

ROCK LOBSTER & GIANT CRAB RESOURCE ASSESSMENT GROUP (RLRAG)

2025/26 GIANT CRAB FISHERY TACC RECOMMENDATION

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

ASSESSMENT SUMMARY

The TACC for the Giant Crab Fishery was set at 10.5 tonnes between 2014/15 to 2020/21. In early 2021 it became evident that a large correction to effort data for two fishers was required due to inconsistent effort reporting for both soak time and pot-lifts. The correction to effort data fundamentally changed the recent CPUE trend. The declining CPUE trend was confirmed during the 2021/22 season, with a known value of 0.55 kg per 24-hour pot-lift. This value is just above the limit reference point of 0.52kg per 24-hour pot-lift. The TACC was subsequently reduced to 7.5t for the 2021/22 quota period and has remained at this level for the follow two seasons.

Following this reduction, the CPUE recovered considerably reaching 1.10kg per adjusted pot-day in 2022/23. In 2023/24, however, the CPUE reduced considerably to 0.66 kg per adjusted pot-day. Anecdotal evidence from industry has indicated high-grading practices are currently in place to meet market demands from smaller sized crabs. Regularly returning larger crabs to the water in favour of smaller crabs, comparative to practices employed in previous seasons, will result in a lower average CPUE.

DRAFT HARVEST STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT

Following last year's recommendation, a sub-committee of the RLRAG has led the development of a new Giant Crab Harvest Strategy. The revised harvest strategy is in its final stages of development and is intended to be released for public consultation in April 2025, pending VFA approval.

Recognising the data deficiencies within the fishery, the draft strategy incorporates a tiered structure allowing greater capacity for growth with improved data collection and verification. Importantly, Level 1, the most conservative tier, is reflective of the control rules within current harvest strategy. Despite Level 1 not allowing for TACC increases, the sub-committee recommended a starting TACC of 8.5 tonnes under the new strategy. This level maintains a precautionary approach whilst recognising a recent improvement in average CPUE over the last three seasons.

The RLRAG has endorsed the sub-committee's draft harvest strategy.

RLRAG RECOMMENDATION

The RLRAG endorses the draft harvest strategy and supports its application in setting the 2025/26 TACC, noting that Level 1 of this strategy is consistent with the current arrangements.

Whilst the current harvest strategy arrangements, and Level 1 of the draft harvest strategy, do not allow increases in the TACC, the RLRAG did not oppose the recommendation to implement an 8.5 tonne TACC for the 2025/26 season. Members noted concerns that the CPUE had dropped this year but recognised this may be due to high-grading practices to account for the market demanding smaller-sized crabs.

Despite these concerns, the RLRAG noted that an increase in the TACC from 7.5 tonnes to 8.5 tonnes is unlikely to impact the sustainability of the resource. The RLRAG further noted the current and draft harvest strategies both employ conservative rules capable of ensuring adequate stock protection.