

### RECORD OF MEETING

Meeting 44, 3 March 2025

VFA, Queenscliff & Online

**CHAIR:** Ewan Flanagan

**MEETING COMMENCED:** 10:00 am

Present	
Ewan Flanagan	Victorian Fisheries Authority (VFA) / 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)
Zeb Johnston	Industry member (WZ)
Gary Ryan	Industry member (WZ)
Alex Haberfield	Industry member (WZ)
Ben Scullin	VRFish member
Peter Galvin	Recreational fishing representative/ VRFish member
Lawrence Moore	Recreational fishing representative / VRFish member
Craig Starrit	Recreational fishing representative observer
Katie Creswell	Presenter and observer (IMAS)
Charlotte Miller	VFA observer and minute taker
Online	
Wayne Dredge	Industry member (EZ)
Apologies	
Ian Knuckey	Independent Chair
Robert Timmers	Scuba Divers Federation Victoria member
Naomi Barry	Coastal Indigenous Member
Anthony Ciconte	Giant Crab Fishery industry member
George Brocklesby	Industry observer
Lynn Casement	Industry observer

## 1. Preliminaries

### 1.1. Welcome

Ewan Flanagan, acting Chair, opened the meeting with an Acknowledgement of Country and welcomed all attendees to the 44<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Victorian Rock Lobster and Giant Crab Resource Assessment Group (RLRAG). Ewan advised that the discussion held at the RLRAG is confidential until released to public, via meeting minutes published on the Victorian Fisheries Authority (VFA) webpage. People may be asked to leave the room during discussions where a conflict of interest is identified. Attendees were asked to introduce themselves and disclose any potential conflicts of interest.

- i. Ross Bromley declared his position with Atlantis Advisory as acting for Southern Rocklobster Limited with the Marne Stewardship Council (MSC).

Ewan followed by mentioning all apologies for the meeting.

### 1.2. Adoption of agenda

Ewan provided an outline of the meeting agenda, calling for any additions to be made. The agenda was adopted as circulated.

### 1.3. Minutes and actions from last meeting

The minutes from the last meeting had been circulated and revised out of session after the last meeting and were accepted as a true and accurate record. Ewan confirmed that Charlotte Miller (VFA) would take minutes for this meeting.

Key actions from the previous meeting were summarised as follows:

Action	Status
1. Ewan to Circulate the draft minutes.	Complete
2. VFA to seek costings to include voluntary data collection in eCatch.	For discussion in agenda item 4
3. VFA to meet with Ben Scullin (VRFish) to consider improvements to communications with recreational rock lobster fishers.	Discussions delayed due to VFA restructure proposal
4. Ewan to request a compliance representative present, or provide for presentation, compliance statistics at the next meeting.	For discussion in agenda item 2
5. Katie Creswell to present a summary of the final report for the larval dispersal project at one the next two RLRAGs.	For discussion in agenda item 6
6. VFA to review logbook undersize data.	For discussion in agenda item 4
7. Amend Giant Crab Harvest Strategy to provide explanation outlining the difference between the cap of 10.5 tonnes in Tier 1, and the starting TACC.	Complete

8. RLRAG members to submit feedback on the draft harvest strategy by a date set by the RLRAG Executive Officer.	Complete
9. VFA to create a vessel survey in collaboration with the Chair.	For discussion in agenda Item 4.2

## 2. Compliance Report

### 2.1. Rock lobster inspections summary

Sophie Fletcher, VFA Fisheries Officer, presented statistics relating to Rock Lobster Inspections over the past 6 months. The commercial compliance rate was listed as 95.5% from a total of 111 inspections in the Western Zone Rock Lobster Fishery and 93% from a total of 42 inspections in the Eastern Zone Rock Lobster Fishery. RLRAG members questioned the common types of infringements found in the commercial sector. Sophie clarified that most of the infringements were administrative errors.

Further, a total of 547 recreational rock lobster inspections occurred in the last 6 months, from which 66 offenders were recorded. The most common offence recorded was a failure to register for taking rock lobsters on the GoFishVic RL app. It was further noted that many recreational fishers were unaware of the new reporting app. RLRAG members raised ongoing concerns about the low levels of reported recreational rock lobster catch and discussed the potential for implementing a different voluntary reporting system for recreational Rock Lobster fishers. Most RLRAG members agreed that a point of landing reporting would be the best approach, alongside greater fines for those failing to report.

Sophie also presented statistics showing the response rate to calls made to the 13FISH reporting line. Recognising that not all calls were offence reports, the RLRAG expressed concerns that the response rate to fisher reports was slightly above 10%.

RLRAG members suggested that at future meetings, statistics be presented as percentages of the number of estimated fishing trips. It was noted that this is very difficult to quantify given that rock lobster fishing occurs all along the coast. It could, however, be possible to compare the number of reported trips with compliance statistics.

Members requested that compliance statistics be presented at each meeting and it was noted that a simplified compliance report can be provided if an officer is unavailable. Sophie noted that due to FO stations running at 50% capacity for some time, inspections have become harder to be conducted. These statistics may not be representative of all fishers which raised concerns amongst members of the RLRAG. Moving forward, in order for the VFA's compliance team to positively influence the recreational rock lobster reporting program, a consistent approach is critical; officers need to be able to assess whether fishers have registered in the field; and a greater number of compliance officers is required.

**Action: VFA to organise a compliance report be provided to the RLRAG every 6 months either via the presence of a compliance officer or a compliance presentation being provided to be presented at meetings.**

### 3. Management Update

#### 3.1. 2025 Commercial Port Meetings Schedule

Ewan provided an update of the 2025 commercial port meetings, noting dates had been scheduled and sent to rock lobster licence holders and operators. The meetings will be run over five days, commencing Monday, 31 March 2025.

#### 3.2. VFA Restructure Proposal

Ewan provided an overview of the VFA's proposed restructure, detailing key changes to current operations. Several members raised concerns regarding the impacts that the proposed changes may have on Victorian fisheries resources. Members unanimously agreed upon the following statement and requested a letter be drafted and sent to the VFA on behalf of the RLRAG.

*RLRAG members view the significant reduction in enforcement and science positions at the VFA to be of extreme concern to Victoria's fisheries resources. RLRAG members believe that this reduction will negatively impact the Victorian Government's ability to sustainably manage the Victorian Rock Lobster and Giant Crab fisheries. Furthermore, these changes are likely to significantly inhibit the state's ability to meet the objectives outlined in the Victorian Rock Lobster Management Plan 2024 and the associated Harvest Strategy.*

**Action: The RLRAG's independent chair to draft a letter to the VFA on behalf of the RLRAG expressing its concerns regarding the proposed VFA restructure.**

#### 3.3. Overview of the 2024 RLRAG Discussion Topics

Ewan provided an overview of the key discussion items from the 2024 RLRAG meetings. In Summary, the key discussion points included the following:

1. Recreational rock lobster tool development
2. Recreational Reporting Program updates and 2023/24 season totals
3. 2022/23 rock lobster and giant crab stock assessment results
4. Australian Rock Lobster Model application
5. Rock lobster hatchery proposal
6. 2024 port meetings summary
7. Rock Lobster Management Plan 2024 declaration
8. New Giant Crab Harvest Strategy development
9. FRDC Enhanced Data Collection project update
10. Larval Dispersal and Connectivity project
11. Vessel efficiency review and data collection

#### 3.4. Draft Giant Crab Harvest Strategy

Ewan updated the group on the review of the Giant Crab Harvest Strategy. Following the update at the last meeting, RLRAG members endorsed the draft strategy out of session. The VFA, in collaboration with the steering committee, is now in the final editing stage. Once completed, the draft document will be submitted to the VFA executive for review before being released for consultation. This year's TACC recommendation is based on the draft harvest strategy.

#### 3.5. Recreational Reporting Program

Ewan provided a summary of the data collected to-date during the 2024/25 recreational season, outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: 2024/25 Recreational Reporting Program Summary as at 28 February 2025.

	Total	East	West
<b>Total Registered Users</b>	1,767		
<b>Total RL Caught</b>	1,784	766	1,018
<b>Total Male</b>	1,262	482	780
<b>Total Female</b>	522	284	238
<b>Average Length (cm)</b>	14.56	14.83	14.36
<b>Average Weight (kg)</b>	1.64	1.76	1.55
<b>Total Weight (kg)</b>	2,924	1,351	1,573

Comparative to previous season's results at end of February, there has been a 22% increase in the total number of rock lobster reported and a 31% increase in total weight.

Some RLRAG members noted that the monitoring numbers continue to be lower than when the program first started. Others commented that this was likely due to fishers downloading the app without having a realistic intention of catching rock lobster. Ewan highlighted that the recent results are a more realistic depiction of the total number of recreational rock lobster fishers, given fishers were required to indicate an intention to fish for rock lobster at the commencement of this season. It was further noted that rock lobster is the only species subject to mandatory reporting despite there being other priority species in Victoria.

Most RLRAG members reiterated the sentiment that a better reporting system is required to improve data collection. Sophie Fletcher commented that many members of the public find the app confusing and do not measure their catch accurately, with FO's often needing to input catch data for them.

## 4. Monitoring Program Update

### 4.1. February Results

David Reilly presented a monitoring program update, having undertaken fixed site surveys in the Western Zone and facilitated voluntary pot sampling. Seven of the eight fixed sites chosen to be surveyed were completed, noting the Cape Bridgewater site is currently unable to be surveyed due to operator availability.

David further reported on the voluntary pot sampling program, advising that the VFA has provided kits and simplified data sheets to six of the eight Western Zone fishers involved. The data collected allowed for an analysis of the number of undersized Rock Lobsters per 1000 pot lifts, indicating the number of juveniles in the population. David explained that the number of undersized lobsters per 1000 pot lifts has been decreasing in the Western Zone since 2020. In the Eastern Zone, the lack of available data means that trends cannot be identified.

David further noted that resources are not currently available to add a function to the eCatch platform to input length frequency data. A member suggested that the approach used in the South Australian Southern Zone, utilising a different app for voluntary reporting,



could be more appropriate for Victoria. The new app could also potentially be used to report all mandatory catch data which would then be transferred into eCatch. Ewan noted that any new apps would need to be industry-led and managed, and reporting requirements by fishers would still need to meet the legislative requirements outlined in the *Fisheries Act 1995*.

In response, an industry member raised concerns that creating more apps could cause greater confusion for fishers; and that the current app, in their opinion, is suitable for Victorian fisher's needs.

#### 4.2. Vessel Survey Update

David presented an update on the creation of a vessel survey form, as requested by RLRA members at the previous meeting. The draft survey is currently under development following discussions with industry representatives on the RLRA.

Industry members suggested that the timing of the survey form needs to be considered carefully to ensure it is positively received by fishers. It was noted that some commercial fishers have expressed recent concerns about the Vessel Monitoring System (VMS) being used as a compliance tool for minor misreporting.

**Action: VFA to finalise draft vessel survey form to consider for implementation at the February/March RLRA meeting in 2026.**

## 5. Rock Lobster Stock Assessment Results

### 5.1. 2023/24 Western Zone Rock Lobster Results and Harvest Strategy Application

Klaas Hartman presented the stock assessment results for the Western Zone, summarised as follows:

- i) Effort continues to trend downwards whilst catch has remained relatively consistent in recent seasons.
- ii) Nominal catch per unit effort (CPUE) has continued to increase, rising to 1.26, while standardised CPUE has decreased by 0.01 to 0.78.
- iii) The total number of active vessels in the Western Zone fleet continues to fall, reaching a record low of 30 vessels in 2023/24.
- iv) The pre-recruit index (PRI) has remained fairly consistent in recent years and above the threshold of 1.67. The PRI in 2023/24 was 1.82, down from 1.97 in 2022/23.
- v) Egg production for the fishery has declined slightly since 2020/21 and was 22.4% during 2023/24.

A member requested that an explanation of standardised CPUE compared to nominal CPUE be provided at upcoming port meetings.

**Action: Klaas to provide a simplified explanation of nominal and standardised CPUE to attendees at port meetings.**

Applying the Harvest Strategy, the zone met Harvest Control Rule Part 1 as it was above the limit reference point for egg production. Under Part 2, the CPUE remained in the same band and the PRI was above the threshold of 1.67 undersized pot per lift. As such, it is

recommended that the zone remains within the same CPUE band of 0.75 to <0.80, resulting in a total allowable commercial catch (TACC) of 245 tonnes. Despite declines in certain performance indicators, results remain positive based on historical trends. Klaas further confirmed the Western Zone remains on its rebuilding trajectory.

**RLRAG members endorsed setting a TACC of 245 tonnes for the Western Zone Rock Lobster Fishery.**

## 5.2. 2023/24 Eastern Zone Rock Lobster Results and Harvest Strategy Application

Klaas presented the stock assessment results for the Eastern Zone, summarised as follows:

- i) Total catch increased slightly during the 2023/24 season to 18 tonnes.
- ii) Effort continued to decline to a total of 40,000 pot-lifts.
- iii) Both nominal and standardised CPUE increased significantly, with the latter rising from 0.48 to 0.60 kg/pot-lift.
- iv) Vessel numbers reached a record low of 11 active vessels in 2023/24.
- v) The length frequency data produced concerning results for undersized lobsters, while the PRI reached a record low of 0.02 in 2023/24 compared to 0.09 in 2022/23. The PRI remains below the trigger reference point.
- vi) Egg production was not provided this season as a model-based stock assessment was not undertaken in order to save costs for Eastern Zone fishers. However, it is likely that egg production is above the limit reference point based on it being well above during the last model-run assessment in 2021/22; and that the CPUE proxy of 0.25 kg/pot-lift has been met.

Applying the harvest strategy, the zone successfully meets the Harvest Control Rule Part 1, relating to egg production. Under Part 2, while the CPUE has increased, the PRI has remained below the trigger reference point. As such, the zone remains in the same CPUE band of 0.45-<0.50 and maintains the same TACC band of 21 tonnes. The harvest strategy also requires a review of the harvest control due to the PRI sitting below the threshold for two consecutive seasons. Klaas noted that the required review was deliberately non-prescriptive in the harvest strategy to allow for flexibility based on the current situation. While the low PRI is a concern, the rebuilding strategy, and subsequent lower exploitation rate, has resulted in an increase in the adult rock lobsters in the zone. Moving forward, the collection of voluntary data in the Eastern Zone is increasingly important.

A concern was raised querying whether the PRI results accurately represented the zone, given the limited data collected in recent seasons and smaller spread of fishing effort. It was further suggested PRI numbers are not always reflective of the undersized rock lobster population in the Eastern Zone and subsequent catch rates. Members of the group requested a review be undertaken to consider the historical PRI data and subsequent effects on biomass.

**Action: Klaas to analyse historic PRI data catch rates and subsequent trends in biomass to present at the next RLRAG meeting.**

Members discussed different options for review of the harvest control rules, noting that conservative exploitation rates in the fishery have provided great protection for stocks. Members agreed a formal review could not be adequately achieved at this meeting and the

review be considered as a focus during the next RLRAG meeting. Based on the conservative strategy currently employed in the zone, and an intention to improve voluntary data collection efforts, members agreed to proceed with setting the TACC consistent with the harvest strategy.

Klass noted that the low PRI readings over the past two years are not likely to be an artefact of having less data, and that returning to a full stock assessment in the coming fishing year would not necessarily provide greater insights for the PRI.

**Action: Next RLRAG meeting to have allocated time to discuss Eastern Zone harvest control rule review.**

**RLRAG members endorsed setting a TACC of 21 tonnes for the Eastern Zone Rock Lobster Fishery.**

## 6. Larval Dispersal and Connectivity Project

### 6.1. Project Update

Katie Cresswell presented research on rock lobster larval connectivity. This involves monitoring the movements of rock lobster larvae after being released from specific sites along southern Australia, including New South Wales, South Australia, Tasmania, Victorian and Western Australia. This research has spanned from 1993-2021.

Based on larval movement patterns, the research provides an indication of where the larvae produced in a particular jurisdiction is likely to settle. Overall, the Southern South Australian region provides the strong source of southern rock lobster larvae and is the strongest contributor to Victoria's Western Zone and Eastern Zone. In addition, the Victoria Western Zone and Northern Tasmanian zone are also significant contributors to Victoria's Eastern Zone.

Of the larvae produced in Victoria's Western Zone, most settles in the Eastern Zone, as well as significant contributions to several Tasmanian regions. In addition, the Western Zone also maintains a very high level of self-recruitment, estimated at 37%. Comparatively, The Victorian Eastern Zone is considered to be a larvae sink, with very low levels of larvae found to settle in other areas. In addition, it has a very low level of self-recruitment, recorded at 3%. Katie further advised that the research indicates a very low number of larvae settled in the Eastern Zone during 2021. This could potentially explain the low PRI numbers recently recorded.

Members queried why the focus in the harvest strategy is on reducing the TACC in the Eastern Zone to improve the PRI when larvae is sourced from other areas. Klaas clarified that inshore currents are not well understood and that a reduced TACC remains an important measure to reduce the risk of population depletion.

Some RLRAG members expressed their concerns about the potential windfarms being developed in the Western Zone and the possible impacts on Rock Lobster larvae traveling from South Australia to Victoria, as well as self-recruitment in the Western Zone.

RLRAG members requested a copy of this presentation be distributed. It was noted that the final report for this project has not yet been published. As such, the presentation should not be distributed any further than the RLRAG.



**Action: Ewan to circulate Katie's presentation to the group, noting it is not yet available for public release.**

Members further requested an investigation into the differences in larval connectivity during La Nina or El Nino years.

**Action: Katie to research the effects of La Nina and El Nino weather patterns on larvae connectivity.**

## 7. Giant Crab Stock Assessment Results

### 7.1. Stock Assessment Results and Harvest Strategy Application

Klaas provided a summary of the Giant Crab Fishery stock assessment results. The small number of operators and the slow growth rate of giant crabs creates challenges in assessing the fishery. During the 2023/24 season, total catch was slightly less than previous seasons but was still close to the TACC. CPUE fell significantly to 0.66kg per pot-lift, following consecutive years of increases.

Under the existing harvest strategy, the recommendation would be to maintain the current TACC of 7.5 tonnes as the fishery remains above the reference points. Furthermore, TACC increases are not allowed under this harvest strategy.

Under the new draft harvest strategy, the fishery commences at Level 1 of the tiered strategy. This level specifies a starting TACC of 8.5 tonnes and does not allow for increases until the fishery progresses to Level 2. Should the fishery fall below the threshold reference point, it triggers a TACC decline of up to 50%. In 2023/24, the CPUE was marginally above this reference point. Despite this, Klaas advised that the draft harvest strategy includes a three-year running mean CPUE that aims to minimise the impact of single-season CPUE fluctuations that are unlikely to be representative of the stock abundance. The three-year mean was significantly above the threshold.

Klaas further noted that high grading practices, resulting in larger crabs being returned to the water, could explain some of the CPUE reduction. Based on a conservative analysis incorporating an adjustment for the high-grading practices, CPUE for 2023/24 was estimated to be above the threshold limit.

RLRAG members raised concerns about the proposed TACC increase recommended under the draft harvest strategy considering the significant reduction in CPUE during 2023/24. Some members further noticed anecdotal evidence that the fishery has declined more than the data suggests.

At this point, Ross Bromley stepped out due to an expression of conflict of interest.

RLRAG members undertook considerable discussion as to whether they would endorse the TACC recommendation under the draft harvest strategy. Some members noted concerns about the history of the Giant Crab Fishery. Other members believed that despite their recommendations of a more conservative TACC, maintaining the existing 7.5 tonne TACC would see minimal difference for the fishery in the long term.

The chair confirmed that the sub-committee of the RLRAG, leading this review, had

unanimously agreed to recommend an increased starting TACC of 8.5 tonnes under the new draft harvest strategy. The RLRAG was not required to support this recommendation. Generally, members were unwilling to endorse the recommendation but noted it was not opposed.

**RLRAG members abstained from making a recommendation on the sub-committee's proposed Giant Crab TACC of 8.5 tonnes under the draft Harvest Strategy.**

## **8. Other Business**

### **8.1. Southern Rocklobster Limited Update**

Wayne Dredge provided an update on behalf of Southern Rocklobster Limited (SRL) noting several ongoing research items.

### **8.2. Seafood Industry Victoria Update**

Matt Wassnig provided an overview of Seafood Industry Victoria's (SIV) recent priorities in relation to the Victorian Rock Lobster Fishery. SIV is continuing to advocate for research looking into the potential impacts of offshore marine developments on rock lobster stocks and commercial fishing operations.

In addition, the Trans-Tasman Rock Lobster conference has been confirmed in Victoria for August this year and SIV is in the process of confirming guest speakers and sponsorship for the event.

**The Chair called the meeting closed at 15:30.**

## Schedule 1: Summary of meeting actions

Action	Responsibility	Timing
1. Ewan to Circulate the draft minutes.	Ewan	December
2. VFA to organise a compliance report be provided to the RLRAG every 6 months either via the presence of a compliance officer at meetings or a compliance presentation being provided to be presented at meetings.	Ewan	Bi-annually
3. The RLRAG's independent chair to draft a letter to the VFA on behalf of the RLRAG expressing its concerns regarding the proposed VFA restructure.	Ian	April
4. VFA to finalise draft vessel survey form to consider for implementation at February/March RLRAG meeting in 2026.	David	February 2026
5. Klass to provide a simplified explanation of nominal and standardised CPUE to attendees at port meetings.	Klaas	April
6. Klaas to analyse historic catch rates and subsequent impacts on biomass and present at the next RLRAG meeting.	Klaas	June
7. Next RLRAG meeting to have allocated time to discuss Eastern Zone harvest control rule review.	Ewan	June
8. Ewan to circulate Katie's presentation to the group, noting it is not yet available for public release	Ewan	March/April
9. Katie to research the effects of La Nina and El Nino weather patterns on larvae connectivity.	Katie (Klass)	June

## Schedule 2: Summary of key recommendations

1. RLRAG members endorsed setting a TACC of 245 tonnes for the Western Zone Rock Lobster Fishery.
2. RLRAG members endorsed setting a TACC of 21 tonnes for the Eastern Zone Rock Lobster Fishery.
3. RLRAG members abstained from making a recommendation on the sub-committee's proposed Giant Crab TACC of 8.5 tonnes under the draft Harvest Strategy.