

2024/25 CENTRAL ZONE ABALONE STOCK ASSESSMENT AND QUOTA WORKSHOP - MEETING SUMMARY

Date: Tuesday, 9 April 2024

Attendees: **Chair:** Ian Cartwright

Commercial sector stakeholders: Nick Gall (CEO of Abalone Victoria Central Zone (AVCZ)), Michael Shannessy, Vinnie Hunt, Faye Hashemi, Rene Strauss, Jake Morris, Brandon Cole, Jeremy Prince, Ric De Vries, David Glasbrenner, Craig Miller, Sean Buck, Owen Shannessy, Jamie Espie, Michelle Hansen, Warren Threlfall, Vin Gannon, Murray Petersen

Victorian Fisheries Authority (VFA): Luke O'Sullivan, Melissa Schubert, Anthony McGrath and Rod Barber

MRAG Asia Pacific: Dr. Cameron Dixon

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The annual stock assessment and quota workshop for the Central Zone of the Victorian Abalone Fishery was held on Tuesday, 9 April 2024 at Flinders. The purpose of the workshop was to consider the results of each spatial management unit (SMU) assessment, in light of the harvest strategy, to inform the sustainable catch limits and ultimately the total allowable commercial catch (TACC). The workshop was attended by the VFA, scientists, AVCZ, commercial licence and quota holders and commercial divers. The participation of stakeholders throughout the meeting was constructive and discussions were based on scientific advice, diver observations and catch management considerations within the zone.

Consensus was sought for a proposed catch on each reef code and SMU. This was reached for the majority of reefs and SMU's during the meeting, however, minor differences remained for the Back Beaches, Phillip Island and Prom Westside SMUs.

ITEM 1: WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

The Chair opened the workshop and set clear expectations around respect and behaviour during the meeting and the need to put the sustainability of the fishery first. The Chair then asked each participant to introduce themselves and declare their interests in the meeting.

ITEM 2: OVERVIEW

The Chair noted the agenda for the day and recommended that consensus would be sought on individual spatial management unit (SMU) targets and the resultant TACC for 2024/25.

He advised that Cameron Dixon, MRAG Asia Pacific (MRAG) scientist, would present the stock assessment for each spatial management unit (SMU) and then comments and diver observations would be sought from meeting participants. Commentary for each SMU would be noted and included in the meeting summary.

The Chair outlined that all attendees and other interested stakeholders will have another opportunity to comment during the public consultation phase.

ITEM 4: FISHERY MANAGEMENT UPDATE

Introduction

Anthony McGrath, Abalone Fishery Manager, introduced himself and provided the VFA management update.

Abalone Viral Ganglioneuritis (AVG) update

Anthony noted that AVG was detected at Port MacDonnell in South Australia by abalone divers in February 2024. The outbreak is being managed by the Department of Primary Industries and Regions, South Australia and there are currently no known detections in Victoria. The VFA implemented control measures to prevent the spread the virus into Victoria, including the prohibition of unprocessed abalone from South Australia into Victoria and restricting the Port MacDonnell based rock lobster fleet from entering Victorian waters.

Anthony praised the swift action of industry and provided advice about the Agriculture Victoria - Biosecurity Code of Conduct. Anthony also recommended that divers familiarise the Code of Conduct and view the video released by Abalone Council Victoria, which explains the measures within the Code of Conduct by outlining what a diver should do if they find abalone they suspect to be affected, and how to clean, disinfect and dry equipment.

It was noted that the Victorian diver who discovered the infected abalone in South Australia was in attendance. He was thanked for his efforts in immediately reporting the unhealthy abalone to South Australian authorities and for providing samples for testing.

Abalone Industry Scientific Working Group (AISWG)

The AISWG has been established as an extension to the Fishery Independent Survey Review Working Group. A terms of reference has been developed and the objective of the group is to utilise the experience and expertise of independent scientific personnel, fishery managers and abalone industry members to provide recommendations on how best to assess and monitor the Victorian Wildharvest Abalone Fishery. The AISWG will provide scientific recommendations to the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Victorian Fisheries

Authority on matters pertaining to the fishery and ensure the CEO has sufficient information to support robust science-based decision making.

Carryover provisions

Anthony outlined the central zone carryover provisions and noted the current amounts to be applied. For the 2024/25 and 2025/26 seasons, 9,772.19kg of blacklip and 156.56kg of greenlip are to be allocated to affected fishers.

An industry member questioned if carry-over should be considered separately to the optimal target's. The VFA and MRAG said that for applicable SMU's, carry-over needed to be considered within the optimal target, as this represents the sustainable amount that can be extracted from the resource.

ITEM 3: COMPLIANCE UPDATE

Rod Barber, Senior Fisheries Officer, introduced himself and provided the VFA compliance update. He outlined the compliance approach and explained the split of resources between recreational and commercial fisheries, marine safety, marine parks, aquaculture, and fish receivers. Rod provided an overview of compliance actions from 2023/24 to date and congratulated industry on the low level of actions in the central zone, with the few offences resulting in verbal or official warnings.

Rod outlined compliance actions in the recreational sector and explained the importance of education, with fisheries officers attending events and using social media to increase understanding and compliance.

Industry questioned if compliance activity in the central zone was similar to previous years, to which Rod explained that VFA budget pressures and current vacancies for fisheries officers were restricting the amount of compliance activity that could be undertaken.

ITEM 5: STOCK ASSESSMENT OVERVIEW

Overview

Cameron Dixon from MRAG presented the stock assessment overview, noting it more relevant data than preceding assessments. In previous years, there had been a high degree of uncertainty due to the absence of FIS data for 2022 and a heavy reliance on catch per unit effort (CPUE) which, when used on its own, can mask a declining biomass.

He outlined the data sources used for current stock assessment and thanked the VFA and Duncan Worthington of AMBRAD for support with providing them:

- CPUE (kg/h and kg/day)
- A FIS at 15 historic sites closest to the current fishing grounds
- Commercial length frequency data (provided for the first time in three years).

Cameron noted that all indicators were trending positively, giving greater confidence in the weight of evidence assessment outcomes. This was demonstrated through the increases in CPUE, average daily catch and in average size, with many SMU's fishing 10mm+ above the Legal Minimum Lengths (LML). He explained that with increased average size, less fish are harvested to reach the quota. Resulting in more fish remaining in the fishery, which supports biomass recovery.

Cameron also described that the Central Zone fishery had a significant 'rest' period during COVID and this was showing through in the data. Due to the restricted fishing activity over a 15-month period, only 120 tonnes of the 262 tonne TACC had been caught. This 'rest' period, combined with conservative management of TACCs and reduced LML's has had a positive impact on the biomass. Further, this was followed by an increase in recruit abundance, following previous declines from 2003-2018 and a dramatic increase (87%) in pre-recruit abundance in 2023, following significant decline from 2003-2021.

Cameron noted that the 2023/24 nominal CPUE has also showed another increase (to 1 April 2024).

MRAG recommendations

It is unequivocal that the spatial extent of the fishery has contracted substantially in the last two decades, and the fishery now relies heavily on shallow water reefs. While there remains uncertainty in each measure individually, the fact that all indicators provide positive trends in recent years suggests that the decline in biomass has halted and is likely to have started to increase on these shallow reefs.

On this basis, Cameron recommended that it would be appropriate to continue to invest in stock recovery by maintaining the catch at current levels while continuing to monitor and improve biomass indicators and the stock assessment approach.

The Chair thanked Cameron and the MRAG team for the work done on the stock assessment and thanked participants for their feedback.

ITEM 6: BLACKLIP ABALONE SPATIAL MANAGEMENT ASSESSMENT

To begin the discussion Cameron acknowledged an issue that had been identified by industry after last year's TACC forum and was subsequently addressed in the data and current assessment. It involved the incorrect reporting of effort at Cape Liptrap, where some operators had recorded effort twice when fishing for both greenlip and blacklip. Meeting participants discussed this and the need for eCatch to be better at filtering time fishing between species.

Action AISWG to discuss a standardised method to report catch across two species.

The Chair outlined that the process to build the TACC should be based on the total sustainable catch which should include the carry-over amounts, rather than apply this after a sustainable catch has been decided. Cameron then introduced each SMU discussion with historic context, the stock assessment outcomes and harvest strategy results. Anthony provided the VFA recommendation, and the Chair asked for comments from industry participants. SMU discussions are summarised in Table 1.

ITEM 8: GREENLIP ABALONE ASSESSMENT

The group discussed the greenlip abalone TACC and consensus was reached, recommending maintaining current settings at 3.4t (3.6t including carryover). A number of industry members requested that the VFA review the current system limitations that prevent fishing for greenlip in SMU's that have been closed in eCatch once the blacklip TACC has been reached.

ITEM 9: SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

The Chair thanked all participants for a constructive process this year and explained that VFA will draft the meeting summary for stakeholder comment, with public consultation due to occur within the next month.

Meeting closed at 4:15 pm.

Table 1. Spatial management unit breakdown – results and comments. Note, industry comments are separated into a point per individual.

SMU	Catch		Recommendations and comments
	Target (OT + carryover) 2023/24 (t)	Target (OT + carryover) 2024/25 (t)	
Cape Otway (6.01-8.01)	49.0	49.0	MRAG summary: • Catch of 55.8 t just below the OT with carry-over. • CPUE declined slightly in 2022 but has generally increased over last few years. • Four Top 15 sites only. Recruit abundance increased since 2017. • Pre-recruit abundance increased substantially in 2023. • Commercial size has increased in the last few years, over and above the size limit increase. • Catch average 136mm (11mm over LML). • Mean daily catch 457kg. Industry comments: 1. Diver relayed concerns about size and abundance and noted that despite good data, the area can be a bit 'hit and miss'. Consensus reached to keep this area the same.
Back Beaches (12.01-12.05)	40	41.5	MRAG summary: • Catch above the OT by 2.5 t. • Standardised CPUE has increased since 2017. • Three Top 15 sites only. Recruit abundance stable since 2020. • Pre-recruit abundance decreased to very low numbers in 2021 but increased to historic high levels in 2023. • Commercial size has increased substantially in the last few years; more than the LML increase. • Catch average 127mm (8mm over LML). • Mean daily catch 506kg. VFA recommendations: 1. Maintain catch 40.1t. 2. Maintain current upper limit of 5% over the target. 3. Maintain current LML.

SMU	Catch		Recommendations and comments
	Target (OT + carryover) 2023/24 (t)	Target (OT + carryover) 2024/25 (t)	
			Industry comments: 1. One industry member considered the area to be fine, with his catch rate at 100kg/hour. 2. Another industry member noted that Reef 12.05 looked poor, with many scars from last season and low recruitment. 3. General concerns for some areas. 4. Some members recommended maintain the current target. 5. One member wanted to increase TACC by 3 tonnes in this SMU. Consensus was not reached on a target. Outcome shown is 'middle ground of 1.5t increase.
Shipwreck Coast (4.01-5.03)	29.2	29.2	MRAG summary: • Catch was around the OT with carry-over. • Impacted by the virus in 2007 and closed until 2010. • CPUE showed no clear trends in the last decade. • Two Top 15 sites only. Recruit abundance has increased post virus and is currently at high levels. Pre-recruit abundance did increase but has been at low levels since 2021. • Mean commercial size has also increased over and above the size limit increase. • Catch average 127mm (13mm above LML). • Mean daily catch 566kg. VFA recommendations: 1. Maintain catch target to 29.2 tonne (inclusive of carryover), or reduce. 2. Maintain upper limit of 10% over the target. 3. Maintain current LML. Industry comments: 1. One diver noted that this area has a patch biomass, but once you find them, they are abundant in those areas. Consensus to maintain at 25.3t, plus carry-over.
Phillip Island (14.01-	32.3	34	MRAG summary: • Catch 1 t above OT but capped. Four consecutive years of constant catch.

SMU	Catch		Recommendations and comments
	Target (OT + carryover) 2023/24 (t)	Target (OT + carryover) 2024/25 (t)	
14.11)			• CPUE has increased sequentially over this time. • Two Top 15 sites only. FIS recruit abundance has increased substantially since 2017 and is currently at high levels. • Pre-recruit abundance is the highest since 2010. • Mean commercial size has also increased over and above the size limit increase. • Average catch 117mm (5mm above LML). • Mean daily catch 473kg. VFA recommendations: 1. Maintain catch target to 32.3 tonnes. 2. Maintain current upper limit of 5% over the target. 3. Maintain current LML. Industry comments: 1. Phillip Island fished well this year. 2. Several divers believed that the harvest strategy allowed for an increase in TACC, whilst three recommended no change and two suggested a 1.7t - 2t increase in TACC (noting that 1.7t will return the TACC to previous year's setting). 3. A number of other divers recommended that Phillip Island LML should be increased by 2mm to be in line with Flinders LML, despite the average catch size being well above this. Consensus was not reached on a target. Outcome shown is 1.7t increase, returning to 2022/23 season settings.
Flinders (12.06-13.07)	20.5	20.5	MRAG summary: • Catch was 2.5 t above OT but remains well below historical levels. • Standardised CPUE generally increased since 2017. • Only two Top 15 FIS sites. • Recruit abundance remains at historical lows. • Pre-recruit abundance more than doubled in 2023. • Commercial size has increased above the LML increases in recent years. • Low shell numbers counted. • Average catch 127mm (13mm above LML). • Mean daily catch 405kg.

SMU	Catch		Recommendations and comments
	Target (OT + carryover) 2023/24 (t)	Target (OT + carryover) 2024/25 (t)	
			VFA recommendation: 1. Maintain current target. 2. Maintain current 10% upper limit over the target. 3. Maintain current LML. Industry comments: 1. Divers suggested maintaining current settings. Consensus to maintain at 20.5t.
Prom Westside (16.07-17.13)	21	21	MRAG summary: • Catch of 26.7 t was 5.7 t above the OT and has remained relatively high for the last three years following the low catch in 2019. • Average catch since 2010 is 24 t. • CPUE has increased in recent years. • Only two Top 15 sites. • Both recruit and pre-recruit abundance are low in a historic context. • Commercial size has shown no clear trend in recent years but is complicated by two size limits. • Mean daily catch 468kg. VFA recommendation: 1. Maintain the catch target at 21 tonnes or reduce. 2. Maintain 10% over the target. 3. Maintain LMLs. Industry comments: 1. Some divers recommended to maintain current target. 2. No positive trends over than CPUE were noted. 3. Two divers lobbied for increase of 3t in TACC based on harvest strategy. Consensus was not reached on a target. Outcome shown is to maintain at current settings.

SMU	Catch		Recommendations and comments
	Target (OT + carryover) 2023/24 (t)	Target (OT + carryover) 2024/25 (t)	
Kilcunda (15.01-15.05)	10.3	9.3	MRAG summary: - Recent catches are well below historic levels. - CPUE has been a little variable in recent years. - Commercial size has not changed. - Not as positive as other stocks. - Mean daily catch 368kg. VFA recommendation: - Reduce catch target by 1.4t to 8.9 tonne (inclusive of carryover). - Maintain upper limit of 10% over the target. - Maintain current LMLs. Industry comments: - Unanimous agreement by meeting participants that the SMU should be decreased by 1.0t based on stock assessment results and diver observations. - One diver recommended that Kilcunda be reviewed by AISWG with a view to divide into two reef codes, as there are two distinctly separate populations defined by bottom structure. Consensus reached, to reduce by 1.0t
Prom Eastside (18.03-18.09)	4.8	4.8	MRAG summary: - Catches have reduced to around 5 t last two years from 7-8 t. - CPUE has been variable but there are only a few days of data each year. - Commercial size data have shown a general increase, but low number of shells measured. - Mean daily catch 304kg. VFA recommendation: - Maintain catch target to 4.3 t. - Maintain upper limit 10% over the target. - Maintain current LML.

SMU	Catch		Recommendations and comments
	Target (OT + carryover) 2023/24 (t)	Target (OT + carryover) 2024/25 (t)	
			Industry comments: No discussion Consensus to maintain at 4.8 t
Cape Liptrap (16.01-16.06)	9.4	9.4	MRAG summary: - Catches have been variable. - CPUE has had issues due to mis-reported greenlip/blacklip effort. - Low number of days to calculate CPUE. - Commercial size data have shown a general increase, but only low number of shells measured. - Difficult to determine stock status. - Catch average 121mm (11mm above LML). - Mean daily catch 354kg. VFA recommendation: - Maintain catch target at 9.4 tonne (inclusive of carry over). - Maintain current upper limit at 10% over the target. - Main current LML. Industry comments: - Some conversation around the misreporting of greenlip and blacklip effort. - Request for compliance to look into the ability to fish for greenlip in this SMU when it has closed for blacklip. Current settings in eCatch don't allow for this. Consensus reached to maintain at 8.4t, plus 1.0t of carry-over.
Cliffys (18.08)	4.7	4.7	MRAG summary: - Low catch last two years well below OT. - CPUE is low in a historic context. - Shell size has declined but very few shells measured in recent years. - Mean daily catch 385kg.

SMU	Catch		Recommendations and comments
	Target (OT + carryover) 2023/24 (t)	Target (OT + carryover) 2024/25 (t)	
			VFA recommendation: 1. Maintain catch target to 4.7 tonnes or reduce. 2. Maintain upper limit 10% over the target. 3. Maintain current LML. Industry comments: 1. Cliffys had only been fished on one day for this season by one diver. 2. Minimal discussion Consensus reached to maintain at 4.7 t
Surf Coast (8.02-10.05)	1.7	1.7	MRAG summary: • Catches are low in a historical context but increased in 2020. • Most of the catch comes from one reefcode (10.02). • CPUE is highly variable due to a low number of days fished. • Mean daily catch is 295kg VFA recommendation: 1. Maintain catch target to 1.7 tonnes. 2. Maintain 5 tonne upper limit for exploratory fishing. 3. Maintain current LML. Industry comments: 1. Visibility has been poor at the Surf Coast SMU. 2. This SMU is very weather dependent, fish can be caught, but good swell and visibility is required. 3. Maintain the current target and upper limit. Suggest reinstating an industry incentive to encourage fishers to dive the SMU. 4. Issue for thought here is high-grading of catch. Consensus reached to maintain at 1.7t
Port Phillip	0	0	MRAG summary:

SMU	Catch		Recommendations and comments
	Target (OT + carryover) 2023/24 (t)	Target (OT + carryover) 2024/25 (t)	
Bay (11.01-11.18)			• Important contributor to the fishery prior to 2008. • Catch on 0.1t in 2022/23 • Optimal target of 0.0t in 2023/24 VFA recommendation: 1. Maintain total catch target at 0 tonne. 2. Maintain 5 tonne upper limit for exploratory fishing. Industry comments: 1. No commentary Consensus reached to maintain 0.0t with 5t upper limit
Total	222.9	225.1 (incl. 9.8t carryover)	VFA recommended total catch target: 215.3 tonne (plus 9.8 t carryover)