

RECORD OF MEETING

Meeting 47, 3 September 2026

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
Ross Bromley	Industry member (EZ)
Wayne Dredge	Industry member (EZ)
Gary Ryan	Industry member (WZ)
Peter Galvin	Recreational fishing representative/ VRFish member
Lawrence Moore	Recreational fishing representative / VRFish member
Rohan Nicol	VFA observer and minute taker
Apologies	
Alex Haberfield	Industry member (WZ)
Matt Harry	Invited participant – commercial fisher (EZ)
George Brocklesby	Invited participant – commercial fisher (EZ)

1. Preliminaries

1.1. Welcome

Ian Knuckey, Independent Chair, opened the meeting with an Acknowledgement of Country and welcomed all attendees to the 47th meeting of the Victorian Rock Lobster and Giant Crab Resource Assessment Group (RLRAG). Ian advised that RLRAG discussions are confidential until released publicly through meeting minutes published on the Victorian Fisheries Authority (VFA) webpage. Attendees may be asked to leave the room during discussions where a conflict of interest is identified. Attendees were asked to disclose any potential conflicts of interest.

Ian then noted all apologies for the meeting.

1.2. Overview of meeting and adoption of agenda

Ian provided an outline of the meeting agenda, calling for any additions to be made.

Members agreed to add a discussion and consideration of research projects proposed through Southern Rocklobster Limited (SRL).

Ian further suggested introducing a standing agenda item for updates from commercial and recreational members representing each sector. Members agreed to add this to agenda item 2.1 for today's meeting.

Action: Introduce a standing agenda item providing updates from each commercial zone and the recreational sector.

1.3. Minutes and actions from last meeting and 2025 PRI Review Meeting.

The minutes from the last meeting and 2025 PRI Review 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, 2025 PRI Review Meeting, and subsequent comments, are summarised as follows:

Action	Responsibility	Status
Actions from RLRAG 46		
1. VFA to circulate the draft minutes.	Ewan	Completed
2. Ewan and Ian to meet and discuss possible structure of induction meeting for RLMAC and RLRAG.	Ewan	Completed
3. VFA to provide education to fishers on bycatch requirements at the upcoming port meetings.	Ewan / David	Completed
4. David to lead a review of the monitoring program at the next RLRAG, detailing all current data collection methods, to identify any areas for efficiencies and/or improvements. David to	David	Agenda Item 4

provide supporting papers prior to that meeting.		
5. Klaas to present Australian Lobster Model development at the next RLRAG meeting.	Klaas	Agenda Item 5
6. Klaas to present a simplified historic catch rate analysis at the upcoming port meetings.	Klaas	Completed
7. VFA and VRFish to discuss options to improve community engagement with the Recreational Rock Lobster Reporting Program.	Ewan / Anthony McGrath	Ongoing
8. SIV to provide feedback to RLRAG regarding discussions of voluntary data collection with Giant Crab fishers.	Matt	Update today
Actions from Eastern Zone PRI Meeting (3 July 2025)		
1. Request a more detailed review of the larval dispersal data specific to the period associated with low PRI.	Klaas	Update today
2. Reconsider pot sampling program in collaboration with George, Matt, Harry and Wayne.	Klaas / David	Update today
3. Anthony to investigate private research survey.	Anthony Ciconte	Outstanding
4. Contact Eastern Zone fishers to encourage participation in voluntary data collection program.	David / Matt	Update today
5. Outcomes of the meeting presented to RLRAG (electronically) for endorsement.	Ewan	Completed
6. RLRAG recommendations presented to VFA for consideration.	Ewan	Completed

Members agreed that Ewan is to follow up with Anthony Ciconte regarding the status of Action Item 3 from the PRI Meeting. It was noted that this survey was intended to be a one-off, snapshot survey, rather than an ongoing survey program.

2. RLRAG Structure

2.1. Sector updates

Gary Ryan provided an update on fishing in the Western Zone. Catch rates have continued to improve broadly across the Western Zone but have varied across different locations. Prices have fluctuated and are now back at levels similar to those experienced prior to the disruption in the Chinese market. Increasing catch rates have helped to maintain or improve profitability for fishers. Operating costs, including bait, fuel and lease costs have increased, but the higher catch rates have helped offset these costs. With diesel prices expected to

increase again, fishers may choose to fish inshore and use less bait, which can result in lower catch rates. Maintaining good catch rates will be important for fishers' profitability. Most fishers in the zone are using cost saving measures to combat increased operating costs.

Wayne Dredge provided an update on fishing in the Eastern Zone. He reported finding good numbers of lobsters across the fishery, particularly east of Wilsons Promontory. He has observed more undersize lobsters than he has previously seen, along with a high number of large lobsters. This was supported by observations of more large lobster by recreational fishing representatives.

Wayne was of the view that lower fishing pressure has had positive implications for the fishery and noted the increase in pre-recruits observed last year, which he had not previously seen. Wayne inquired about the status of the RLRA's previous proposal to have Eastern Rock Lobster recognised as bycatch, allowing fishers to retain them for sale without affecting their Southern Rock Lobster quota. Klaas Hartmann noted that the New South Wales Department of Primary Industries, as the key manager of Eastern Rock Lobster, was not concerned about the small number being caught in Victoria, as this would not have implications for overall stock health. The VFA noted that the concept was still being explored and that provisions in the *Fisheries Act 1995* relating to the structure and management of quota need to be considered. Future consideration of this change is likely to be a matter for the new management advisory committee rather than the RLRA.

2.2. Membership responsibilities and structure

Ian Knuckey outlined the role and purpose of the RLRA, including reviewing fishery data and stock assessments, assessing fishery performance against the harvest strategy, identifying information gaps and priorities, and providing recommendations to the VFA on stock status and management needs. Ian outlined the RLRA membership and operating arrangements including member responsibilities, confidentiality requirements, conflicts of interest and decision-making structure.

A Register of Interests will be maintained, with members required to declare any relevant interests during meetings. Members may be required to leave the meeting where a significant conflict of interest exists.

The importance of the group being well informed, operating within its Terms of Reference and having clear priorities and plans was also discussed.

2.3. RLRA workplan review

Ian reviewed the 2026 management workplan and invited comments from RLRA members.

Matt Wassnig asked why RLRA input into the RL management plan review was not included in the workplan. It was noted that this would be included in the workplan for the following year.

Harvest strategy and stock assessment training will be provided to Rock Lobster and Giant Crab Management Advisory Committee (RLMAC) members at the first RLMAC meeting, in accordance with the RLRA's previous recommendation.

3. Management Update

3.1. 2026 commercial port meetings summary

Ewan provided an overview of the key outcomes from the 2026 port meetings for the Eastern Zone, held in Apollo Bay and San Remo, summarised as follows:

- Support for the current harvest strategy and TACC level, with fishers noting positive signs during the 2025/26 season
- A notable increase in the number of undersized lobsters observed across the zone
- Support for changes to the management of Eastern Rock Lobster, although these changes are likely to impact only specific areas
- Strong support for recreational reporting to occur at the place of landing
- Concerns regarding a significant reduction in compliance statistics
- The availability of leased quota is likely to impact the ability to collect length-frequency data
- A need to consider a reduction in pot numbers or mandatory soak times.

The RLRA considers the proposed changes to the management of Eastern Rock Lobster to be a great opportunity for the commercial fishery but noted that the RLRA should monitor the proportion of Eastern Rock Lobster forming the Eastern Zone's total catch.

Ewan noted that compliance updates will be provided annually at RLMA meetings rather than RLRA.

The group raised concerns around fishers using a two-day soak time, including potential impacts on catch and effort, CPUE and lobster mortality. Safety considerations associated with soak times were also discussed, including the best approach to manage soak times. An action item in the current Rock Lobster Management Plan outlines that the changes in the Eastern Zone be implemented through a legislative instrument, and the Western Zone through the industry code of practice.

Ewan provided an overview of the key outcomes from the 2026 port meetings for the Western Zone. Port meetings were held at Apollo Bay, Port MacDonnell and Port Fairy and discussions were summarised as follows:

- Mixed support for the TACC recommendation, with some licence holders supporting an increase prior to the meetings and others supporting the current TACC and rebuilding plan. The majority supported continuing with the harvest strategy and rebuilding plan until the next scheduled review, which is due to commence in 2027.
- Strong support for recreational reporting to occur at the place of landing
- Concerns regarding a significant reduction in compliance inspections, specifically relating to recreational inspections. It was further noted that commercial targets have been generally achieved.
- Proactive responses to seal exclusion device requirements as part of the Commonwealth government export accreditation renewal
- Discussion regarding reducing pot allocations to a maximum of 60–70 pots
- Recommendation for fixed sites to be charged at a fixed rate plus operating costs, including for giant crab.

Ewan provided an overview of the key outcomes from the 2026 port meetings for the Giant Crab Fishery. Key points from the giant crab meeting were:

- Desire to review current pot limits as part of the next management plan review
- Anecdotal suggestions that catch rates were lower during the 2025/26 season, from both new and existing operators
- Willingness to commence length-frequency sampling.

3.2. Export approvals update

Ewan provided an update on the export approval status for the Southern Rock lobster and Giant Crab fisheries. The Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW) has granted Southern Rock Lobster export approval for the maximum period of 10 years, subject to standard annual reporting requirements. DCCEEW noted the strength of the harvest strategy and rebuilding plan. Concerns were also raised by DCCEEW during the application regarding risks to fur seal populations. Seal exclusion devices are now required when fishing near seal colonies, with industry proactively responding to meeting to these requirements. The new requirements were formalised through a Fisheries Notice on 1 July 2026.

DCCEEW has granted Giant Crab export approval for a period of five years, with the shorter approval period based on the current depleted stock status. The approval is unconditional other than standard reporting requirements. Two recommendations were included in the outcome:

1. Increasing the proportion of monitoring system data
2. Undertaking research into post-release mortality of giant crab to provide greater confidence around expected high post-release survival.

These will be considered as part of future priority research discussions at the RLRAAG. It was noted that the research program could be supported through FRDC given its cross-jurisdictional benefits.

Action: RLRAAG to consider post-release mortality of giant crab at future meeting (relating to export approval recommendation).

4. Monitoring Program Review

4.1. Overview of program and consideration for efficiencies

David Reilly provided a monitoring program summary for the 2025/26 season. The last major review of the monitoring program was undertaken by Klaas in 2017. The main components of the monitoring program include:

- Length-frequency data, which is used in the stock assessment model and PRI (Pre Recruit Index)
- Tag and recapture data, which is used to estimate growth for the stock assessment model
- Electronic monitoring
- Puerulus collectors, which are not currently used in the stock assessment model.

It was noted that the voluntary pot sampling program is the most cost-effective method of collecting length-frequency data, followed by the observer program and fixed site surveys.

Eastern Zone

Members discussed maintaining the current data collection methods in the Eastern Zone and continuing to encourage participation in the voluntary sampling program. The limited opportunity and logistical constraints for onboard observations in the Eastern Zone were noted, due to fewer fishers, remote fishing areas, multi-day trips and lower catch rates.

Members considered whether a research catch allowance could be provided, in addition to the usual quota, as an incentive to increase industry participation. It was noted that this would need to be considered as part of the next harvest strategy review and may not be possible under provisions in the *Fisheries Act 1995* relating to the structure and management of quota. A research allowance may also have broader implications for the rock lobster fishery.

The importance of maintaining fishery-independent data was discussed, particularly for export approval and eligibility for Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certification, should industry choose to pursue it. Members discussed whether cameras could be used on vessels participating in the voluntary sampling program as a more cost-effective and logistically simpler means of validating sampling data than an onboard observer program. Concerns were raised about industry support for installing cameras on vessels; however, it was noted that installation would form part of a fisher's voluntary participation in data collection.

There was support for focusing improved observer or voluntary sampling on the western side of the Eastern Zone, particularly around Queenscliff, to improve the spread of data collection across ports where the fishery is active. Members agreed that the focus should be on improving participation and data quality rather than introducing incentives. The importance of maintaining high-quality data was also discussed. It was noted that updated logbooks now include discards and bycatch, which should provide improved data as reporting continues to develop.

Action: David to approach fishers in the Queenscliff and Apollo Bay areas to discuss contributing to the voluntary data collection program.

Action: Victorian Rock Lobster Committee (VRLC) to consider options to encourage voluntary data collection in all Eastern Zone regions.

Western Zone

It was noted that the Western Zone currently meets its data requirements through the observer and Fishery Independent Survey (FIS) programs. Members discussed options to maintain the current program or discontinue FIS and use the cost savings to develop a more strategic observer program.

There was general agreement that FIS provides a valuable long time-series of data and should be retained. Members were satisfied with the current monitoring approach in the Western Zone.

Tagging Program

David presented a review of the tagging program, to assess whether the current quantity of tagging is sufficient to detect changes in growth. Members recommended David prioritise entering the current outstanding tag-recapture data to allow Klaas to re-estimate the growth model to determine the sample size required to detect a change in growth. It was noted that preparation 2025/26 stock assessment will be prioritised before reviewing tagging data.

Action: Complete tag recapture data analysis.

Action: Re-estimate the growth model and determine the sample size required to detect a change in growth.

Electronic Monitoring – Giant Crab

David provided an update on electronic monitoring validation for giant crab. It is a mandatory requirement for vessels landing more than one tonne in Victoria, with 10 per cent of hauls reviewed by Archipelago.

Puerulus Monitoring

David provided an update on the puerulus monitoring program serviced by Otway Ocean Care. The data is not currently used in the stock assessment due to poor correlation between puerulus settlement data and recruitment to the fishery. The program was recognised as providing a useful community engagement opportunity at a relatively low cost. Members agreed that the program should be retained and further requested that comparative South Australian puerulus settlement data be presented at the next RLRAG meeting in December.

Action: David to obtain and present South Australian puerulus settlement data at the next RLRAG meeting.

5. Australian Lobster Model Update

5.1. Update and proposed introduction

Klaas provided an overview of the development of the Integrated Model using Length Transition (IMuLT), formerly the Australian Lobster Model, which has been developed largely for the Western Rock Lobster fishery in Western Australia. The model is mathematically consistent with the models used for Tasmania and Victoria and has the required functionality for both jurisdictions. There is interest in establishing a community of practice to allow jurisdictions to contribute to the ongoing improvement and review of the model.

The existing model produces good results but is more bespoke and difficult to expand its functionality. IMuLT provides greater capacity to incorporate additional inputs and explore different scenarios as part of the harvest strategy review. It is also easier to get other experts who are familiar with IMuLT to review the model.

It was noted that Victoria's existing model will need to be replaced at some point and that IMuLT provides a low-cost option. There may need to be a transition period to recalibrate reference points if inputs are changed. It was agreed that the preference is to consider selecting the model at the start of the next harvest strategy review to avoid changing the approach partway through.

The next RLRAG meeting will include a comparison of the two models, with the RLRAG to consider whether to use the new model, existing model, or a combination of the two. SIV inquired about cost implications for industry and it was noted that the assessment of a new model is part of the current stock assessment contract.

Action: Klaas to present IMuLT model comparison at next RLRAG meeting.

6. Eastern Zone Pre-Recruit Index Review

6.1. Role of PRI in the harvest strategy

Klaas provided an overview of the role of the PRI in the harvest strategy.

The PRI has been below the reference point for the third consecutive year, while catch rates have increased during this period.

The PRI working group met to consider the results 12 months ago. Due to the limited length-frequency data available and the small spatial scale over which the data was collected, the group recommended no further management response at this stage and to maintain the current TACC, noting also that the TACC was at a conservative level as part of an aggressive rebuild strategy.

6.2. Review of recent data and ongoing trends

Klaas presented a review of recent data and ongoing trends for consideration by the RLRAG. Overall, the available data indicate a slow increase in the number of undersized lobsters entering the fishery. It was noted that voluntary sampling data are not currently included in the PRI calculations, as the current calculation method was developed approximately 10 years ago and has not been reviewed since. Klaas indicated that an alternative PRI calculation should be presented alongside the stock assessment for consideration.

Wayne Dredge raised concerns that the PRI index does not align with his observations from the fishery, noting the need to improve understanding of the relationship between the PRI and actual biomass in the fishery. He acknowledged that developing this understanding will take time. It was noted by the group that the 2025/26 data had yet to be incorporated into the modelling.

The potential inclusion of voluntary small-mesh gear data in the PRI was also discussed, with members noting that any additional information that could improve the indices would be beneficial.

Klaas will review the previous stock assessment model and investigate the relationship between PRI and recruitment. He also noted the importance of further examining the Eastern Zone data, given issues identified with the data in the past.

Action: Klaas to present alternative PRI calculation when presenting the stock assessment results at the next RLRAG.

Action: Klaas to review the previous stock assessment model and investigate the relationship between PRI and recruitment

6.3. Larval dispersal analysis

Klaas Hartman provided new data relating to the larval dispersal project data presented at previous RLRAGs, including revised oceanographic modelling using improved inputs and longer time series. Settlement patterns from the oceanographic model matched well with puerulus collector data. Temperature was identified as having a significant influence on settlement, with warmer water potentially increasing larval mortality. The analysis indicated that most lobster larval settlement in Victoria originates from outside the state, with external spawning events accounting for approximately 96% of settlement in the Western Zone and 99% in the Eastern Zone. South Australian spawning is considered to be the

largest contributor to Victorian lobster stocks.

Action: Klaas to circulate larval dispersal model research when published.

6.4. Determination of next steps regarding PRI

The RLRAAG recommended continuing to collect voluntary monitoring information to improve the PRI index, including consideration of how small-mesh gear data could be incorporated. Members noted that rebuilding CPUE appears to be tracking appropriately and supported the results in the current harvest strategy. The potential use of both small and large escape gaps in relation to voluntary monitoring and the PRI was also noted.

7. Other Business

7.1. Southern Rocklobster Limited Update

Wayne Dredge provided an update on Southern Rocklobster Limited's (SRL) research priorities. SRL has reached out to industry with a list of priorities and requested expressions of interest across a range of topics. Research priorities identified across all jurisdictions were gathered and narrowed down to those aligned with the strategic plan. SRL has subsequently called for proposals against these priority areas. Ian volunteered to send a SurveyMonkey poll to members to select their top five research priorities, with an option to provide additional suggestions. These responses will be collated and passed on to SRL. Wayne noted that the SRL R&D meeting is scheduled for the 21st of September.

Action: Ian to create and circulate a survey regarding SRL Ltd research priorities.

7.2. Seafood Industry Victoria Update

Matt Wassnig provided an update on Seafood Industry Victoria's actions and priorities.

SIV has been working with Members of Parliament to ensure that amendments to establishing the new Fisheries, Hunting and Outdoor Victoria (FHOV) prioritise the social, cultural and economic contributions of commercial fisheries and aquaculture. SIV is also engaging with MPs regarding election commitments and identifying actions to progress should they enter government. Point-of-landing reporting for recreational lobster fishers is one of the matters being discussed.

SIV is responding to consultation regarding proposed wind farms in Gippsland, including potential impacts from electromagnetic fields on lobster.

The VRLC has provided input to Sea Change Australia as part of SRL Ltd's support for Southern Rock Lobster being used as a case study in a project to examine how fisheries are changing in response to climate change and how fishers are adapting their practices.

An update was also provided from the recent Australian Lobster Industry Representatives (ALIR) meeting, which provides an opportunity for information exchange among lobster industry partnership agreement and peak body organisations across the country. Tropical lobster aquaculture is increasing in Vietnam and is having some impact on the Chinese market for smaller Western Rock Lobsters. There may be improved opportunities for larger lobsters in Vietnam; however, it was noted that this situation would require further monitoring.

SIV will continue to monitor diesel prices and engage in forums to keep federal government across the impacts on commercial fisheries.

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	October
2. Introduce a standing agenda item providing updates from each commercial zone and the recreational sector.	Ewan	Next RLrag / Ongoing
3. RLrag to consider post-release mortality of giant crab at future meeting (relating to export approval recommendation).	Ewan	2027 mid-year RLrag
4. David to approach fishers in the Queenscliff and Apollo Bay areas to discuss contributing to the voluntary data collection program.	David	2027 RLrag
5. Victorian Rock Lobster Committee (VRLC) to consider options to encourage voluntary data collection in all Eastern Zone regions.	Matt, Wayne	2027 RLrag
6. David to enter recapture data and provide to Klaas.	David	Early 2027
7. Klaas to re-estimate the growth model and determine the sample size required to detect a change in growth.	Klaas	2027 RLrag
8. David to obtain and present South Australian puerulus settlement data.	David	Next RLrag
9. Klaas to present the IMULT model comparison during the next stock assessment review.	Klaas	Next RLrag
10. Klaas to present alternative PRI calculation when presenting the stock assessment results at the next RLrag.	Klaas	Next RLrag
11. Klaas to review the previous stock assessment model and investigate the relationship between PRI and recruitment.	Klaas	Next RLrag
12. Klaas to circulate larval dispersal model research when published.	Klaas	TBD
13. Chair to circulate SurveyMonkey for SRL research priorities	Ian	September