strategy that accounts for the absence of regional data. Klaas noted that the data from the Queenscliff region suggests the area is being sustainably fished and is on a positive rebuilding trajectory.

The chair called a 20-minute tea break

4.5. Stock Assessment Discussion Summary

The chair summarised the stock assessment discussion noting that there is a concern for the Eastern Zone based on a lack of data and low levels of recruitment observed. Matt Wassnig acknowledged that point but noted there should not be an overreaction to these results. It is important to note that here will be fluctuations in the CPUE and PRI from year-to-year as the stock rebuilds. This could also be an artefact of a small data source from a limited number of fishers.

Rob raised the question of when the RLRAG determines the biomass tonnage for this season. Klaas commented that this assessment is generally about the application of the harvest strategy. As the Eastern Zone is not completing a stock assessment an accurate biomass cannot be determined this season, however, it is approximated at 800 tonnes.

Craig raised whether there is a higher number of males in the fishery, however, this is inconclusive. Craig also queried whether the lower legal minimum length for females potentially resulted in fewer large female rock lobster. Klaas advised that the legal minimum lengths were based on similar ages for each sex class and that restricted size limits were likely to result in limited benefits.

Ian thanked Klaas for his work and concluded that the process is to now summarise the comments by the RLRAG. The TACC recommendation was confirmed as per the recommended levels in the summary report.

4.6. Consideration of Vessel Efficiency Factors

In the interests of time, vessel efficiency considerations will be discussed at a future date.

5. Australian Lobster Model Update

Genevieve Phillips provided a brief background of the Australian Lobster Model (OzLob) noting the aim is to develop a model to be used across all Southern Rock Lobster fisheries in Australia. In Victoria, the model is working towards the final stock assessment to be presented in February.

The OzLob model has a similar egg production trend to the current model's but estimates recent egg production to be slightly higher.

Trends in biomass follow very similar patterns when comparing the two models. There is a sharp increase in this model for the 2022/23-year comparative to the current model, however, this is likely an artefact of the model and may not remain once the length-frequency data are included. The fits to length-frequency data are generally considered good, however, these will likely improve as more data are added.

In reference to a comment made earlier in the day suggesting larger lobsters can prevent smaller lobsters from entering pots, it was queried whether the model can consider this. The model incorporates both selectivity (the size distribution of lobsters that can enter pots) and catchability (the likelihood of particular lobsters going into and remaining in a pot). If a larger lobster gets into the pot, the selectively of the pot hasn't changed. The catchability of smaller lobsters may be decreased, however, if larger lobsters prevent smaller lobsters from entering. The model accounts for catchability by estimating it for both males and females, based on the data we are providing the model. This includes length-frequency data and catch data. It also relies on other parameters in the model such as mortality, selectivity etc. Catchability could be a fixed parameter in the model by supplying the data to the model rather than relying on model estimations. While complicated, Genevieve noted it may be possible to account for this, with additional research data, such as behavioural experiments, or data from cameras on pots that show exclusion of smaller lobsters by larger lobsters.

It was noted that rock lobsters may be less likely to enter a pot in shallower water due to turbulence. Genevieve and Klaas advised that depth was already accounted for in the CPUE calculations which would help to account for fewer lobsters in shallower depths. Additional research results, such as length-frequency data from shallow sites or additional research projects, could provide additional information. This could then be incorporated in catchability and/or selectivity parameters in the new model.

Genevieve concluded that the results are positive for the new OzLob model in considering how closely it aligns with the current Victorian model. Comparison with other states remains ongoing.

6. Giant Crab Stock Assessment Results

6.1. Stock Assessment Results

Klaas provided an overview of the giant crab stock assessment results. It was confirmed that there is an agreement from industry to disregard the minimum boat limit for the purposes of disclosing data for the stock assessment. The TACC is generally fully harvested and catches from the fishery had been maintained at a steady TACC until the recent reduction to 7.5 tonnes. Recent concerns regarding under-reported effort suggested the CPUE was not as high as originally thought. The most recent data point in 2020/21 was verified and confirmed that CPUE declined between 2013/14 and this point. In the most recent two seasons the catch rate has increased. As it is essentially a sole operator fishery, results are problematic as a result of an inability to standardise data. Klaas noted that the FRDC project for length frequency data will offer significant benefits to this fishery.

The mean weight data has shown a slight decrease. Coupled together with an increasing CPUE, this is potentially reflective of a higher abundance of smaller crabs reaching the legal minimum size. Klaas noted there is little length frequency data to consider, with 2014 providing the most robust dataset.

6.2. Application of Harvest Strategy

Klaas advised that the new harvest strategy remains on hold while the issues surrounding reported effort are finalised. All indicators are currently above the thresholds required for this fishery. The limit reference point is at 0.52kg per pot lift and the Trigger Reference Point is at 0.42kg per pot lift. The TACC will remain consistent for the current year. Klaas clarified that the harvest strategy currently does not have a mechanism to increase the TACC. A review is triggered in the event that an indicator declines in two consecutive years. Under the draft harvest strategy, there is a two-tier mechanism built in for TACC increases.

Ian concluded that the TACC will remain at the current level of 7.5 tonnes.

Action: Provide information to Anthony Ciconte as he was absent for this section of RAG

7. Other Business

7.1. Seafood Industry Victoria Update

Matt Wassnig confirmed that the Victorian Rock Lobster Committee (VRLC), as a subcommittee of SIV, will provide a submission in response to the Draft Management Plan consultation process. To support the consultation process, the VRLC provided a summary of the catch and TACC history of the fishery to all rock lobster licence holders. In addition, a and a summary of the proposed harvest strategy was also provided to assist members in understand the rationale and implications. Matt thanked the VFA for its assistance in drafting this document.

Matt also advised that SIV, in conjunction with VRFish and the Abalone Council Victoria, is reviewing available literature on the potential impacts of seismic testing on recreationally and commercially important species. SIV has also provided feedback on a proposed compensation protocol for displacement of fishing effort.

SIV has put forward two research priorities for funding that look at impacts to rock lobster populations associated with seismic surveying in shallow near shore environments, and electromagnetic fields associated with offshore wind infrastructure.

Finally, Matt noted that SIV has expressed interest in hosting the 2025 Trans-Tasman Rock Lobster conference which offers significant opportunities to promote the Victorian Rock Lobster industry and the local seafood sector more broadly.

7.2. Southern Rocklobster Limited Update

Gary Ryan provided an update from SRL noting there had been a few changes in board members. SRL is currently seeking a new scientific representative. MSC certification is still progressing through the pre-assessment stage.

The Chair called the meeting closed at 16:00.

Schedule 1: Actions from meeting 40

Action	Responsibility	Timing
06 December Actions	•	•
1. Ewan to Circulate the workplan with the draft minutes.	Ewan	October
2. Create standing item to review the previous year at first RLRAG meeting.	Ewan	February
3. VFA to follow up with App developers regarding zonal reporting error.	Ewan	Immediately
4. VFA to contact NSW regarding the possible inclusion of Eastern Rock Lobster Quota	Ewan	January
5. VFA, SIV and an industry representative to meet and discuss monitoring program targets	David	January
6. Klaas to provide a trajectory of how each zone is tracking under the rebuild strategy at next RAG.	Klaas	February
7. VFA to consider data agreement with the fishers in the San Remo region (if required)	Ewan	January
8. VFA and IMAS to consider the effects of no fishing effort on the new Harvest Strategy	Klaas / Ewan	January
 9. Genevieve to provide optimal OzLob model alongside next year's stock assessment. Review different input parameters / sensitivity analyses 	Genevieve	February
10. VFA to provide Anthony Ciconte with giant crab stock assessment summary presentation	Ewan	December
11. David to raise future enhancement to Vic e-Catch to include functionality to report under voluntary pot program.	David	Ongoing
 12. Vessel Efficiency Factors David to provide historic vessel survey data to Klaas. Klaas to raise discussion at next RLRAG meeting with a larger commercial presence. 	David/Klaas	January
13. David to follow up with Eastern Zone fishermen regarding voluntary observer data.	David	December