

2025/26 ROCK LOBSTER AND GIANT CRAB RESOURCE ASSESSMENT

GROUP TACC RECOMMENDATION

The Rock Lobster and Giant Crab Resource Assessment Group (RLRAG) met on 3 March 2025 to review the 2023/24 Rock Lobster Stock Assessment Report. Based on the results of this assessment and application to the Harvest Strategy, the RLRAG provides the Victorian Fisheries Authority (VFA) with the following recommendations on setting the 2025/26 total allowable commercial catch (TACC).

ROCK LOBSTER – WESTERN ZONE

Assessment summary

The TACC for the Western Zone in 2023/24 was 242 tonnes, set under the rebuilding plan in the Draft Harvest Strategy. This strategy was declared in 2024.

Overall, the stock indicators in the Western Zone continue to show improvement. The standardised catch per unit effort (CPUE) improved from 0.74kg/pot-lift in 2021/22 to 0.78 in 2022/23 and remained at 0.78 in 2023/24. The pre-recruit index (PRI) indicates the abundance of undersize lobsters. This reached a record low in 2015/16. Despite increasing slowly, it remained close to this record low over the subsequent three years. In the last four years the PRI has been at a level marginally above the threshold level (1.82 in 2023/24 compared with the 1.67 undersize / pot-lift threshold level).

Egg production has been declining slightly the last three years. In 2023/24 egg production was at 22.4% which is above the 20% limit reference point. A new alternative method used for calculating egg production confirms that egg production is above the 20% reference point with near certainty.

Biomass had been increasing slowly from a recent low in 2008/09, however slightly decreased the last four years to 851t in 2023/24.

Application of the Harvest strategy

Decision Rule	2023/24 Stock Indicator Level	Outcome
Part 1: Egg Production		
Is the model estimated egg production above the limit reference point of 20% of unfished levels?	The 2023/24 egg production level is estimated at 22.4% of unfished levels.	Decision rule has been met. Go to Part 2
Part 2: TACC Determination		
a. Is standardised CPUE in a higher band than the previous season?	CPUE decreased from 0.79kg/pot-lift in 2022/23 to 0.78kg/pot-lift in 2023/24. This remains in the same 0.75-0.80 CPUE band	The CPUE band has remained the same.
a. Is the 2022/23 PRI at or above the threshold level of 1.67 undersize/pot-lift?	The combined PRI was 1.82 in 2023/24. This was a slight reduction from the previous three years but remains above the threshold level.	The combined PRI is above the threshold level.
RESULT		The Western Zone remains in the CPUE band 0.75-<0.80. This gives a TACC of 245t in 2025/26.

Recommendation

The RLRAG acknowledges that the application of the Harvest Strategy, under the new rebuilding plan, maintains the zone in the 0.75 - <0.80 CPUE band. This corresponds to a TACC of 245 tonnes, consistent with the current setting.

The RLRAG unanimously supports continuing to set the TACC as per the rules defined in Harvest Strategy and new rebuilding plan. This recommendation is consistent with the last two year's recommendation and ensures the zone remains in line with meeting the management goals of rebuilding the stock. The RLRAG recommends that the TACC be set at 245 tonnes.

ROCK LOBSTER – EASTERN ZONE

Assessment summary

The 2022/23 TACC was maintained at 32 tonnes, however, the subsequent 2023/24 TACC was reduced to 21 tonnes under a new rebuilding plan. In an effort to provide financial relief to the Eastern Zone Fishery, a full stock assessment process was not completed this year. This decision was considered appropriate based on the very conservative TACC of 21 tonnes set for the 2023/24 season

Over the last three years nominal CPUE has continued to decline, however more positively, the standardised CPUE which provides a better indicator for stock status has been increasing, rising from the recent low of from 0.36 kg/pot-lift in 2019/20 to 0.49kg/pot-lift in 2022/23 and a substantial increase to 0.60kg/pot-lift in 2023/24. This positive sign must be treated with some caution as the reduced size of the fishery means there is less data for calculating the CPUE time series and the reliability of this is reduced.

The pre-recruit index (PRI) reached a low of 0.08 undersize / pot-lift in 2018/19. In the following three years substantial increases were observed to a level exceeding the PRI threshold. However, in 2022/23 PRI fell to 0.09 undersize / pot-lift and declined further to a new record low of 0.02 undersize / pot-lift in 2023/24.

Due to the reduced stock assessment provisions, a weight of evidence approach was used to indicate egg production. This approach indicated that egg production was steady and well above the limit reference point of 20%.

Application of the Harvest strategy

Decision Rule	2023/24 Stock Indicator Level	Outcome
Part 1: Egg Production		
Is the model estimated egg production above the limit reference point of 20% of unfished levels?	The 2023/24 egg production level is likely to be above the 20% level based on the CPUE proxy and weight of evidence argument.	Decision rule has been met. Go to Part 2
Part 2: TACC Determination		
b. Is standardised CPUE in a higher band than the previous season?	CPUE increased from 0.48kg/pot-lift in 2022/23 to 0.60kg/pot-lift in 2023/24. This corresponds to a higher 0.60 -< 0.65 band.	The CPUE band has increased.
b. Is the 2023/24 PRI at or above the threshold level of 0.25 undersize/pot-lift?	The combined PRI was 0.02 in 2023/24. This is a significant reduction that is well below the threshold level.	The combined PRI is below the threshold level.
RESULT		The Eastern Zone remains in the same CPUE band (0.45-<0.50) with a TACC of 21t.

Recommendation:

The RLRAG noted that the considerable increase in standardised CPUE is a positive sign for the fishery. Despite this, it recognised that the limited data available to Eastern Zone Rock Lobster Fishery requires that this figure be considered with caution.

The RLRAG noted significant concern regarding the second reduction in the PRI, and second consecutive season recorded at well below the PRI threshold. It further acknowledged that the harvest strategy requires a review of the harvest controls rules in the event that the PRI is below the PRI threshold of 0.25 undersize per pot-lift.

The RLRAG further noted that the zone has is currently managed under a very conservative rebuilding strategy facilitated by low TACCs.

In considering the above, the RLRAG recommends the TACC remains at 21 tonnes. The RLRAG further recommended that a review of the harvest control rules be prioritised at its next meeting to determine an appropriate course of action should the trend in the PRI continue.