

**Official Meeting record**  
**Eastern Zone Abalone stock assessment and quota workshop**

**4th December 2024**

**Mallacoota community club rooms**

**Attendees:**

**Eastern Zone Abalone Industry Association (EZAIA):**

Cameron Armstrong, Chris Daniel, Donald Hayes, Gavin Hayes, Darren Joiner, Mike Minehan, Brenda O'Neill, John O'Neill, Robert O'Neill, Joe Peel, Grant Shorland (Jnr), Reinhard Strauss, Waikura Strauss, Joel Theodore, Brendan Wadsworth, Jason York, John Minehan, Chris Wright, Reuben Battel, Jayde Theodore, Brett Cowan, Helen Burvill.

**Virtual:**

Elke Hupfauf, Roz Davis.

**Apologies:**

Steve Fraser, John Armstrong, Grant Shorland (Snr), Cody Winward, Judy & Ross Davis, Chris and Dean Arendsen.

**VFA:**

Luke O'Sullivan, Ian Parks, Melissa Schubert, Anthony McGrath, Mattias Baenziger, Andy Benton

**MRAG:** Cameron Dixon

**Independent Chair:** Ian Cartwright

**Executive Summary**

The Eastern Zone total allowable commercial catch (TACC) workshop was held on 4 December 2024 in Mallacoota. This workshop was undertaken as the second day of a two-day forum with the Eastern Zone Abalone Industry Association (EZAIA) members. This is the second year of the two-day format, which is considered successful by both industry and the VFA.

Day 2 consisted of the VFA led workshop, chaired by Ian Cartwright. In this workshop participants requested changes to the 2024/2025 (current season) catch limits to facilitate transferring catch from reefs to eliminate potential damage to lower performing reefs as opposed to those that were fishing well. There were no proposed changes to the overall TACC amount. VFA considered advice from MRAG and agreed to the proposed changes.

- *Table 1: Proposed changes at SMU level (current season):*

SMU Name	Changes to upper limit	New upper limit
Marlo	Decrease by 6.0t	33.32t
Mallacoota West	Increase by 3.0t	16.2t
Mallacoota Large	Increase by 1.0t	19.5t
Mallacoota East	Increase by 3.79t  (note this represents an existing over catch of 1.79t plus the 2t requested increase)	25.4t
Mallacoota Central	No change	
Mallacoota Small	No change	
Airport	No change	

- *Table 2: Proposed changes at reef code level (current season):*

Reef code name	SMU falls within	Changes to Upper limit	New upper limit
22.00 Tamboon Reef	Marlo	Increase by 1.0t	1.0t
22.10 Clinton Rocks	Marlo	Increase by 1.0t	1.0t
23.04 Petrel Point	Mallacoota West	Increase by 1.5t	4.8t
23.05 Island Point	Mallacoota West	Increase by 1.5t	4.8t
24.00 The Skerries	Mallacoota Large	Increase by 1.0t	6.0t
24.05 Secret Reef	Mallacoota Central	Increase by 1.0t	1.0t
24.17 Gabo Island	Mallacoota East	Increase by 3.8t	18.54t

After lengthy discussions and reef and SMU review consensus was reached on a recommendation for the 2025/26 TACC for the Eastern Zone.

- Participants expressed some concern over the current state of the Marlo SMU and proposed a significant reduction by 25 tonnes and deleting Point Hicks reef code from eCatch. This decision also came from a presentation the previous day which highlighted various environmental changes over the last four years which have had a significant impact on this area
- Industry requested the upper limit for SMU's be set at 10%
- Industry requested the upper limits for reef codes be set at 15%
- Hard limits remain at the Mallacoota Large SMU and reef codes

The final recommendation was arrived at by consensus, with an Optimal Target (OT) catch for each reef code decided under a process facilitated by the independent chair. The final recommendation for the 2025/26 TACC is 182.55 tonnes, representing a reduction of 26.05 tonnes from the 2024/25 season.

## 1. Welcome and introduction

The Chair welcomed participants to the stock assessment and quota workshop.

Reference was made to the useful discussions at the industry meeting the previous day with industry requesting a change to the agenda, being VFA to consider a review of the current season allocation to shift some remaining TACC from poor performing reef codes to better performing reef codes that closed early in the season. This was to provide better protections and flexibility for divers to fish reefs that perform well, allowing fishers to catch their quota.

It was agreed to conduct this workshop consistent with the agenda, with one change:

- TACC setting process was divided into two sessions:
  - how best to finish off the current (2024/2025) quota year and then,
  - taking into account those decisions, make recommendations for the 2025/2026 quota year.

## 2. Management update

The VFA Fisheries Manager provided an update on several management issues related to the Eastern Zone abalone fishery:

### ***Fisheries Independent Survey (FIS)***

A new FIS contract is about to be put out to tender for the installation of new FIS sites in the Eastern and Central Zones. For the Eastern Zone;

- It is intended to establish 48 new fixed transect sites at shallow reefs which better represent the current fishery over the next two years.
- 11 fixed transects have already been installed and surveyed at existing intermediate depth FIS sites, under an existing contract.
- A further 6 of the existing sites to be included in the new project.
- Adverse weather conditions have held up progress.

### ***Abalone Scientific working group (ASWG).***

The abalone ASWG has been working well with regard to a number of issues, including ensuring that CPUE standardisation takes account of the changing circumstances of the fishery. The standardisation process is complex, with allowances having to be made for co-op catch limits, team diving, etc. Information on which to base management decisions is improving and moving beyond CPUE with the eventual incorporation of the new FIS sites, logger (including spatial) data etc. These improvements are only incremental at this stage. There are also moves to address the timeliness of data. Whilst this year it has been possible to show the first six months of the year, albeit standardised, in future years it is hoped that the first six months will be incorporated into the stock assessment.

### ***E-catch issues***

Several issues with the eCatch system have been identified by VFA and industry. These include:

- Targets and catches can only be viewed to within one decimal points, meaning that eCatch could be out by 99kg.
- Greenlip cannot currently be shown in the other zones
- Zone Executive Officers don't have access to eCatch and cumulative catch reports

There have been some problems associated with catch is being incorrectly assigned by fishers to wrong reef codes. Currently, correcting these is expensive as there is a need to go to the software developer to make the changes. Efforts are currently underway to enable the duty officer to reset the eCatch settings. Industry made a recommendation to delete Point Hicks from eCatch as it is in the marine park area.

### ***AVG outbreak in SA***

An overview of the situation relating to mortality and the extent of the AVG outbreak in South Australia was provided.

- Mortality has been up to 95% in affected areas.
- Victoria closed the border rapidly and there are currently no reports of virus in Victoria.
- Additional Biosecurity protocols have been put in place.
- Causes of the outbreak is uncertain but believed it may be due to high intensity Bonnie Upwelling.

### ***Urchins***

VFA have removed quota restrictions to encourage greater extraction of urchins. Following these changes the urchin fishery will be closely monitored to determine the effects of those changes and any future directions that may be necessary.

## **3. Compliance Update**

### ***Cultural fishing***

The VFA Director of Education and Enforcement provided an update on native title/cultural fishing as applied to the Abalone fishery. It was noted provisions for cultural fishing under native title were federal legislation which is above state law.

Whilst challenging, Victoria does not face the same restrictions occurring in New South Wales with the ability to pursue illegal fishing under the guise of cultural fishing

### ***EZ abalone compliance report***

There are general good relations between the eastern zone abalone industry and VFA compliance. Despite concerns, VFA compliance priority is to detect poaching and there have been no infringement notices issued for non-operational VMS as every effort was made to introduce a system in a cooperative and pragmatic manner.

- In the 2024/25 season, 34 inspections have been carried out on water and land, with six offences detected giving an 82.4% compliance record.
- Main issues detected relate to misreporting and undersized abalone.
- It is the responsibility of fishers to avoid breaching Fisheries Notices relating to exceeding reef codes and SMU upper limits, which will be enforced, noting the flexibility already allowed
- Fishing vessels are not allowed in marine parks with abalone (a priority species) on board.
- Care should be taken where CDRs are split between reef codes and licences to avoid CPUE inaccuracies.

### ***eCatch requirement for next season***

The Fisheries Officer explained that a condition will be included in the 205/26 Eastern Zone fisheries notice that requires fishers to begin a trip in eCatch prior to departing the port. This condition is being rolled out in all fisheries using eCatch.

### ***Team Diving***

- Under Regulation 311, two divers cannot dive legally on different licences from the same boat. This is happening more as industry struggles to reduce dive costs.
- VFA is taking steps to address this under an exemption, the conditions of which will be worked on collaboratively between industry and VFA.
- The VFA Director Education and Enforcement declared that no infringements would be issued for this whilst an exemption is being developed.

### ***Boarding at sea.***

Every effort is to ensure the safe boarding of Abalone dive vessels while at sea. This includes contacting the vessel, frequently via the deckhand, before boarding before ensuring the safety of the diver is paramount. Patrol personnel will always seek to board vessel considering operator preferences. It is acknowledged that while there are safety issues associated with boardings at sea, every effort will be taken to minimise these, as there is a job to do.

### ***Inspection of aquaculture facilities***

Industry requested information on the level of inspections related to abalone aquaculture facilities. VFA stated that all Abalone aquaculture facilities and fish receivers had been subject to inspections in the past year.

## **4. Stock assessment report**

MRAG provided an overview of the EZ stock assessment.

The knowledge base on which to make decisions, which has been based primarily on CPUE is improving, with a better understanding of recent operational changes in the fishery factored into the stock assessment.

Next year's TACC setting process will include better standardisation of CPUE, a new FIS with sites better located to represent inshore areas, logger data and more up-to-date information. Industry/government/researcher cooperation and coordination has improved markedly, allowing for adaptive approaches to managing the fishery based on improved data.

### ***Harvest strategy:***

It was acknowledged the current harvest strategy is not necessarily guiding catches currently. The Victorian harvest strategy, along with others used in Australian abalone fisheries has been MSE tested and shown to be relatively conservative. With work via the Abalone Scientific Working Group, it is hoped to include the latest six months detail when applying the harvest strategy for 2026/27.

Currently:

- Assessment is heavy reliant on CPUE.
- The last six months data is available it is not standardised.
- Harvest strategy outcomes are lagged – (the very large cuts in 2024/25 will not yet be apparent in the fishery)

- CPUE has been affected by selective fishing for the live market, although standardisation is under way to address this
- Mean daily catch has been influenced by co-op daily catch limits.

There is little data to support moving away from existing Optimal Targets (OT's) and no justification for increasing the overall TACC. MRAG noted that there may be justification for a reduction, particularly given the performance of Marlo and the comments made the previous day by Dr Landos.

### **A two-region fishery:**

MRAG noted that given the environmental impacts on the Marlo SMU it appeared the eastern zone could be usefully considered as to subregions; i.e. Marlo and Mallacoota.

- Marlo SMU continues to struggle under adverse environmental conditions and is likely to do so for some time.
- There are encouraging signs from other SMUs in the Mallacoota area which is not influenced by the Snowy River catchment
- Airport SMU has a stable/increasing catch rate.
- Mallacoota West appears to be recovering well due to early and precautionary action.
- MRAG cautioned strongly against transferring catch from Marlo to other SMUs on the basis that early signs of recovery

## **5. 2024/25 Quota Year (current season)**

The workshop then considered the specifics of where the remaining 2024/25 catch should be taken, with EZAIA presenting a request for the redistribution of 6.0t of the TACC, based on the advice and views of industry from the previous days meeting, MRAG and the VFA.

*Table 1* and *Table 2* of the executive summary outline the agreed changes in detail, at SMU and reef code level respectively. A summary of the changes are:

- Petrel Pt. and Island Pt. in the Mallacoota West SMU each receive an additional 1.5t, as these were fishing at high catch rates when they closed early in season.
- The Skerries in Mallacoota Large SMU to receive an additional 1.0t as it was fishing well prior to closing
- Gabo Is. In Mallacoota East SMU to receive an additional 2.0t as it was fishing well prior to closing early in the season

In addition to the redistribution of 6.0t:

- The Marlo SMU was reduced by 6.0t to ensure the overall Eastern Zone TACC stayed the same.
- Clinton Rocks and Tamboon reef in the Marlo SMU were each allocated 1.0t upper limits (previously 0t), providing a minimal allocation to allow divers to explore these areas
- Secret reef in Mallacoota Central SMU also be allocated 1.0t upper limit (previously 0t), providing a minimal allocation to allow divers to explore this area.

Industry requested for agreed changes to the fisheries notice be made as quickly as possible, noting that a statutory process is required, the minimum conditions of which must be fulfilled.

## **6. 2025/26 Quota Year**

Setting of the 2025/26 TACC was done by dividing the Eastern Zone into two distinct fisheries.

- The Marlo SMU
- The Mallacoota area

Initial discussions centred round Marlo, which has been heavily impacted by the last four years of extreme environmental conditions including bushfires and back-to-back major floods in the Snowy River catchment. It was acknowledged that a precautionary Optimal Target was required. The discussion was mature and with a long-term view of the fishery.

It was agreed by consensus to reduce the Marlo SMU Optimal Target to 10.0 tonnes. This reduction was led by industry members, based on their observations and information presented on Day 1 by Dr. Landos. The reduction represents a reduction of 25 tonnes from the current season and 60.0 tonnes over the past two years.

This reduction was agreed to with the intention to

- prevent any further decline in stock condition; and
- enable recovery to occur, subject to improved environmental conditions.

The remaining SMUs/reef codes were reviewed and the following the *Table 3* of the represents the outcome of discussions:

### **Upper limits**

The use of Optimal Targets and Upper Limits for SMUs and reef codes was discussed and it was agreed that;

### **Summary**

The recommended 2025/2026 TACC for consultation is 182.55 tonnes. This represents a quota responsible reduction of 26.05 tonnes on the 2024/25 TACC. These reductions are mostly from the Marlo SMU and were led by industry.

Minor changes to the upper limits will provide greater flexibility within the fishery, whilst maintaining protections to resource.

### **Meeting Actions**

1. VFA to delete the Point Hicks reef code from eCatch.
2. EZAIA to work with VFA Education and Enforcement team to develop an exemption to Regulation 311, allowing two divers to fish from one vessel.
3. VFA to correct the eCatch link to the DiverObs website.
4. VFA to review boundary of The Skerries and Easby Creek.
5. VFA to seek advice of the how the TACC for Mallacoota Large SMU can be fairly divided between quota units.
6. VFA to amend the 2024/25 Fisheries Notice (current season) and eCatch to reflect agreed changes and reallocation.

• Table 3: Proposed 2025/26 TACC

Reef code	Reef name	Lower limit	Lower threshold	Optimum target	Upper threshold	Upper limit
21.00	Lakes Entrance	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
22.01	Marlo	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
22.02	French's	0.9	1.0	1.0	1.1	1.2
22.03	Point Ricardo	0.9	1.0	1.0	1.1	1.2
22.04	Cape Conran	2.6	2.9	3.0	3.2	3.5
22.05	East Cape	0.9	1.0	1.0	1.1	1.2
22.06	Yeerung Reef	0.9	1.0	1.0	1.1	1.2
22.08	Pearl Point	2.6	2.9	3.0	3.2	3.5
22.09	Tamboon Reef	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.0
22.10	Clinton Rocks	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.0
23.01	Point Hicks	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
<b>MARLO SMU</b>				<b>10.0</b>		<b>11.0</b>
23.02	Whaleback	2.6	2.9	3.0	3.2	3.5
23.03	Mueller	2.6	2.9	3.0	3.2	3.5
23.04	Petrel Point	2.6	2.9	3.0	3.2	3.5
23.05	Island Point	2.6	2.9	3.0	3.2	3.5
<b>MALLACOOTA WEST SMU</b>				<b>12.0</b>		<b>13.2</b>
23.06	Big Rame	10.2	11.7	12.0	12.0	12.0
24.00	The Skerries	4.3	4.9	5.0	5.0	5.0
24.03	Easby Creek	1.7	2.0	2.0	2.0	2.0
<b>MALLACOOTA LARGE SMU</b>				<b>19.0</b>		<b>19.0</b>
24.04	Red River	0.6	0.7	0.8	0.8	0.9
24.05	Secret Reef	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.0
24.06	Sandpatch Point	10.9	12.5	12.8	13.8	14.7
24.07	Sandpatch Point lee	13.6	15.6	16.0	17.2	18.4
24.08	Benedore	4.5	5.1	5.3	5.6	6.0
<b>MALLACOOTA CENTRAL SMU</b>				<b>34.8</b>		<b>38.3</b>
24.09	Little Rame	2.6	2.9	3.0	3.2	3.5
24.14	Bastion Point	2.1	2.4	2.5	2.7	2.9
<b>MALLACOOTA SMALL SMU</b>				<b>5.5</b>		<b>6.1</b>
24.10 & 25.10	Little Rame lee	19.6	22.4	23.0	24.7	26.5
24.11 & 25.11	Shipwreck - Seal Ck	5.1	5.9	6.0	6.5	6.9
24.15 & 25.15	Tullaberga Island	5.1	5.9	6.0	6.5	6.9
24.16 & 25.16	Gabo Harbour	9.4	10.7	11.0	11.8	12.7
24.21 & 25.21	Quarry Beach/Betka	28.9	33.2	34.0	36.6	39.1
<b>AIRPORT SMU (24.10 &amp; 25.10, 24.11 &amp; 25.11, 24.15 &amp; 25.15, 24.16 &amp; 25.16, 24.21 &amp; 25.21)</b>				<b>80.0</b>		<b>88.0</b>
24.17	Gabo Island	12.8	14.6	15.0	16.1	17.3
24.18	Gunshot	1.7	2.0	2.0	2.2	2.3
24.19	Iron Prince	3.6	4.1	4.3	4.6	4.9
<b>MALLACOOTA EAST</b>				<b>21.3</b>		<b>23.4</b>
<b>EASTERN 2023/24 TACC</b>				<b>182.55</b>		