

Central Abalone TACC FORUM 2026

Swan Bay Room, VFA Office, 2A Bellarine Hwy, Queenscliff

Thursday, 9 April 2026

10:00am – 3:30pm

CHAIR'S SUMMARY

Chair: Ian Cartwright

Attendees:

Sean Buck	Executive Officer, Central Abalone Victoria
Sue Alcock	Executive Officer, Abalone Victoria (Central Zone)
Owen Shannessy	Central Abalone Victoria
Anthony Quarrell	Central Abalone Victoria
MaoMao Chen	Kansen
Warren Threlfall	Abalone Victoria (Central Zone)
Lyn Warn	Abalone Victoria (Central Zone)
Jarvis Espie	Abalone Victoria (Central Zone)
Jamie Espie	Abalone Victoria (Central Zone)
Jake Morris	Abalone Victoria (Central Zone)
Vin Gannon	Abalone Victoria (Central Zone)
Rene Strauss	Abalone Victoria (Central Zone)
Ric Devries	Abalone Victoria (Central Zone)
Cameron Dixon	MRAG Asia Pacific
Luke O'Sullivan	Director, Fisheries Management and Boating, VFA
Melissa Schubert	Program Leader, Commercial Fisheries and Science, VFA
Ian Parks, Director	Community Engagement and Major Crime, VFA
Rhys Neville	Senior Fisheries Officer, Community Engagement and Major Crime, VFA
Darvin Hansen	(Seafood Tasmania) joined online, intermittently

Apologies: Joel Browne
Vinnie Hunt

1. Introduction

The VFA Fisheries Management and Boating Director, Luke O'Sullivan, opened the meeting, welcoming members and noting the focus of the meeting which was to work through the total allowable commercial catch (TACC) setting process for the Central Zone Abalone Fishery. He introduced the Chair of the meeting, Ian Cartwright. The Chair noted the meeting was advisory in nature.

2. Fishery management update

Abalone Scientific Working Group (ASWG)

The MRAG Scientist, Cam Dixon provided an overview of ASWG and its membership across the three Victorian abalone zones, noting it is jointly chaired by Craig Fox (Abalone Council Victoria Chair and Western Zone licence holder) and Luke O'Sullivan. In his view, the ASWG is an effective group that enabled industry representatives from the three zones and the VFA to work through science issues relevant to the fishery with him and Duncan Worthington, science provider for the Western Zone. Included in the discussions was the review of the abalone Fisheries Independent Survey (FIS).

Fishery Independent Survey (FIS) update

After undertaking a review of the FIS Program in 2022, the ASWG developed a program to establish new fishery independent survey sites that better represent the current fishery by reflecting the spatial contraction to more fishing in shallow waters.

Data from the previous FIS sites in deeper and intermediate depth waters will not be lost. The 'best' of the historic sites will be retained and additional sites added in the shallow grounds, using the new fixed site process using a step-by-step evolutionary process. Some comparisons will be made where fixed sites overlap with radial transit sites, linking 'old' and 'new' data. The short-term goal is to establish 10 new sites in the Central Zone by June 30, 2026, subject to weather. Site selection was done initially on a random stratified basis, with fine scale positioning of the transect using diver observation. It was noted there are significant gaps in the FIS data, suggestion precaution in setting catches is appropriate.

After the Eastern Zone TACC Forum in February 2026, Craig Fox, Brendan Wadsworth and Cameron Dixon spent a day examining some of the new fixed sites in the zone and confirmed that a review of the site selection process would be beneficial.

The use of VMS to provide positional data to inform 'heat maps' and other analyses to inform stock assessments was discussed and the differences of using ORBCOMM units (currently polling at 5-minute intervals) vs Succorfish, which is set to collect data at 1 minute intervals. The ASWG and VFA have reached agreement to roll-out Succorfish units and diver loggers across the fishery to improve data collection, with diver loggers giving time in and out (effort) and water temperature.

AVCZ noted that it can support VFA on data collection, but not where Succorfish is involved because they have concerns regarding the privacy and security of any data collected by the UK-based company, citing that the company's data storage does not meet Australian standards. AVCZ has no confidence in their involvement. If VFA is seeking improved or expanded data collection, then AVCZ's preference is that this be done through ORBCOMM and the current framework, rather than by introducing a second provider. Conversely, Central Abalone Victoria and the Abalone Council Victoria were supportive of using Succorfish for the data collection.

There is also an issue to be resolved regarding managing data access, which will be discussed over the coming months and the VFA suggested a data agreement would be struck between industry and the VFA to make sure it was secure.

To further expand data collected across the fishery, the ASWG has also proposed to broaden the use of shell measurers and has purchased a small number of devices to trial with divers.

A suggestion was made from AVCZ that the VFA and the fishery should look again at what SPR approaches have to offer; they are now being successfully used in New Zealand and globally on other species.

Export approval application

The VFA provided an update on the progress of the application to renew the export approval for the Abalone Fishery, which expires this year. The Federal Government has indicated that they will include conditions requiring new harvest strategies for each zone as well as a new management plan. Whether there needs to be relatively minor changes or something more significant is yet to be decided; this will occur through a consultative process.

3. Licensing and Quota Management System

The VFA provided an overview of the new Licence and Quota Management System (LQMS) currently in development, which will be rolled out over next few months. The VFA received funding from Dept Treasury and Finance through its Business Acceleration Fund to replace the outdated Fisheries

Licensing System. The new system has been designed to better manage aquaculture and commercial fishing licences and quota, transactions between VFA and entitlement holders and will provide an online portal to replace a range of paper-based approval processes.

The primary functions of LQMS are

- Permit and licence applications
- Additions to and transfer of operators on a licence
- Licence renewals
- Permit, boat and licence payments
- Boat registration, renewals and transfer
- Quota trading, summary and balances
- Real time licence data

The VFA is currently in the final stages of testing the new system, with the aim of delivery before the 1 July licence renewal period. It will be accessible both by desktop and through a mobile application and mobile phone.

4. Compliance update

Ian Parks, Director of Community Engagement and Major Crime, provided an overview of compliance arrangements within the Central Zone Abalone Fishery. He outlined the general VFA approach, which is to promote high levels of voluntary compliance and apply education, engagement, intelligence and enforcement. Good compliance by the commercial sector was noted, with only one infringement notice and the rest verbal warnings. Key messages from the annual compliance review included the importance of tracking SMU catch limits and fishing to the optimal targets thereby reducing that risk of breaching the SMU upper limits and improving accuracy of weights when reporting.

It was noted that recidivist offenders are a target for the VFA's compliance focus, noting that a small number of offenders are taking 80% of the illegal fish and require a serious crime prevention and disruption focus.

5. Abalone stock assessment

The meeting focused on the 2024/25 stock assessment report for the Central Zone, highlighting key changes, such as adding six months of data up to December 2025, undertaken to facilitate continual improvement to the reporting.

The stock assessment suggests that there is strong evidence that the fishable biomass of the blacklip stock is recovering. The CPUE has increased in recent years at all spatial management units (SMUs) and reef codes, the 2024/25 TACC was under-caught at 197.7t (225.1t TACC) and catch at SMUs closer to easily accessible ports were all caught at or above their Optimum Targets (OTs).

Based on the available data and the advice from MRAG was that maintaining stable OTs across the fishery for 2026/27 would be appropriate and achieve further stock recovery.

Issues with continued use of CPUE as a primary indicator were raised and many shortcomings were identified. While some of these have been addressed through the CPUE standardisation processes, there was agreement that other sources of data and indicators are badly needed to inform the assessment. MRAG's view was that while the shortcomings are acknowledged, the increase in CPUE over the last few years is positive and are an encouraging sign of some stock recovery. An issue was raised with possible positive bias arising from taking CPUE data from part-fished areas, from which relative high catch rates were recorded, given the stocks had not been sufficiently reduced as to impact CPUE. MRAG agreed to consider his point further.

Action: MRAG to consider the impact of using CPUE data from part fished (where target catch is significantly under caught) on stock assessment outcomes.

6. Greenlip assessment and TACC recommendation

Total catches of greenlip abalone have been very consistent since 2008 and have been in the range of 205 to 3.6 tonnes throughout that time. It was agreed by consensus to recommend maintaining the greenlip TACC at 3.4 tonnes for 2026/27, noting that it was primarily a bycatch species and that targeting the species was not economical viable, especially if lengthy (and expensive) travel was needed to finish small quota balances.

The issue of being closed out of greenlip when blacklip Upper Limits were reached was raised, as it has been in previous years. VFA agreed to look at the issue.

Action: VFA to consider the option of maintaining access to greenlip in areas closed to blacklip due to ULs being reached, noting such consideration will include compliance matters.

7. Blacklip assessment and TACC recommendation

Commercial CPUE has increased in all SMUs and key reefcodes in recent years. Catches from the remote Cape Otway and Shipwreck SMUs however were under the OTs by 18t and 12t, respectively.

Forum participants discussed views on factors potentially influencing catches, including market preferences and weather and fuel price impacts on travelling to the remote SMUs.

- All agreed that weather was the primary driver for lower catches at the Cape Otway SMU, but ACVZ noted that some of their divers suggested the area is under fishing pressure. The CAV divers indicated that previous size increases have made some areas unfishable.
- Within the Flinders SMU, participants agreed to put a watching brief on reef code 13.04 (Cairns Bay).
- The under-catch at the Shipwreck SMU was discussed, with ACVZ suggesting that quota could be reduced because stock levels were low and that diver observations were different from the stock assessment (which suggested it was looking okay). CAV considered the area to still be in recovery but that maintaining the TACC level was appropriate. Participants agreed that the SMU should be closely monitored throughout the next season to determine if the under-catch is weather related or a result of a decreasing stock.

The consensus was to maintain current OTs, with some significant concerns raised by AVCZ over size limits and the need for increases in some areas. Further, AVCZ suggested that in many SMUs/reef codes, most of the catch exceeded the LML and that increasing the LML would seem to be able to be achieved with little impact on industry. Other industry participants indicated that the current LMLs were satisfactory for the status of the fishery at this time.

The need for better data and allowance for market or weather-related issues was recognised, as were the issues with the current reliance on CPUE in stock assessments. The meeting also touched on the need for better coordination and representation within the industry to address these challenges effectively.

Overall, participants at the forum were accepting of the recommendation to keep TACCs stable at each of the SMUs for the upcoming season (Table 1).

Table 1: Recommended TACCs for 2026/27

Spatial management unit	Lower limit	Lower threshold	TARGET	Upper threshold	Upper limit
Shipwreck Coast (4.01-5.03)	26.3	27.7	29.2	30.7	32.1
Cape Otway (6.01-8.01)	44.1	46.6	49.0	51.5	53.9
Surf Coast (8.02-10.05)	1.0	1.2	1.7	2.5	5.0
Port Phillip Bay (11.01-11.18)	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.5	5.0
Back Beaches (12.01-12.05)	40.4	41.4	42.5	43.6	44.6
Flinders (12.06-13.07)	18.5	19.5	20.5	21.5	22.6
Phillip Island (14.01-14.11)	32.3	33.2	34.0	34.9	35.7
Kilcunda (15.01-15.05)	8.4	8.8	9.3	9.8	10.2
Cape Liptrap (16.01-16.06)	10.9	11.5	12.1	12.7	13.3
Prom Westside (16.07-17.13)	18.9	20.0	21.0	22.1	23.1
Prom Eastside (18.03-18.09, ex 18.08)	4.3	4.6	4.8	5.0	5.3
Cliffys (18.08)	4.2	4.5	4.7	4.9	5.2
Total			228.8		

As noted above, AVCZ suggested that size limits should be increased in some areas as a priority action to ensure stock rebuilding. The VFA advised—based on guidance from MRAG—that altering LMLs is likely to affect CPUE, which currently serves as the sole indicator of stock status. Consequently, recommendations regarding changes to LMLs will be deferred until more comprehensive fishery data becomes available. Industry participants requested that their views on the LMLs be recorded (see Table 2).

Table 2: Record of LML discussion

Spatial management unit	Current LML (mm)	Proposed LML for 2026/27	
		ACVZ	CAV
Shipwreck Coast (4.01-5.03)	130	130	130
Cape Otway (6.01-8.01)	125	125	125
Surf Coast (8.02-10.05)	110	110	110
Port Phillip Bay (11.01-11.18)	105	105	105
Back Beaches (12.01-12.05)	119	120	119
Flinders (12.06-13.07)	114	115	114
Phillip Island (14.01-14.11)	112	115	112
Kilcunda (15.01-15.02)	115	115	115
Kilcunda (15.03-15.05)	110	115	110
Cape Liptrap (16.01-16.06)	110	112	110
Prom Westside (16.07, 17.02, 17.04, 17.05)	115	117	115
Prom Westside (17.01, 17.03, 17-10-17.13)	120	120	120
Prom Eastside (18.03-18.09, ex 18.08)	110	110	110
Cliffys (18.08)	110	110	110

8. Other business

Two additional items were tabled by AVCZ for consideration:

- Converting the quota year to a calendar year for marketing purposes.
- **Consider quota trading by area** (spatial allocation to suit divers and where they live). An industry proposal was that given i) expenses are climbing rapidly and ii) prices have fallen and show little prospect on increasing, there is a need to think differently about how the fishery operates as doing the same thing will have an inevitable consequence. One way is to look at how to reduce costs by managing quota spatially to better suit the distribution of divers in the fishery; this would be a complex process, but worth consideration. VFA agreed to review this option.

Action: VFA to discuss the option for innovative ways to spatially manage the fishery to reduce costs and increase industry viability.