

2024/25 WESTERN ZONE ABALONE STOCK ASSESSMENT AND QUOTA SETTING WORKSHOP

MEETING SUMMARY

Date: Friday, 14 March 2024

Attendees: **Chair:** Monique Leane

Commercial sector stakeholders:

Travis Baulch (WADA Executive Officer), Craig Fox (WADA Chairman, WZ owner and diver), Dr Duncan Worthington (AMBRAD - Industry Scientist), Andrew Rowe (WZ owner and diver), Kerry Rowe (WZ owner), Clinton Collie (Tasmanian Seafoods), Vin Gannon (Tasmanian Seafoods), Jo Plummer (WZ owner), Lou Plummer (WZ owner and ex-diver), Murray Petersen (WZ diver), Peter Riddle (WZ diver), Phillip Plummer (WZ diver) Jaiden Plumber (WZ diver), Sandra Downes (WZ owner), Len McCall (WZ owner), Wade Thiele (WZ diver).

Victorian Fisheries Authority (VFA): Anthony McGrath (Fishery Manager), and Cameron McCallum (Fisheries Officer)

WADA Facilitator: Duncan Worthington

Observer: Sean Buck (Central Zone fisher and member of ACV)

Apologies: Cleave Thiele

ITEM 1: WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

Western Abalone Divers Association (WADA) Chairman, Craig Fox, introduced the workshop and welcomed Monique Leane as the independent Chair, WADA members, and other attendees. Craig introduced the Victorian Fisheries Authority (VFA) attendees: Fisheries Officer, Cameron McCallum and new Fishery Manager, Anthony McGrath.

ITEM 2: OVERVIEW AND BACKGROUND

Monique Leane, Chair, opened the workshop acknowledging the Western Zone's (WZ) long demonstrated stewardship of the fishery and outlined the workshop objective: to determine total allowable commercial catch (TACC) recommendations for each spatial management unit (SMU), optimal targets (OT) for individual reef codes, and the WZ TACC for 2024/25.

The Chair confirmed there were no changes to the agenda and asked each participant to introduce themselves and declare their interests in the meeting.

ITEM 3: HARVEST STRATEGY AND FIS

WADA Executive Officer, Travis Baulch, provided an update on the Harvest Strategy and Fishery Independent Survey (FIS) work being undertaken. He noted that the current Harvest Strategy (*Harvest Strategy Victorian Western Zone Blacklip Abalone Fishery 2016-2020*) is out of date and due to be reviewed and updated. WADA has been working with the

VFA to develop a MoU and Travis discussed a Strategic Plan for Stock Assessment and Harvest Strategy development in the Western Zone Abalone Fishery. Both Travis and WADA's Science contractor, Duncan Worthington, advised that it was difficult to put a timeline on when the Harvest Strategy would be updated, citing the completion of FIS work as the highest priority. The remaining FIS work included the continued installation of additional shallow water survey sites by WADA divers, which is reliant on suitable weather conditions.

Travis noted that the existing Harvest Strategy was developed after the major Abalone Viral Ganglioneuritis (AVG) mortalities in 2006/07 and that current FIS and stock assessment work showed stock recovery in many areas, but that several years of data collection at the new sites would be required before trends could be seen. Duncan added that whilst the review would be undertaken, the outcome was likely to be an extension of the existing strategy, rather than a completely new Harvest Strategy.

ITEM 4: MANAGEMENT UPDATE

Abalone Fishery Manager, Anthony McGrath provided an update on the current AVG outbreak in the South Australian southern zone. Anthony thanked WADA and Abalone Council Victoria (ACV) for their hard work, support, and patience over the past few weeks. He noted that AVG was detected in wild abalone near Port MacDonnell, in South Australia's southeast, on 23 February by a Victorian diver who was working out of Port MacDonnell and reported suspect abalone to fisheries officers.

The South Australian Department of Primary Industries and Regions (PIRSA) has been managing the outbreak in South Australia and, as at 14 March, there were no known live outbreaks in Victoria. PIRSA implemented an exclusion zone around Port MacDonnell, which extended from the Victorian border to the Nene Valley. Further detections were then found westwards to Robe, prompting an expansion of the exclusion zone.

The VFA introduced emergency measures via Fisheries Notice on 26 February to protect Victorian abalone stocks. These conditions remain in place and restrict the use of any commercial and recreational fishing equipment that has been used in the exclusion zone from being used in Victoria waters. The conditions prohibit the importation of unprocessed abalone from South Australia into Victoria. It also prohibits rock lobster fishers from fishing out of Port Macdonnell, by requiring them to begin and end their fishing trip at a Victorian port. The closest Victorian port is Portland.

ITEM 5: COMPLIANCE UPDATE

Portland Fisheries Officer, Cameron McCallum, provided a compliance update for the area and reported that compliance levels for commercial abalone divers were high. Recreational divers inspected or observed were also found to be compliant by observing the stock recovery area around Portland and abiding size and bag limits in other areas.

Cameron suggested that an increase in VFA-marked vehicle patrols has had a positive impact on compliance and reported that making 13FISH calls was an established practice in the area. Over the past year several pieces of information or concerns about potential fisheries offences have been provided, though mostly around the Port Campbell area.

ITEM 6: GREENLIP TACC

Travis and Duncan Worthington, Industry Scientist and WADA Facilitator, introduced the greenlip TACC discussion and invited divers to provide comment on their observations while fishing over the season.

Diver comments highlighted that there is a strong market for large greenlip abalone, which are in high demand. Divers noted that Julia Bank, Hospital reef and Dutton way had all fished well, however the cutting and Killarney should be kept closed. There was consensus that the TACC should be maintained at 2023/24 TACC of 1.05t.

WADA recommended an allocation of 75kg of Greenlip per quota unit and a voluntary minimum length of 140cm.

Summary of recommended greenlip abalone catch caps.

Reef code	Reef name	Recommended OT
2.12	Hospital Reef	300 kg
2.13	Dutton Way	300 kg
2.16	Minerva Reef	300 kg

ITEM 7: BLACKLIP SMU STOCK ASSESSMENT AND TACC

Overview

Duncan presented an overview of the data streams that inform the stock assessment, including catch reporting, FIS abundance, vessel monitoring system (VMS), depth loggers and shell measurers.

Duncan encouraged industry to use the *Diver obs.* app developed by ACV and frequently used in the Eastern Zone. The app can collect qualitative information during diver trips that can be compared to diver information in the TACC workshop.

Harvest strategy outcomes

Duncan presented the 2020/21 FIS estimates for mature biomass, legal biomass and pre-recruits for each SMU and noted that these had also been used in the 2022 and 2023 TACC forums because no data collected since then. He provided an estimated legal biomass and advised that harvest fractions of 5%, 10% and 15% would work safely in a recovering fishery, noting that different harvest fractions were required at different SMU's.

Many of the TACC-related decisions were made using a combination of old and new data sources, but the consensus was that the fishery was in good shape. He indicated that parts of the fishery appeared to have recovered from previous AVG outbreaks, whilst others were still recovering.

Meeting participants were of the view that they had observed a recovered biomass across the fishery. They felt that whilst the 130mm legal minimum length had worked well to recover the stock, it was now appropriate to move to a spatial management approach in

selecting suitable LML's to allow some fishing to be undertaken, thereby relieving pressure on the bigger fish that had been targeted in better performing SMU's.

ITEM 8: PORTLAND SMU

The Portland SMU has had a 0 tonne blacklip allocation for many years to allow for stock recovery following AGV outbreaks. Whilst survey and surveillance work found that the area has recovered considerably, it was acknowledged that diver CPUE data would be needed to inform and set a TACC. As such, WADA has taken the approach to allow conservative targets on reefs and areas unaffected by previous outbreaks. This process will also provide a second critical function by allowing AVG surveillance dives closer to the SA/Victorian border than current fishing areas.

Outcomes of discussion:

Portland SMU

Recommended TACC – 7.5 tonnes

The recommended 7.5 tonnes TACC is a conservative exploratory quota, which would be allocated to reef codes that have observed much lower impacts from AVG. Structured fishing will be managed by WADA to ensure appropriate spatial coverage to provide a basis for the assessment of stocks. The information collected via the structured fishing will support fishery independent survey data for the Portland reefs.

WADA management arrangements will include:

- 300kg per day, per diver, per reef code cap
- Canned product only
- Portland catch will commence on 1 July and be complete before any diver moves on to Port Fairy. All operators will undertake cleaning and drying of equipment consistent with the Biosecurity control measures for AVG Code of Practice, developed with Agriculture Victoria.

ITEM 9: BLACKLIP TACC

Lady Julia Percy Island SMU

Recommended TACC – 4.8 tonnes

This recommendation is consistent with the 2023/24 and 2022/23 seasons and is 8.4% of exploitable biomass based on the most recent fishery-independent survey results. This is well within the guidelines of the existing Harvest Strategy which sets a 15% harvest fraction limit.

Port Fairy SMU

Recommended TACC – 14.5 tonnes.

This recommendation is a 1 tonne increase from the 2023/24 season and is 8% of exploitable biomass based on the most recent fishery-independent survey results. This is

well within the guidelines of the existing Harvest Strategy which sets a 15% harvest fraction limit.

The 1 tonne increase will be applied to Crags reef (code 3.05) which is supported by a consistently increasing catch rate on the reef and diver observations.

Warrnambool SMU

Recommended TACC – 16 tonnes

This is a 3.5 tonne increase from the 2023/24 season and is 4.7% of exploitable biomass based on the most recent fishery-independent survey results. This is well within the guidelines of the existing Harvest Strategy with sets a 15% harvest fraction limit.

A 1 tonne increase will be applied to each Killarney, the Cutting and Mills reefs (codes 3.10, 3.11 and 3.09) and 0.5 tonnes to Levy's Point (3.14).

It is also recommended that Killarney, the Cutting and Mills reefs all be subject to a decreased size limit of 125mm. Diver observations and fishery dependent data indicate that these reefs have large unfished areas with high numbers of smaller fish which are likely stunted in growth. This approach will be managed by applying a 300kg/reefcode/diver/day rule.

Summary or recommended SMU TACC for 2024/25

Spatial management unit	Legal biomass from 2020/21 FIS	Harvest fraction	Recommended TACC
Portland	216 t	Exploratory fishing	7.5 t
Julia Percy	57 t	8.4%	4.8 t
Port Fairy	182 t	8%	14.5 t
Warrnambool	106 t	4.7%	16 t
2024/25 WZ TACC			42.8 t

Recommended management changes in 2024/25

WZ industry members agreed on several other management changes for the 2023/24 season:

Portland SMU:

1. 300kg per day, per diver, per reef code cap
2. Canned product only
3. Portland catch will commence on 1 July and be complete before any diver moves on to Port Fairy. All operators will undertake cleaning and drying of equipment consistent with the Biosecurity control measures for AVG Code of Practice, developed with Agriculture Victoria.

Other changes

4. Killarney, the Cutting and Mills reefs (codes 3.10, 3.11 and 3.09) all be subject to a decreased size limit of 125mm.

ITEM 9: SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

The Chair thanked all participants for the constructive discussion and the consensus reached at each reef code, SMU, and zone level. The Chair outlined the next steps, with public consultation due to occur in coming weeks.

Craig, on behalf of WADA, acknowledged the hardships experienced in the WZ and thanked attendees for their passion, stewardship, and long-term commitment to recovery.

Meeting closed at 4:00 pm

Summary or Portland SMU TACC for 2024/25

<i>SMU</i>	<i>Reef code</i>	<i>Reef name</i>	<i>2023/24 OT (t)</i>	<i>Recommended 2024/25 OT (t)</i>
Portland	1.01	Discovery Bay	0	0
	1.02	Whites Beach	0	1.0
	1.03	Water Springs	0	1.5
	1.04	Blowholes	0	1.0
	1.05	The Tits	0	1.5
	1.06	Bully Cove/South Bridgewater	0	0.5
	1.07	Seal Caves	0	0
	1.08	Horseshoe	0	0
	2.01	Murrels	0	0
	2.02	Jones Bay	0	0
	2.03	Outside Nelson	0	1.0
	2.04	Devils Kitchen	0	0
	2.05	Inside Nelson	0	0
	2.06	Killer Waves	0	0
	2.07	Yellow Rock	0	0
	2.08	Cape Grant	0	1.0
	2.09	The Passage	0	0
	2.10	Lawrence Rocks	0	0
	2.11	Blacknose	0	0
	2.12	Hospital Reef	0	0
	2.13	Dutton Way	0	0
	2.14	Julia Bank	0	0
	2.16	Minerva Reef	0	0

Summary of other SMU TACC for 2024/25

<i>SMU</i>	<i>Reef code</i>	<i>Reef name</i>	<i>2023/24 OT (t)</i>	<i>Recommended 2024/25 OT (t)</i>
Julia Percy	3.01	JP North	0.6	0.6
	3.02	JP Northeast	0.6	0.6
	3.03	JP East	0.6	0.6
	3.04	JP Prop Bay	3.0	3.0
Port Fairy	2.15	Yambuk	0.0	0.0
	3.05	Crags	8.0	9.0
	3.06	Burnets	2.5	2.5
	3.07	Water Tower	2.0	2.0
	3.08	Lighthouse	1.0	1.0
Warrnambool	3.09	Mills	1.5	2.5
	3.1	Killarney	3.5	4.5
	3.11	The Cutting	2.0	3.0
	3.12	Thunder Point	3.5	3.5
	3.13	Lady Bay	0.0	0.0
	3.14	Levys Point	2.0	2.5

