

Torres Strait Tropical Rock Lobster Resource Assessment Group Meeting 39

Final Meeting Record

30 January 2025

Videoconference

Note all meeting papers and record available on
the PZJA webpage: www.pzja.gov.au



Australian Government

Australian Fisheries Management Authority

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Meeting participants

Members

Name	Position	Declaration of interest
David Brewer	Acting Chair	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Director – Upwelling P/L (David Brewer Consulting). • Honorary Fellow - CSIRO • Chair - Torres Strait Finfish RAG • Scientific member – Torres Strait Finfish Working Group • Scientific member – Northern Prawn Fishery RAG • Current consultancies with Quandamooka Yoolooburrabee Aboriginal Corporation, Newcrest Mining Ltd. • Ex co-investigator on the completed Torres Strait 'Non- commercial catch' project. <p>As a fisheries consultant, may apply for funds for Torres Strait fishery research projects in the future where consistent with his role as Chair.</p>
Andrew Penney	Scientific member	<p>Director of Pisces Australis Pty Ltd, an Australian registered marine/coastal research and management consultancy based in Canberra - interests in any opportunities in this regard.</p> <p>Currently Principal Investigator on Fisheries Research Development Council Projects Nos 2017-180: Design and implementation of an Australian National Bycatch Report: Phase 1 – Scoping; and 2019-036: Implementation of dynamic reference points and harvest strategies to account for environmentally-driven changes in productivity in Australian fisheries, potentially red leg banana prawns or TRL.</p> <p>Independent scientific member on the AFMA Southeast RAG, the Tropical Rock Lobster RAG and the Small Pelagic Fishery RAG. Member of the AFMA ERA Technical Working Group.</p> <p>No shareholding and hold no positions relating to any other companies, including any fishing companies or industry associations.</p>
Éva Plagányi	Scientific member	<p>Lead scientist for PZJA funded TRL research projects conducted by CSIRO. Contribute to other Torres Strait research projects that receive research funding, including currently Shared science and Indigenous knowledge to support fisheries capacity building in Torres Strait. No other interests in the fishery.</p>

Name	Position	Declaration of interest
		Independent scientific member of HCRAG and NPFRAG.
Les Pitt	Traditional Inhabitant Member – Kemer Kemer Meriam	Apology
Charles David	Traditional Inhabitant Member - Kulkalgal	Absent
Patrick Mooka	Traditional Inhabitant Member – Guda Maluilgal	Traditional Inhabitant Member Guda Maluilgal. TIB licence holder. Zenadth Kes Fisheries representative. TSRA Board member, and involved with CSIRO Climate Change and Fisheries Project.
Jermaine Reuben	Traditional Inhabitant Member - Maluilgal	Traditional Inhabitant Member Maluilgal, TIB licence holder. Zenadth Kes Fisheries member.
Thomas Fujii	Traditional Inhabitant Member - Kaiwalagal	Traditional Inhabitant Member Kaiwalagal. Queensland East Coast TRL and TIB license holder. Zenadth Kes Fisheries member. Involved in the CSIRO Climate Change research project.
Brett Arlidge Joined the meeting at 10:21am.	Industry Member	Director of MG Lobster Kailis Pty Ltd. MG Kailis Lobster Pty Ltd is a holder of 5 TVH licences. Seafood buyer from Torres Strait, QLD and PNG TRL fisheries.
Ken McKenzie	Industry Member	TVH licence and quota holder. Queensland East Coast TRL license and quota holder.
Damian Miley	TSRA Member	TSRA Fisheries Project Manager, TSRA holds multiple TVH TRL fishing license on behalf of Torres Strait Communities but does not benefit from them. No personal or pecuniary interest.
Jenny Keys	QDAF Member	Apology
Ryan Murphy	AFMA Member	Nil conflicts to declare.
Georgia Langdon	Executive Officer	Senior Management Officer for Tropical Rock Lobster Fishery. Nil conflicts to declare.

Observers

Name	Position/Organisation	Declaration of interest
Quinten Hirakawa	TSRA	TSRA employee, TIB license holder with a TRL endorsement.
Lisa Cocking	AFMA	Torres Strait Scientific Advisory Committee Executive Officer. Nil conflicts to declare.

1 Preliminaries

Welcome and apologies

1. The 39th meeting of the Tropical Rock Lobster Resource Assessment Group (the RAG) was held via videoconference and opened with a prayer at 9:39am on Wednesday 30 January 2025. The acting Chair welcomed participants and acknowledged the Traditional Owners of the various lands on which members were participating from and paid respect to the Elders past, present and emerging. Members and observers introduced themselves. The Chair noted that the main purpose of the meeting was to discuss and evaluate the research proposal *'Fishery independent survey, stock assessment and Recommended Biological Catch calculations for the Torres Strait Tropical Rock Lobster Fishery 2025-2028'*.
2. Participant tables at the start of this meeting record reflect attendance. The following apologies were received:
 - a) Jenny Keys, QDAF member;
 - b) Les Pitt, Traditional Inhabitant member for Kemer Kemer Meriam;
 - c) Yen Loban, TSRA Board Fisheries Portfolio Member;
 - d) Joseph Posu, Papua New Guinea (PNG) National Fisheries Authority (NFA).

Adoption of agenda

3. The RAG considered the draft agenda which was circulated to members on 13 December 2024. It was adopted without change by the RAG and is provided at **Attachment B**.

Declaration of interests

4. The Chair advised members and observers of their PZJA Fisheries Management Paper No. 1 (FMP1) conflict of interest obligations.
5. The Chair requested that members update the record of declarations. These are detailed in the meeting participant tables at the start of this meeting record.
6. Scientific member, Éva Plagányi acknowledged that she is likely to have the greatest conflict of interest at this meeting (both real and perceived). Noting that Dr Plagányi is the Principal Investigator for the previous TRL projects including the current project, her primary role was as the scientific member of the RAG. This is the first time in the history of the fishery that CSIRO had not submitted a proposal for this work. Reasons include reduced capacity for undertaking remote field work, staff departures and removal of equipment that have not been replaced, further impacted by broader financial constraints. She added that CSIRO continue to have an ongoing commitment to research in the Torres Strait and will continue to address issues related to climate change, the ecosystem and broader genetics work. CSIRO are very proud of their long involvement in fisheries research and the impact it's had in supporting sustainable management of the TRL Fishery.
7. CSIRO are keen to support the new provider but are heavily invested in ensuring a new provider can do an equally good job, maintaining the same standard moving forward. Any criticism in the discussions today is driven by the desire to ensure this. The Chair acknowledged that Dr Plagányi was well placed to provide advice and confident that any conflicts could be sufficiently managed.
8. All industry members and/or licence holders left the meeting temporarily. The Chair acknowledged that there were no significant pecuniary interests for industry, noting that some of the traditional inhabitant members could be potentially employed as divers on the new project should that element progress. The RAG members agreed that although industry members have

a direct interest in the fishery, they should participate in all discussions and recommendations of the meeting.

9. Scientific and research members (including the Chair) temporarily left the meeting. All remaining members agreed that the advice and input of the scientific members was critical and that their involvement in the discussions and recommendations was necessary.
10. Government members and observers also left the meeting temporarily. The remaining RAG members agreed there were no conflicts of interest that would preclude government participation in the discussion and recommendations of the meeting.

2 Appraisal of the new TRL Research Proposal

11. RAG members considered one proposal received through a call for research which closed on 1 November 2024. The proposal was submitted in response to a project scope (**Attachment C**) developed by the RAG, and considered to be an essential, high research priority for the TRL Fishery. The project is designed to undertake annual fishery independent surveys, a stock assessment and annual recommended biological catch calculations for the TRL Fishery over three years (2025-2028).
12. Using the Torres Strait Scientific Advisory Committees (TSSAC) evaluation sheet to guide the discussion, the RAG considered the following key questions, and assessed each with a ranking (does not meet [1]; meets [2]; exceeds [3] or not applicable):
 - a) Is the project timeline for completion feasible and likely to succeed?
 - b) Are the project objectives and outcomes clear, realistic and measurable?
 - c) What is the likelihood that the outputs will be adopted? Is the pathway for update and extension described?
 - d) Does the research project actively engage traditional inhabitants and Torres Strait Islanders in the research (either voluntarily or through paid employment)?
 - e) Does the project involved capacity development for communities?
 - f) Are the methods scientifically sound (including experimental design), well described (are the reproducible) and consistent with the project's objectives?
 - g) Does the applicant and team have the human and financial resources and capacity to implement the project and produce the outputs?
 - h) Is the project cost effective/value for money? Is the budget justified for delivering on the project objectives?
 - i) Is the budget appropriate to meet the outputs and outcomes? Is there in-kind investment and is it realistic?
 - j) Is the strategy for management data sufficient to ensure data is easily accessible by others in the future; and that there is a plan for identifying any Traditional Ecological Knowledge and management this or other sensitive and confidential data.
13. **Overall, the RAG considered the project proposal to have a ranking of 2 (meets) and recommended that the project be funded through the TSSAC.**
14. The TSSAC was scheduled to meet and consider all project proposals recommended by Torres Strait Fisheries advisory committees on 4-5 February 2025.

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**TROPICAL ROCK LOBSTER RESOURCE ASSESSMENT GROUP 39
(TRLRAG 39)**

Thursday 30 January 2025 | 930am – 130pm

Video Conference

ADOPTED AGENDA

1 PRELIMINARIES (30 mins)

1.1 Welcome and apologies

The interim Chair will welcome members and observers to the 39th meeting of the RAG.

1.2 Adoption of agenda

The RAG will be invited to adopt the draft agenda.

1.3 Declaration of interests

Members and observers will be invited to declare any real or potential conflicts of interest and determine whether a member may or may not be present during discussion of or decisions made on the matter which is the subject of the conflict.

2 APPRAISAL OF THE NEW TRL RESEARCH PROPOSAL

The RAG will be invited to discuss and evaluate the research proposal '*Fishery independent survey, stock assessment and Recommended Biological Catch calculations for the Torres Strait Tropical Rock Lobster Fishery 2025-2028*'.

Comments are sought from the RAG ahead of the Torres Strait Scientific Advisory Committee's meeting on 5-6 February 2025, Cairns.

Prior to this meeting, RAG members should have each completed a TSSAC evaluation form and provided a ranking against each criteria with commentary where possible.

Comments are also welcome on stakeholder engagement fliers.

The Chair must approve the attendance of all observers at the meeting. Individuals wishing to join the meeting as an observer must contact the Executive Officer – Georgia Langdon (fisheriesti@afma.gov.au)

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OFFICIAL,***Fishery independent survey, stock assessment, and Recommended Biological Catch calculations for the Torres Strait Tropical Rock Lobster Fishery 2025-2028*****Project need:**

A Total Allowable Catch must be determined for the Torres Strait Tropical Rock Lobster Fishery (TRL Fishery) for the 2025-26 through to 2027-28 fishing seasons to support quota management and catch sharing arrangements between Australia and Papua New Guinea (PNG) under the Torres Strait Treaty. The TRL Fishery fishing season runs from 1 December each year through to 30 September the following year.

Annual fishery-independent surveys of the Torres Strait TRL population have been conducted for over 30 years. Following a decision to transition to quota management, both mid-year (between May-July) and pre-season (November) surveys were completed in 2005 to 2008, 2014 and 2018. In other years only a pre-season survey has been conducted. These surveys have provided the basis for assessing sustainable catch levels for the Fishery and provide critical long-term information on the relative abundance of recruiting TRL.

The TRL Fishery operates under a Harvest Strategy which was agreed to and implemented in 2019. The Harvest Strategy uses an empirical Harvest Control Rule (eHCR) to calculate a Recommended Biological Catch (RBC) each season. The eHCR uses the pre-season survey 1+ and 0+ indices, standardised CPUE indices, applies the natural logarithms of the slopes of the five most recent years' data. The eHCR is applied in November each year to provide a RBC for the following fishing season. A stock assessment is run on a three year cycle (commencing in 2019), unless an assessment is triggered by a decision rule under the Harvest Strategy. If a stock assessment is triggered this may also entail the conduct of additional surveys (mid-year). The stock assessment determines the stock status, evaluates the performance of the eHCR and identifies if any revisions to the eHCR are required. If the eHCR needs to be revised, the stock assessment will be conducted annually to estimate the RBC until the revised eHCR is agreed.

In recent years, the overall economic viability of the industry has been in decline as the TRL Fishery has been significantly impacted by a range of non-stock related external factors including the COVID-19 pandemic, trade bans on Australian lobster into China (as well as being listed as a protected species), suppressed market prices, increased fuel prices (as high as \$3.70 per litre in some outer islands) and other higher operating costs (e.g. freight). These have caused a significant reduction in fishing effort across the fishery and in particular, the total catch of TRL in the Traditional Inhabitant Boat (TIB) sector. The TIB sector has caught on average, 57.5 per cent of the TIB total allowable catch (TAC) each year since the 2019-20 fishing season. Noting this, this work should aim to take account of market and supply chain challenges where possible.

Any extraordinary survey and stock assessment work need not be included in proposals, as this will involve separate funding proposals.

Involvement of traditional inhabitants or non-researchers in the scientific surveys of the TRL Fishery is a long-standing desire of traditional inhabitants across the Torres Strait. Incorporation of greater involvement of non-research personnel and traditional inhabitants in this work should be considered to build capacity in the region and future proof this work.

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Desired outcomes

2025-26 fishing season

- Pre-season survey undertaken in accordance with established survey protocols developed by CSIRO.
- Consideration of all available data including PNG data and Torres Strait Prawn observer data in the eHCR.
- RBC calculated for the 2025-26 fishing season with updated fishery independent and commercial catch data using the agreed eHCR and associated decision and meta rules.
- Integrated stock assessment to evaluate the performance of the eHCR to identify if any revisions to the eHCR is required.
- If the integrated stock assessment indicates the eHCR needs to be revised, work on this review commenced.

2026-27 fishing season

- Pre-season survey undertaken in accordance with established survey protocols developed by CSIRO.
- Consideration of all available data including PNG data and Torres Strait Prawn observer data in the eHCR
- RBC calculated for the 2026-27 fishing season with updated fishery independent and commercial catch data using the agreed eHCR and associated decision and meta rules.

2027-28 fishing season

- Pre-season survey undertaken in accordance with established survey protocols developed by CSIRO.
- Consideration of all available data including PNG data and Torres Strait Prawn observer data in the eHCR.
- RBC calculated for the 2027-28 fishing season with updated fishery independent and commercial catch data using the agreed eHCR and associated decision rules.

Applicants are asked to detail monitoring and data collection costs separate from the assessment costs.

Contacts

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