

2026/27 WESTERN ZONE (WZ) ABALONE STOCK ASSESSMENT AND QUOTA SETTING WORKSHOP

MEETING SUMMARY

Date: Friday, 27 March 2026

Attendees: **Co-Chairs:** Melissa Schubert - Victorian Fisheries Authority (VFA) and Craig Fox -Western Abalone Divers Association (WADA)

Commercial sector stakeholders:

Craig Fox (WADA Chairman, WZ owner and diver), Travis Baulch (WADA Executive Officer), Sandra Downes (WZ owner), Dr Duncan Worthington (AMBRAD - Industry Scientist), Joanne Plummer (WZ owner), Lou Plummer (WZ owner and ex-diver), Phillip Plummer (WZ diver) Jayden Plumber (WZ diver), Cleave Thiele (WZ owner), Sandra Downes (WZ owner), Peter Riddle (WZ diver and owner rep), Aaron Leopold (WZ diver).

Victorian Fisheries Authority (VFA): Melissa Schubert (Manager - Fisheries Management), Kylie Wohlt (Principal - Policy Analyst), Cameron McCallum (Senior Fisheries Officer).

WADA Science Provider: Dr Duncan Worthington (Ambrad Consulting – Industry Independent Scientist)

Apologies: Bree Fox (WZ diver), Kerry Rowe (WZ owner), Mac Riddle (WZ diver), Andrew Rowe (WZ owner and diver).

*No apologies noted/given from Darvin Hansen (WZ owner), and Murray Peterson (WZ diver).

ITEM 1: WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

Craig Fox (C-Chair), opened the workshop and welcomed attendees. He introduced Melissa Schubert as Co-Chair of the workshop and noted her significant experience in the commercial fishing industry. Craig asked all in attendance to quickly introduce themselves to provide background for those new to a WZ workshop. Craig also outlined the purpose of the meeting and thanked all for attending.

Craig introduced Kylie Wohlt from VFA to present on changes to the VFA licencing system.

ITEM 2: VFA FISHERIES LICENCING SYSTEM PRESENTATION

Kylie Wohlt presented on changes to the current VFA fisheries licencing system. Kylie explained that the new VFA licencing system (Licencing and Quota Management System – LQMS) is currently being developed and is expected to be rolled out formally at end of April. The new system will replace the outdated system and be the primary interface for all fisheries licencing functions. All primary functions will be retained in LQMS and will provide a 'one stop shop' for fishers to renew licences and transfer quota amongst other things.

ITEM 3: COMPLIANCE UPDATE

Cam McCullum, Senior Fisheries Officer, provided the VFA compliance update.

Cam introduced himself and explained that currently there are less officers around the State generally. This has resulted in less inspections but much more thorough inspections focusing on two key areas including; major crime and community engagement.

Four commercial abalone inspections took place throughout 2025/26 and Cam explained the excellent communication between VFA compliance staff and commercial fishers.

Key points from Cam include:

- Ensure trips are started in eCatch prior
- Ensure VMS is functional (succorfish app.)
- Call local officers if in doubt

ITEM 4: ABALONE MANAGEMENT UPDATE

Melissa Schubert (Co-Chair), introduced herself and explained her current role managing abalone and Victoria's fisheries more broadly. Currently, the VFA are working to recruit a new abalone fishery manager after the departure of Anthony McGrath.

Melissa described the valued relationship between VFA and WADA and regarded the WZ approach as being the gold standard relating to data collection frameworks and stewardship. VFA and WADA work collaboratively through constructive engagement and described the establishment of the Abalone Scientific Working Group (ASWG) to bring together science, Government and industry.

ITEM 5: MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

The group discussed the current management framework and the highly conservative management approach after AVG events in the WZ. It was discussed that after 17 years of recovery from the first AVG event, many parts of the stock should be considered as recovered (i.e. particularly with the exception of Portland and its more recent AVG impacts).

Prior to the recommencement of commercial abalone fishing in WZ in 2009, a 135mm LML was implemented (alongside very conservative catch targets) to help protect and recover stocks. The meeting noted that right from the recommencement of fishing on 135 mm, and the concerns at the time of concentrating fishing, there was an intention to reduce the LML as stocks recovered to better spread the distribution of commercial fishing effort across stocks to enable greater productivity. Annual stock assessments since 2009 have indicated incremental improvement in biomass estimates and secondary indicators such as catch, catch per unit effort (CPUE), shell lengths for over 17 years, however production remains below expectation with catch and effort concentrated on only the most productive sites within reefcodes.

There is now strong evidence from GPS data collected over 17 years that fishing effort concentration and consequent catch has been focused in areas of faster growth to larger sizes. At the same time, many of the areas with slower growing fish that often only reach smaller sizes, are not being fished or are being fished at less than possible sustainable levels.

Over the last 2 years, a 125mm Legal Minimum Length (LML) has been trialled in three adjacent reef codes, and have demonstrated the spread of effort more evenly across the stocks with different growth patterns. The meeting was confident that applying the same approach more broadly could spread concentration of fishing effort and enable greater production. There was strong support and consensus to roll out the 125mm LML across the zone with the exception of Portland. A 130mm LML will remain at Portland to promote further protection and recovery of stocks in that Spatial Management Unit (SMU).

To ensure appropriate management and spread of fishing effort and catch across the stocks, the meeting agreed to maintain and continue to develop the strong data collection and monitoring program implemented in the fishery. It was noted that ongoing monitoring of fishing and stocks with the new management approach will include; boat GPS and diver-activity loggers, shell measurers, and the new improved Fishery Independent Survey, which will each continue to provide high quality data for assessment and adaptive within-year management of fishing during the 2026/27 season. WADA and VFA will continue to monitor and manage fine scale distribution of fishing effort, to ensure effort and catch are more closely matching production and that sustainability is improved.

The Stock Assessment presented to the meeting included estimates of biomass developed from an approach that commenced in 2009, but was focussed on estimates of legal-sized biomass >130 mm, as was done in previous years. Updated estimates of biomass density were calculated for abalone >125 mm, were extrapolated to areas of reef currently used by the fishery, and in addition to new areas of reef not currently used by the fishery because of the higher 130 mm LML. Estimates of the biomass density of abalone from 125-130 mm (i.e. able to be fished on a 125 mm LML but not able to be fished on a 130 mm LML) were calculated using the data from the Mills-Killarney-Cutting trial in the last two years (Figure 1, showing 22 days with >20 kg 125-130 mm abalone measured). Reducing the LML to 125 mm enabled access to additional biomass density of between 6-79% among diver days (i.e. as a % of that above 130 mm). On average, biomass was 34% higher from abalone 125-130 mm. Further, the meeting also considered the additional spread of fishing effort across reefs within the 3 reefcodes using the 125 mm LML compared to 130 mm in recent years. Estimates of biomass from the FIS above 130 mm, together with higher estimates of biomass from 125-130 mm, and the extension of fishing to new areas of reef not currently fished because of the 130 mm LML, led to large increases in the legal-sized biomass estimates, and complimentary reductions in current and proposed catch and harvest fraction. The Assessment also highlighted the importance of ongoing monitoring of the fishery and stocks to ensure fishing effort and catch is spread more evenly across stocks as it moves to a 125 mm LML, and is not just concentrated on the most productive sites as has been occurring.

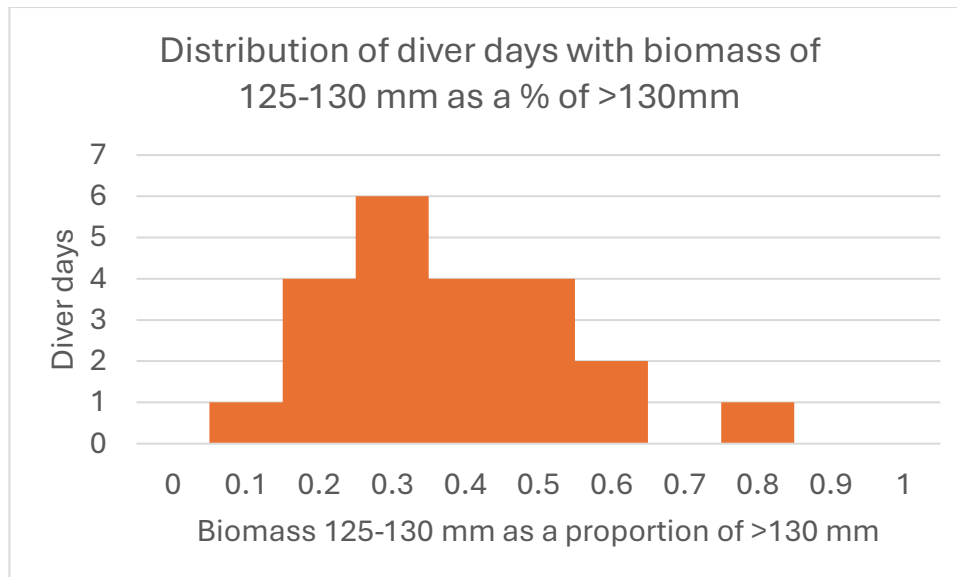


Figure 1. Frequency distribution of diver days with the biomass of 125-130 mm abalone as a proportion (%) of that above 130 mm from application of 125 mm LML in Mills-Killarney-Cutting during last two quota years. Only days with >20 kg of 125-130 abalone measured are used.

ITEM 6: HARVEST STRATEGY AND OVERVIEW

Duncan Worthington, WADA science provider, initially described the journey of the WZ and the significant efforts to rebuild the resource post AVG. This involved significant cuts to quota over 20 years ago. At that time quota was effectively cut to zero for most of the zone and modelling was developed in collaboration with CSIRO to inform a new harvest strategy designed to promote recovery of abalone stocks.

Duncan also described the ongoing development of the new Fishery Independent Survey (FIS) program following a review in 2022 and recommendations. This has involved establishment of over 40 sites throughout the WZ. Preliminary information from FIS indicates that Port Fairy SMU is relatively stable with regard to 'Unders' (100-130mm) fluctuating 10-15%, and the Warrnambool SMU initially down then stable.

The new FIS program measures the footprint of the fishery as defined by GPS data captured by Succorfish devices. Duncan also described the development of a new 'dashboard' that will incorporate all available information (i.e. spatial effort, catch effort – depth loggers, shell measuring data and catch) where all consolidated data is available for fishers.

Harvest Strategy will be reviewed in the next 12-24 months as new information from FIS trends can be defined, calibrated and integrated. This review will aim to maintain the intent of the original Harvest Strategy with reference and focus on primary (fishery independent) and secondary (fisheries dependent) indicators such as; catch rate, shell lengths and observations. The review will also update recovery targets, biomass estimates and overall reference points as FIS data and analysis develops. Melissa (VFA Co-Chair) also spoke to the review indicating that a new Management Plan and review of Harvest Strategy is required by 2028 to maintain certain accreditations at Federal level.

ITEM 7: BLACKLIP SMU STOCK ASSESSMENT AND TACC

Overview

Duncan presented an overview of the FIS abundance data (2021-25) and the reef report cards that form the basis for the current stock assessment. These include; catch reporting, FIS abundance (biomass estimates), shell length data, Catch Per Unit Effort (CPUE). Duncan also encouraged the use and integration of the *Diver obs.* app developed by the Abalone Council Victoria. The app collects qualitative information during diver trips that can then be compared to diver information in the TACC workshop.

Portland SMU

- **Recommended TACC – 6.5 tonnes**

The current 2025/26 season blacklip allocation is 6.5t as determined at the previous TACC workshop. The proportionally small allocation was designed to encourage fishing activity and form the basis for fishery dependent data collection to inform future decisions. There was consensus to maintain the current conservative target for continuation of data collection for informed decision-making at the next TACC workshop

Many of the comments focused on the patchy nature of recovery. One fisher indicated his observations to include average catch of 500kg per day and significant recruitment of juvenile abalone in areas that had been affected by AVG. While fishing was very good in certain areas, the stock appeared to remain patchy at this point and there was justification to maintain the current small allocation to continue to encourage recovery while collecting important data. **Decision – maintain 6.5t for 2026/27 season.**

Spatial management of catch in the Portland SMU will involve indicative optimal targets, however the SMU is open in all reef codes to promote spread of effort and data collection.

Lady Julia Percy Island SMU

- **Recommended TACC – 4.8 tonnes**

This recommendation has remained consistent since 2022/23 season.

The group commented on the rising prevalence of white sharks and the reluctance to dive this SMU. Julia Percy remains under caught, however all agreed that it generally fishes well and the 125mm LML will help achieve allocation to get caught. **Decision – maintain 4.8t for 2026/27 season.**

Port Fairy SMU

- **Recommended TACC – 20.7 tonnes.**

There was consensus for a 5.5t increase from the current season, following a 700kg increase from the 2024/25 season. There was some discussion about how the stocks would

react to an increase in TACC, however data and proposed LML arrangement supported an increase. It was detailed in discussion that if the new proposed framework did not achieve stock performance goals then review would take place. **Decision – increase to 20.7t for 2026/27 season.**

Heatmaps were presented by Duncan and distinctively demonstrated concentrated fishing effort in most reefcodes. It was discussed by the group that the new arrangement should promote greater distribution of fishing effort.

Changes included:

- Increase by 2t Craggs 3.05
- Increase by 1.5t Burnetts 3.06
- Increase by 1.5t Watertower 3.07
- Increase by 0.5t Lighthouse 3.08

Warrnambool SMU

- **Recommended TACC – 19 tonnes**

There was consensus for 3t increase from the current season. Comments mostly revolved around observations of increasing recruitment of juveniles and stocks generally looked good. Catch rates were up across most reefcodes and fishers were generally happy with abalone stocks.

Heatmaps presented showed a slight increase in the distribution of fishing effort throughout the reefcodes Mills, Killarney and Cutting in trial 125mm LML. It is expected that the changes to arrangements proposed here should increase greater exploration of reefcodes and increase the distribution of fishing effort. All agreed that the proposed framework should be implemented and reviewed mid-season to gauge how stock was performing. **Decision – increase to 19t for 2026/27 season.**

Changes include:

- Increase by 1t Mills 3.09
- Increase by 2t Killarney 3.10,

Summary or recommended SMU TACC for 2026/27

Spatial management unit	Recommended changes	Recommended TACC
Portland	No Change	6.5t
Julia Percy	No Change	4.8t
Port Fairy	Increase 5.5t	20.7t
Warrnambool	Increase 3.0t	19t

Recommended Portland management in 2026/27

There was consensus that all product from the Portland SMU would be canned only and no live shipments. Divers who fish Portland will also maintain two sets of gear if they wish to fish other parts of the WZ. All fishing performance in the Portland SMU will be directly conveyed to the Exec Officer for filing and data analysis.

ITEM 6: GREENLIP TACC

Duncan introduced the greenlip TACC discussion and described the fishing effort to date. At the time of TACC workshop limited greenlip fishing had taken place to date. Greenlip fishing had been focused in the Warrnambool SMU and there was consensus that all reefcodes should be available to greenlip fishing when weather windows present. All agreed to maintain the current greenlip allocation and continue with 135mm LML. Duncan also described the need for further FIS information focused on greenlip. **Decision – maintain 1.05t for 2026/27 season.**

ITEM 9: SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

The Co-Chairs thanked all participants for the constructive discussion and the consensus reached at each reef code, SMU, and zone level. Melissa (Co-Chair) outlined the next steps, with public consultation due to occur in coming weeks.

Craig, on behalf of WADA, acknowledged the hardships experienced in the Western Zone and thanked attendees for their passion, stewardship, and long-term commitment to sustainability.

Meeting closed at 4:00 pm

Summary or Portland SMU TACC for 2026/27

<i>SMU</i>	<i>Reef code</i>	<i>Reef name</i>	<i>Recommended 2026/27 OT (t)</i>
Portland (6.5 tonnes allocated to SMU)	1.01	Discovery Bay	0
	1.02	Whites Beach	1.0
	1.03	Water Springs	1.0
	1.04	Blowholes	1.0
	1.05	The Tits	1.0
	1.06	Bully Cove/South Bridgewater	0.5
	1.07	Seal Caves	0
	1.08	Horseshoe	0
	2.01	Murrels	0
	2.02	Jones Bay	0
	2.03	Outside Nelson	0
	2.04	Devils Kitchen	0
	2.05	Inside Nelson	0
	2.06	Killer Waves	0
	2.07	Yellow Rock	0
	2.08	Cape Grant	1.0
2.09	The Passage	0	
2.10	Lawrence Rocks	1.0	
2.11	Blacknose	0	
2.12	Hospital Reef	0	
2.13	Dutton Way	0	
2.14	Julia Bank	0	
2.16	Minerva Reef	0	

Summary of other SMU TACC for 2026/27

<i>SMU</i>	<i>Reef code</i>	<i>Reef name</i>	<i>Recommended 2026/27 OT (t)</i>
Julia Percy	3.01	JP North	0.6
	3.02	JP Northeast	0.6
	3.03	JP East	0.6
	3.04	JP Prop Bay	3.0
Port Fairy	2.15	Yambuk	0.0
	3.05	Crags	11.5
	3.06	Burnets	4.2
	3.07	Water Tower	3.5
	3.08	Lighthouse	1.5
Warrnambool	3.09	Mills	3.0
	3.1	Killarney	7.0
	3.11	The Cutting	3.5
	3.12	Thunder Point	3.0
	3.13	Lady Bay	0.0
	3.14	Levys Point	2.5