

# CENTRAL ZONE FRAG WORKSHOP SUMMARY

Held at 10am-3pm on 29 September at the Atlantis Hotel, 300 Spencer Street, Melbourne

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## Attendees

**Meeting Chair:** Ian Cartwright (Independent)

**Central Zone:** Malcolm Petrie, Tony DeDomenico, Kaz Bartaska, Peter Johnston, Michelle Hansen, Allan Buck

**Expert consultant:** Duncan Worthington

**VFA:** Kate Simpson, Bill Lussier, Corey Green

**Observer:** Diana Attana (minute taker)

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Prior to the meeting commencing, Duncan Worthington provided a short Succorfish demonstration.

## Item 1: Welcome and opening comments

The Chair opened the workshop and made some overarching comments regarding the origin of FRAG, the FRAG process and the benefits of industry stakeholders having a number of opportunities to discuss views on the state of the resource during the year leading up to the TACC meeting. The meetings will be scheduled to consider the previous year's stock assessment and quarterly data from the fishery as the year progresses.

AV(CZ)'s CEO conveyed that the organisation is delighted to be holding the inaugural FRAG workshop, noting that it marks the:

- commitment by industry to safeguard the resource, and its mutual objective with Government of ensuring a healthy and sustainable abalone industry;
- Central Zone's desire to strengthen its relationship with Government and foster collaboration; and
- the importance of building confidence in the industry, from a commercial perspective, to ensure future investment in marketing and processing, which is integral to the industry.

VFA endorsed the format of the FRAG process, as a more constructive way to discuss and give focus to the science, in a separate forum prior to the TACC workshop.

FRAG members noted that the Central Zone is the largest and most diverse Victorian abalone zone, and agreed there is too much data and discussion required in order to adequately provide advice on catch levels in a one-day TACC setting workshop. Holding up to four FRAG workshops each year will enable most issues to be thoroughly considered prior to the final TACC meeting.

## Item 2: FRAG Terms of Reference (ToR)

The FRAG ToR were discussed, with the following comments noted:

- The ToR have been approved, and will be reviewed on an annual basis, for continuous improvement as the FRAG process evolves;
- The ToR was developed with equal contribution and support from both Government and industry stakeholders; and
- The Government references to DEDJTR will be corrected to the VFA.

The Chair went through each section of the ToR and reiterated the documented role and responsibilities of the FRAG. With regard to attendance at future workshops, it was noted that workshops are open to observers and that divers will be encouraged to attend, using the process outlined in the TORs.

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## **ACTION:**

- Prepare a Chairman's summary of the FRAG workshop notes and ensure these are publicly available (e.g. published online). (AVCZ)

## **Item 3: Objectives of the meeting**

Key objectives of the meeting were noted:

- To review the previous fishing year's stock assessment, including how effective SMU management has been; and
- To discuss other related matters, such as the Harvest Strategy.

## **Item 4: December 2016 Stock Assessment**

### ***Overview of stock assessment report***

VFA presented an overview of the December 2016 Stock Assessment. VFA's presentation is annexed to this workshop summary as attachment 1.

In presenting the 2016 Stock Assessment, VFA reiterated that numerous SMUs were not managed within the target range and noted the importance of managing catches within the target range to assist in rebuilding the fishery. VFA stated that the only positive trend observed since the peak catch year of 2003 was the Shipwreck Coast SMU and all other SMUs had experienced varying levels of decline. VFA advised that with regard to SMU management, an interim Harvest Strategy is in place until the 2017 Harvest Strategy is finalised. A fundamental element of the Harvest Strategy is to manage the catch within the Limits and Thresholds to ensure sustainability of the resource.

VFA presented the following conclusions as a summary to the stock assessment:

1. Fisheries independent and fisheries dependent data indicates a decline in the Blacklip Abalone resource since 2003.
2. There has been no demonstrated recovery following reductions in the TACC over several years.
3. Recruitment to the fishery (and therefore the breeding stock) is expected to remain low in the short-term.
4. Environment factors are thought to be influencing abalone abundance.
5. There is a risk that Central Zone stocks will not rebuild and may continue to decline at the current level of fishing pressure if recruitment and abundance remains at current levels.

In response to the aforementioned conclusions drawn by the VFA, AV(CZ) made the following remarks:

- Using the peak year of 2003 as a benchmark against subsequent years provides a distorted result given that it was the highest catch in ~30 years. A single high point (such as 2003) should not be used as a reference point. Comparing recent CPUE to averages over a much longer time frame would be far more valid.
- The 30% Upper Limit (in the Abalone Management Plan) is in place for good reason. Natural variability dictates that the performance of SMU's will vary from year to year, and may not necessarily fit to exact pre-determined catches figures. Industry needs some flexibility to match fishing effort to natural cycles.

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- With regard to the processor data presented – the processor has been recording individual diver’s daily catches since 2002 and their data shows the average daily catch rate from 2004 to current is steady at 412kgs per day.
- The impact of illegal catches has not been factored into the methodology for stock assessments.
- Based on anecdotal evidence, industry believes there’s some signs of recovery in some areas of the Central Zone, particularly in the western area of the zone.
- Increased size limits may have had a negative effect on CPUE even though the effect on the resource is positive.
- There will be a significantly different data set (from the data logger program) coming into future TACC meetings, which is likely to result in changes to the stock assessment.

VFA reiterated their objective to rebuild Abalone biomass. It was noted that the summary of the peer-reviewed stock assessment was based on fisheries independent and fisheries dependent data.

### Item 5: 2017 Stock assessment process

VFA provided an overview of the stock assessment process including the data inputs, diver surveys and length measurements.

#### *Harvest Strategy*

Members discussed the harvest strategy, noting VFA’s indicative timeline for preparing the new Harvest Strategy (expected to be available in November 2017). This Harvest Strategy will comprise operational objectives for the fishery, performance indicators to assess fishery status and triggers to control the intensity of fishing activity.

VFA advised that the secondary performance indicators are still being determined and highlighted the various management options. The new Harvest Strategy will define the trigger points for when decisions are required and the actions that follow. For example (and hypothetically) at what point should a SMU be closed, duration of closure, and activities to support the resource during that time. Industry noted that the intention was to use the Harvest Strategy to take management action as necessary to ensure the fishery was never in a position where the closure of an SMU was required.

It was noted that a meeting of science advisers to the Abalone Working Group (AWG) would be held in mid-October to progress the secondary performance indicators and triggers within the Harvest Strategy, which will apply across all three zones. The AWG will have an opportunity to contribute to the metrics being proposed. The Central Zone will be represented by Malcolm Petrie and Peter Johnston at this and any subsequent harvest strategy meetings.

VFA advised that TACC setting arrangements for the 2018/19 season would be based on the current harvest strategy. The new Harvest Strategy would be run alongside the current process as a ‘transition exercise’ to observe what the outcomes would be if the new Harvest Strategy was applied. The new Harvest Strategy is expected to be fully implemented for the 2019/20 quota.

#### **ACTION:**

- Publish presentations from the FRAG workshop on the Central Zone’s website. (AVCZ)

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## Item 6: Current stock assessment update

Duncan Worthington provided an update on the current stock assessment, touching on the following areas:

- Catch distribution
- Catch rate
- VFA survey
- Coverage GPS and depth loggers
- Measuring logger coverage
- Harvest strategy

Duncan's presentation is annexed to these minutes as attachment 2.

### *Logger data*

The privacy issues associated with VFA access to logger data were discussed. Duncan Worthington clarified that Succorfish obtains the data and allows access but it is up to the user(s) to apply Quality Assurance/Quality Control.

The data sharing agreement which is in progress with Government was discussed and is referenced further in 'Other Business'. The agreement will seek to find the right balance between ensuring diver anonymity and the need for VFA to standardise data and be fully confident in the integrity of the data.

[Workshop adjourned for lunch]

Duncan Worthington provided an overview of logger data from 2014-17 using tables 1-5 from his presentation.

The FRAG acknowledged that the Central Zone had pioneered a number of aspects of the data logger program in Victoria and other Zones are now looking to implement Succorfish.

### **ACTIONS:**

- Clarify how data should be recorded and presented to future FRAG workshops.(All)
- Provide Duncan Worthington with processor data. (Kaz Bartaska)

### *Diver survey and observations*

It was noted that the diver survey is being set up for responses from all three zones. The survey will comprise questions/statements to elicit a mix of qualitative and quantitative feedback. The survey will provide divers with an opportunity to express views on the status of the resource in a considered and comprehensive manner.

In a response to AV(CZ)'s concern that some divers will seek to undermine the survey process and use direct communication rather than questionnaires, the VFA confirmed that it will point divers to the survey should they call to comment on their observations, as previously agreed with Alison Webb. VFA fisheries managers will, however continue to communicate with divers on all aspects of the fishery from time to time, as is their role.

### **Presentation on 2016/17 stock assessment update**

The VFA provided an update on the 2017 Central Zone stock assessment. VFA's presentation is annexed to these minutes as attachment 3.

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AV(CZ) voiced its frustration with the use of abundance surveys and the recurrent message from Government stating that the resource has been in a 'statistically significant' decline since 2003. The figures provided in the stock assessment showed a different picture and continually providing the inference to those unfamiliar with statistics that there had been a steady decline was misleading.

AV(CZ) referred to the summary of a report from the science group (Dichmond, Gorfine & Worthington) which stated that indicators from the abundance surveys are inconsistent, have great variability, and provide no clear secondary indicators that can be consistently used at the scale of SMU to contribute to the assessment in the Harvest Strategy.

AV(CZ) believes that the assumption "the stock does not appear to be rebuilding" is based on flawed data and encouraged VFA to also display/acknowledge any positive trends or areas that are showing signs of stock rebuilding. AV(CZ) sought clarification regarding the point at which stock is classified as 'rebuilding'.

VFA noted that they had previously requested feedback on the stock assessment template and encouraged AV(CZ) to provide feedback on the stock assessment template as soon as possible, and noted the feedback received from Industry with regard to the content and messaging for future presentations. The data to be obtained from 1992-2003 may provide some insights regarding the contributing factors leading to the peak 2003 season.

### ACTION:

- **Data from 1992-2003:** VFA committed to looking at including that data in future assessments and also providing that data to the next FRAG meeting, or if not available/appropriate, disclose the scientific rationale for excluding this data.

### Future Shell Measuring Frequency

AV(CZ)'s CEO advised that there are budgetary limits to how many units can be measured due to additional fees paid to deckhands for measuring. Currently, there are seven divers measuring every day, representing around 20% of catch, and processors are also providing measuring data.

### ACTION:

- **Shell measuring data:** Provide length data to VFA. (AV(CZ))
- **Shell measuring specifications:** Provide guidance on shell measuring specifications, e.g. how many units and how many days to measure. Provide guidance on areas to target and coverage desired. (VFA)

## Item 7: Other Business

### *Logger data – privacy considerations*

VFA provided a further update on progress with resolving the data privacy issue for divers and progress with the data sharing agreement.

### *Fisheries Independent Survey*

VFA advised that the Fisheries Independent Survey is currently out to tender. AV(CZ)'s CEO agreed to contact the Eastern and Western Zones regarding the possibility of having a collective survey.

### *Next science meeting*

It was noted that the next science meeting is scheduled for 18/19 October 2017.

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### ACTION:

- **Formal thanks to Alison Webb:** Formally acknowledge Alison's Webb role in progressing the FRAG and its Terms of Reference. (Chair)

### TACC

The TACC meeting was scheduled for Thursday 30 November with the location to be confirmed dependent on divers (likely to return to Hastings). There will be no further FRAG workshops prior to the TACC meeting.

The Chair thanked members for their contribution to the FRAG, noting the meeting had been very constructive.

**The workshop concluded at 3.00pm.**