

Fishery Resource Advisory Group (FRAG)

Meeting 1/2015
Monday April 20, 2015 – 10.30am
IMAS, Nubeena Crescent Tarooma

Minutes

Present:

Members:

I Cartwright (Chair), Greg Woodham, J McKibben, B Cobbing, J. Hoult, D Hansen, D Lisson, R Scanlon, A Hansen., M Bradshaw (DPIPWE), C Mundy (IMAS) M Haddon (CSIRO), J Freeman (minutes),

Observers:

J Ramsden, E Thorpe, M Porteus, B Russell, B Amos, J Huddleston, M Webster, B Ransom, S Anning, L McRae, S McRae, H Jones (IMAS)

Apologies:

P. Richardson, A Brown, A Gray, D Tarbath (IMAS)

1. Welcome and opening remarks:

The Chair welcomed members and observers, and outlined the 3 stage process for FRAG meetings proposed by the Abalone Council. These were:

- i) Part 1 – Informal, unminuted discussion for FRAG members only, to discuss agenda and key issues, usually 0900-1000.
- ii) Part 2 – The full FRAG meeting with observers present, run using the FRAG agenda and minuted.
- iii) Part 3 – FRAG members only concluding session, at which any recommendations for the FAC/TAC Board arising out of Part 2 of the meeting will be finalised.

The need for observers to advise the TAC office of their attendance in advance of the FRAG was emphasised. While observers are welcome, just 'turning up on the day' is not acceptable.

2. Matters brought forward from the FRAG pre-meeting:

AbFAC – The FAC considers the review of stock assessment suggested by some members of industry to be unnecessary as it challenges the process of FRAG and AbFAC. The Chair has been requested to formally contact the Minister concerning this issue.

SAFS: The Status of Key Australian Fish Stocks (SAFS) has provided potentially problematic assessments of the Tasmanian abalone fishery. The assessment was carried out without the knowledge of industry and the TAC is very disappointed with the whole process, which represents a significant challenge to efforts to market Australian abalone as 'sustainable'. Over the next 12 months industry will need to ensure that pressure is put on FRDC/ABARES to review the SAFS assessment process for abalone, noting that the 'overfishing'/'red' status designations create substantial difficulties and risk for the abalone sector.

DPIPWE noted the need to be confident of the information as reviewed by independent harvest strategy scientific review.

Abalone Fisheries Data – IMAS described various improvements in the handling of data, including data from loggers and filtering to deal with the duplication of catch records for mixed species (greenlip/blacklip). Malcolm, David and Craig will be using a single data source to develop the abalone assessment and Craig has created a system of managing data and presenting stock status reports in an automated manner.

3. Conflicts of Interest:

FRAG members were reminded to fill in the Conflicts of Interest form and submit it to the TACL.

4. Adoption of agenda;

Agreed with the addition of boundary changes.

5. Minutes of the previous meeting:

Members agreed the minutes of the FRAG meeting held on Thursday October 9, 2014 were accepted as an accurate record.

6. Actions Arising from Previous Meeting:

Action 1. Development of target and limit reference points

Ongoing – The FRAG stressed in the importance of developing target and limit reference points to inform the MCDA-based harvest strategy which is currently being peer reviewed and is proposed for implementation in the Tasmanian fishery. In order to ensure the matter is progressed, the FRAG nominated a small group consisting of Darwin, Craig, Malcolm, Joey, Ben and Matt to convene a meeting to progress and recommend a draft set of reference points for discussion. Joey McKibben agreed to drive and chair the process

Action 1: Joey McKibben set a date for a meeting to progress target and limit reference points and drive process

Action 2. Central Western Zone Boundaries

Ongoing – to be resolved

Action 3. Zone Boundaries – draw up proposal

Completed

Action 4. Closure of Greenlip Fishery

Completed – decision taken to open full fishery

Action 5. Blacklip Zone changes:

Completed

Action 6 – Standardisation of CPUE/divers ‘doubling up’

Completed

Craig explained the process of collecting and recording the data.

Action 6. Block 31, Boundary changes

Completed

Action 7. Block 40A & B boundary changes:

Completed

Action 8. Block 14B and 14C contact AQUIS for possible re-open:

The TAC was notified on April 24 that algal bio-toxin levels had spiked in Block 14B; a voluntary closure has been implemented by TACL. 14C may also close. New data is available showing levels at which there is low risk to human consumption (from viscera only) – this will be incorporated into the revised Biotoxin Management Plan. The standard approach is to close areas when alerted to PST risk for a period of time that allows for natural depuration following a bloom event. After several months, samples are taken for lab analysis and the area is re-opened for fishing after PST levels are below the human health level.

It was noted by divers many scars were found prior to the opening in 2014 of Channel Block 14B & C.

Action 9. King Island, investigate Greenlip data:

Completed

Action 10. Write proposal to TACL Board to continue Shell Study meat quality project:

Completed – funds have been found to continue sampling to determine if meat quality improves after thinning out stocks.

Action 12. Create a rebuilding management plan for Eastern Zone:

Ongoing

Action 13. Bass Strait Zone

Completed

6. Summary of the 2014 fishery

Craig Mundy provided an overview of the 2014 season. Below is an extract from the Executive Summary of the 2014 Abalone Fisheries assessment.

Total landings for the 2014 Tasmanian abalone fishery were 1,927.7 t, comprising 1,787.5 t of blacklip and 140.2 t of greenlip, from a total allowable catch (TAC) of 1,932 t. This is a reduction of 217 t on the 2013 fishing year, principally from the Western Zone (161 t), and with minor reductions in the Northern and Central Western Zones (28 t in each). There has been a progressive reduction in TAC from 2,660 t in 2010 to 1,932 t in 2014, to address falling stock levels.

The gross landed value (GLV) of the 2014 catch fell by \$4.6 million from 2013, to \$69 million, comprising \$64.5 million blacklip and \$4.5 million greenlip. Royalties collected by the Tasmanian Government in 2014 totalled \$4.97 million, reduced by \$0.45 million from the previous year. Beach prices for live market product (mostly sourced from Eastern, Western and part of the Central Western Zones) and greenlip rose steadily throughout the year reaching up to \$45.00/kg in December, while processing grade blacklip (mostly Northern, Bass Strait and some Central West Zone product) remained flat at approximately \$25.00/kg. Both GLV and royalties have fallen in recent years, due to reduced catch and lower beach prices.

The status of the fishery was assessed using two empirical performance measures (catch and catch rates) from diver returns, and supplemented by length-frequency samples from commercial catches. The abalone industry also provided comment on relative stock status, particularly where local knowledge or market preference assists with interpretation of trends.

a) Eastern Zone blacklip Fishery;

The TAC in 2013 and 2014 was 528.5 t, reduced from 547.5 t in 2012.

IMAS Recommendations:

The most valuable fishing region (13E) in the Eastern Zone continues to decline despite catch reductions. Catch needs to be reduced here to allow stock rebuilding rather than wait for a positive recruitment event.

In Block 22 (Eastern Zone), the annual catch has been excessive in recent years and this has caused ongoing decline in catch rates. It is recommended that catch be reduced here to below the long-term average (50 t) to allow stock rebuilding.

Several Eastern Zone blocks have carried the catch reductions from elsewhere in the zone in 2013/2014 with catch rates not sustained in 2014. Performance in these blocks needs to be closely monitored in 2015 and catch reductions may be required in 2016 if catch rate continues to decline.

FRAG Comments;

While the catch rate at the Acteons had remained static, there are no clear signs of rebuilding after reductions in the quota. This appears to be a similar set of events that occurred in 2001-2004 when a decline occurred, a TAC reduction was made and a subsequent recovery was experienced. It was hoped to see some evidence of rebuilding in 2014, which did not occur and there should be an improvement in 2015.

The FRAG agreed that if there is not clear evidence of rebuilding on the east coast in 2015 then there will be a need for further management action for 2016.

Block 13C is the most productive area of the Actaeons, is depleted of stock and the area of high catch rates in the Actaeons appears to be shrinking.

The FRAG noted the imperative to better understand recruitment of juveniles. IMAS, under an FRDC project, has identified a number of areas to monitor using a system of plates anchored to the seabed, three times per year over the next three years. In addition, there will be some dive survey sites established in the Actaeons area.

Considerable work has gone into research to determine the optimal gap between collector plates between which juvenile abalone will settle. To optimize the process the plates will be attached to the rocks to deal with swell action. Further dive surveys to determine the abundance of juvenile abalone will rely on the availability of IMAS staff and resources. Areas to be sampled include Betsy Island and Black reef; these areas have been chosen to test the collectors on various habitats, including where small boulders exist. Here IMAS divers will 'roll' boulders to examine recruitment to compare with the plate collectors.

Greg Hughes suggested using hatchery grown abalone in research areas to maximise survival rates.

It was noted that improvement in the pre-recruits may not lead to an increase in catch rates.

The impact of high biomass of Centrostephanus on the East Coast is also contributing to a fall in productivity due to loss of habitat.,

East Coast Size limit

Divers have seen an abundance of fish at 150mm and the FRAG noted the strong live market demand for larger fish.

A recommendation to increase the size limit on the East Coast was proposed from the floor.

Recommendation: Increase the East Coast size limit to 145 mm in steps: from 138mm to 140mm asap, a further 2mm in 2016, and to 145mm in 2017. This increase will exclude the Actaeons 13D, C, E. **Agreed with two against.**

The FRAG noted that if the recommendation is implemented, 5% fewer animals will be harvested to meet the quota due to the weight difference between 138 and 145mm abalone

IMAS, while supporting the size limit increased, noted that it may not remove the need for a further quota reduction if rebuilding does not occur. DPIPWE support a re-building strategy either by size limits, spatial management or caps. Divers reported more consistent catch rates at 145mm in Block 27 and added strong support for the increase in size limit.

b) Central Western Zone blacklip fishery;

IMAS:

The Central Western Zone 2014 TAC was 73.5 t, reduced by 28 t from 2013. This zone has been reduced to a small area in Block 6, between (but not including) the Arthur River and Sandy Cape. There is ongoing decline in catch and catch rates in this region, which indicates that stock levels have continued to fall despite reductions in TAC. Stocks that were previously assessed as moderate have now fallen to lower levels. Management action is required in this zone to prevent further declines and to allow rebuilding to occur. IMAS recommends that catch in Block 6 (Central Western Zone) is progressively reduced until catch rates stabilise.

c) Western Zone blacklip fishery;

IMAS:

The Western Zone TAC was 840 t in 2014, reduced from 1001 t in 2013. In 2012 Blocks 6D, 7 and 8 were part of the Central Western Zone.

IMAS recommended that a reduced 2016 TAC may be required in the absence of improvement. Western Zone catch rates will be monitored during 2015 for signs of recovery.

In response to industry requests to standardise CPUE data to swell/wave action, IMAS is matching data using logger information and information from BOM that has been overlaid from the 'Wave Rider' reports to create accurate as possible standardisation.

FRAG.

Industry, researchers and management will be looking for an improvement in the fishery this year, or reduction in the TAC and an increase in the size limit to 145mm.

d) Northern Zone blacklip fishery;

IMAS:

The Northern Zone TAC was 280 t in 2014, reduced from 308 t in 2013 and 378 t in 2012.

In Block 49 and King Island (Northern Zone), it is recommended that the catch be progressively reduced each year until catch rates stabilise. It is recommended that the Northern Zone TAC be reduced by the amount reduced in Block 49 and King Island to prevent displacement of catch to Blocks 5 and the North East.

FRAG:

The FRAG discussed the following proposal for a change of boundary in the North East

<p>Recommendation: Block 31A North of Cod Bay to be included in the Northern Zone and fished at 138mm size limit. Agreed by FRAG majority</p>

e) *Bass Strait Zone blacklip fishery;*

The Bass Strait Zone fishery has been managed with a 70 t TAC since its development in 2003. Generally, stock levels were considered stable across the region, with an appropriate level of catch. Catches and catch rates from the Furneaux group are stable.

f) *Greenlip fishery;*

The 2014 greenlip TAC was 140 t, distributed between six regions

IMAS recommend the seasonal variation in greenlip weights be investigated, in order to advise on the benefits of a greenlip closure between January and March when greenlip are thought to be in poor condition and weigh less.

It is recommended that the following alterations be made to the distribution of catch between regions:

- a. Reduce the 20 t catch allocated to King Island.
- b. Remove the 10 t catch allocated to the Central North Coast.
- c. Reduce the Perkins Bay allocation from 25 t.
- d. Reduce the North East allocation from 25 t.
- e. Reduce the Furneaux Group allocation from 47 t

Format of the Abalone Fishery Assessment

The FRAG considered the possibility of removing the 'Recommendations' section of the assessment given that external readers will see the recommendations a year or more after decisions will have been taken to address them and measures have been implemented. As an alternative, it was suggested that the recommendations could be presented in a table at the back of the document, together with the management action recommended and taken in response to the recommendations.

Craig Mundy will discuss this issue discuss with Caleb.

Recommendation: That consideration be given to shifting recommendations for management action in the Abalone Fishery Assessment document to the rear of the document, together with the management action taken.

7. 2015 Catch update & summary of fishing performance by spatial unit

Eastern Zone;

Insufficient information to make any conclusions, but diver observation suggest that stocks on the ground in a number of areas appear to have marginally improved

Western Zone;

50% caught to date

Block 6D catch rates quite low, but wave energy has been substantial

Block 7 catch rates are up

Block 8 No comment

Block 9 catch rates have fallen

Block 10 No comment

Block 11 showing decline

Block 12 not a lot of catch so far

Block 13 catch rate improving

Block 5 improving and stable

Additional West Coast Comments

IMAS noted that the West Coast was not showing the signs of recovery that would be expected given the level of catch reduction. Craig is using 'Wave watch' daily to quantify dive catch rates, and is building a program to use on a regular basis to standardise the catch data. 'Cartographic Wave Exposure Index' shows wave period, height, direction of the swell and direction of wind.

Divers report weather patterns have not been stable and in many cases divers have been restricted to fishing in sheltered waters. In one case 32 days of fishing in one anchorage was reported, which would account for some reports of low catch rates and also contribute to localised depletion.

Size limits

The FRAG re-initiated discussion of previous recommendations on West Coast size limits. It was noted that despite strong support for an increase in size limits from legitimate advisory committees (FAC and FRAG) as well as IMAS support, these recommendations had been undermined by a few written submissions and lobbying on the Minister by certain individuals and action had not been taken. This has caused considerable frustration among a majority of industry, including FRAG members, particularly because those who undermine FRAG advice do not attend meetings and put their position forward, preferring instead to go direct to the Minister on this and other issues. In the view of the majority of FRAG members, failing to act on size limits had exacerbated the poor state of stocks on the West Coast.

Recommendation: That the previous recommendation on increasing Western zone size limits be re-instated and placed before the FAC.

Action 2: The Chair to raise concerns with the Minister regarding a small group of industry members (3 to 4 individuals) who lobby him directly regarding industry management decisions and seek to overturn management advice made through established advisory processes. The FRAG noted that these individuals choose not participate in the FRAG process and do not represent anyone other than themselves. Significant disappointment and frustration was expressed by for the FRAG and AbFAC members (who noted that they attend these meetings at their own expense and in an unpaid capacity) that the Minister and DPIPWE appear to be unduly influenced by these persons and who choose not to participate in the industry stock assessment process (i.e. the FRAG process). FRAG members questioned the value of participating in the FRAG and the AbFAC given that robust management advice from these two important forums appears to be largely being ignored as a result of "private" lobbying by a few stakeholders.

Summary comments on stock Status

West Coast: The FRAG noted that the fishery was faced with possibly making a further cut to the TAC on the West Coast for 2016. Rather than simply calling this a TAC cut, it would be better to develop a strategic rebuilding strategy that will be seen as restoring value and productivity in the fishery. To do this will require a clear and definite rebuilding pathway, agreed by all, which cannot be overturned by a limited number of industry members.

East Coast Catch rates here have now at least stabilised and a watching brief in 2015 will be maintained, noting the importance of increasing minimum size over a three year period. IMAS noted that it is becoming apparent that growth rates on a number of areas of the East Coast are likely to be similar to those on the West Coast, with associated implications for minimum sizes.

Action 3 – IMAS to support Dean at the FAC to create a process to rebuild the stocks on the West Coast

8. SAFS report (Status of Australian Fish Stocks)

The graph on page V1 of the 'Abalone Fishery Assessment 2013' shows the stock status as;

Blacklip;

Eastern Zone as 'Transitional Recovering' except

Block 31A 'Sustainable'

North East Zone Block 31B, 39, 40 'Sustainable'

Northern Zone 'Transitional Depleting'

Central West 'Transitional Depleting'

Western Zone 'Transitional Depleting'

Bass Straight 'Sustainable'

Greenlip;

North West 'Undefined'

Perkins Bay 'Undefined'

Furneaux Group 'Undefined'

North East 'Undefined'

Central North 'Undefined'

King Island 'Transitional depleting'

Action 4 : Given the TACL concerns regarding the many shortcomings of the SAFS assessment processes for abalone fisheries, Craig Mundy to work closely with FRDC in the months ahead to inform an improved SAFS assessment process for abalone fisheries and much improved consultation and communication with industry during the assessment process for the next SAFS Report due in 2016.

9. Other business

Greenlip: Note that the South Australian fisheries have a strategy of harvesting greenlip at optimal harvesting time and there remains interest in implementing a similar strategy for Tasmania. A new FRDC project in South Australia along similar lines, based on blacklip, is under way and some Tasmanian data will be used in the FRDC project.

Boundaries: The proposals agreed to in 2014 to be resurrected at the FAC

Meeting closed at 3.10pm

Actions:

Action Items FRAG #1 2015

	Action	Responsibility
1	Set a date for a meeting to progress target and limit reference points and drive process	Lead: Joey McKibben. Supported by: Malcolm Haddon, Craig Mundy, Darwin Hansen, Ben Cobbing and Dave Tarbath
2	Raise concerns with the Minister concerning the tendency of a small number of industry members, who do not attend FRAG or other meetings, and subsequently seek to overturn advice made through established advisory processes	Ian Cartwright
3	IMAS to support Dean at the FAC to create a process to rebuild the stocks on the West Coast	IMAS/ AbFAC
4	Craig Mundy to work closely with FRDC and industry in the months ahead to inform an improved SAFS assessment process for abalone fisheries and much improved consultation and communication with industry during the assessment process for the next SAFS Report due in 2016.	Craig Mundy

2015 TAC (DPIPWE)

Blocks - Area	TAC 2015	Kgs/unit
Bass Strait Blacklip		
Blocks 32-38 Furneaux Group		
Blocks 50-56 Bass Strait Islands		
Blocks 42-46 Central North		
Total Bass Strait TAC	70	20
Central Western Zone		
Blocks 6A-6C Couta Rocks	52.5	
Total Central Western Zone TAC	52.5	15
Eastern Zone		
Blocks 13C, -14 E. Actaeons		
Blocks 14A and 14B. Lower Huon Channel, Huon to Southport Island, inc Dover, Southport		
Blocks 14C-16 Bruny Island		
Blocks 17-21 Hobart to Tasman Island inc Nubeena		
Block 22		
Blocks 23 and 24 Deep Glen Bay to Triabunna, inc Maria		
Blocks 25-29A Freycinet and Bicheno		
Blocks 29B, 29C, 29D and 30A North East		
Total Eastern Zone TAC	528.5	151
Greenlip		
Blocks 32-38 Furneaux	47	
Blocks 1-4 King Island	20	
North West not Perkins Bay	21	
Block 48A Perkins Bay	25	
Blocks 31,39,40 North East	25.5	
Total Greenlip TAC	140	40
Northern Zone		
Blocks 5A-5C	50	
Blocks 47-48 NW not Block 5	75	
Blocks 1-4 King Island	70	
Blocks 31B, 39 and 40 North East	30	

Total Northern Zone TAC	224	64
Western Zone		
Blocks 6D, 7 and 8. Granville Harbour, Sandy Cape	100	
Block 9 South of Strachan	125	
Blocks 10, 11 and 12A. South West	350	
Blocks 12B-13B South Coast	265	
Total Western Zone TAC	840	240
2015 TAC TOTAL	1855t	530kg



