



Agenda Item No. B2

By: Assistant Chief Officer
To: Kent and Essex IFCA – 21 November 2023
Subject: **2023 Cockle Fishery Management**
Classification: Unrestricted

Summary:

This paper provides Members with a summary of the cockle fishery management for 2023 for both the Thames Estuary Cockle Fishery Order (TECFO) 1994 and the Permitted Cockle Fishery (chart of fisheries attached). Members are also asked to consider and approve the issue of licences for existing vessels for the 2024 TECFO fishery

Recommendations:

Members **NOTE** and **APPROVE** the report

TECFO 1994 fishery:

Background

The cockle fishery within the area of the Thames Estuary Cockle Fishery Order opened between 2 July 2023 and 6 October 2023. At the May 2023 Authority meeting, members approved a TAC of 4620 tonnes, over 30 fishing trips per vessel. As a result of additional trips, approved by the Authority at the September Authority meeting, on area 15, the total number of trips for the fleet increased from 30 to 33, resulting in a total end-of-season TAC of 5082 tonnes.

Catches of the maximum of 13.6m³ or approximately 11 tonnes were consistently landed. In general, weather was good during the season, with less extreme heat than was seen during 2022 and good amounts of rainfall.

Yields were above average starting at around 16% for the Maplin Sands and West Burrows for the first few weeks going up to around 18% before dropping again slightly at the end of August. The fleet also located cockles on area 11 (the Spile) which provided a number of trips for some vessels. Catch rates here were very good with yields comparable to the other beds.

Date	Number of weeks	Number of landings per week
2 July – 28 July	4 weeks	2 landings per week
30 July – 1 September	5 weeks	3 landings per week, no more than one of which must be taken from Area 15
3 September - 6 October	5 weeks	2 landings per week (Area 15 closed)

Autumn Cockle Stock Surveys 2023

Cockle stock surveys were completed between 1 and 3 September 2023 for the main cockle harvesting areas within the TECFO on the Maplin.

The quantity of spat found during the course of the surveys was much improved on the previous four years, which lined up with what the industry had reported throughout the season. Numbers of adult cockle on the ground remain stable, although still relatively low in numbers. The following graphs show population numbers of adult cockles and spat for 2023 compared to earlier years.

Fig. 1: Adult cockle stock size in Spring and Autumn from 2004 to 2023

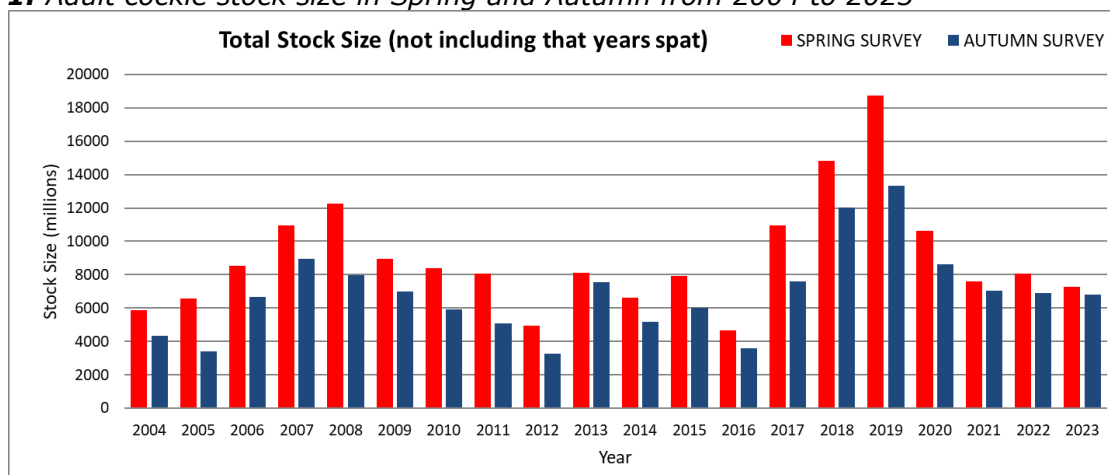
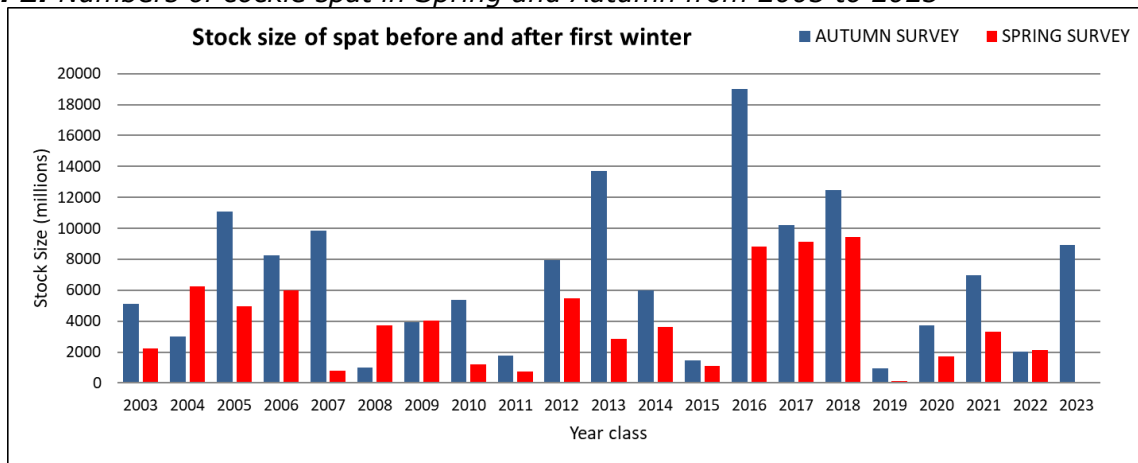


Fig. 2: Numbers of cockle spat in Spring and Autumn from 2003 to 2023



Outlook for 2024 fishery and beyond

The outlook for the 2024 fishery is improved compared to this point last year. We have a stable stock with a good spatfall going into the winter period. Much will depend on how the 2023 spatfall survives the winter period.

2. Permitted Cockle Fishery (outside of the TECFO 1994)

Background

The cockle fishery within the area of the Cockle Flexible Permit Byelaw opened between 11 September 2023 and 6 October 2023. At the May 2023 Authority meeting, members approved a TAC of 432 tonnes, spread over 4 fishing trips per vessel. Of the 30 vessels which held a permit for the 2023 fishery, 18 participated.

2023 fishery management

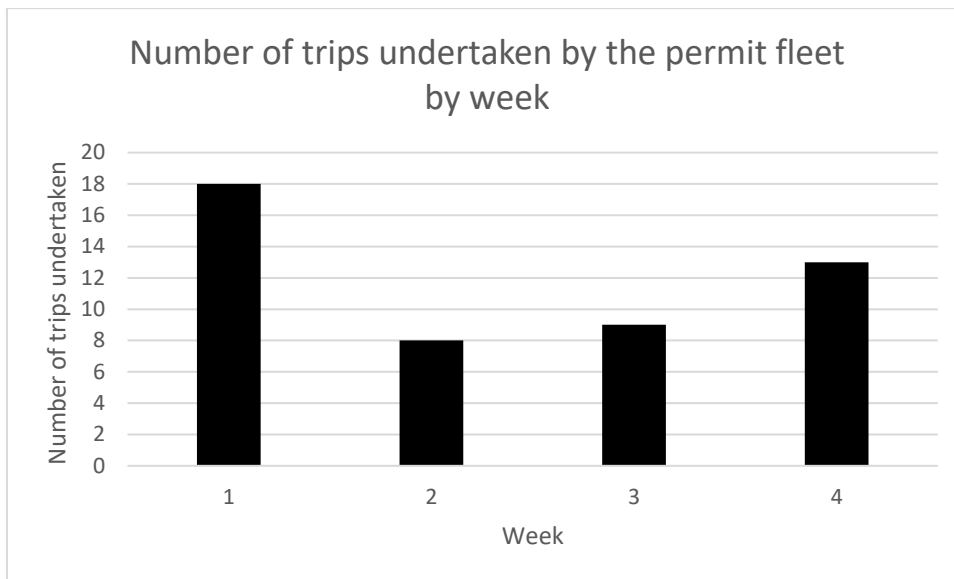
Catches of the maximum of 3.39m³ or approximately 3 tonnes were consistently landed. In general, weather was good during the season, with less extreme heat than was seen during 2022 and good amounts of rainfall.

Yields were, as expected lower than on the main TECFO beds, averaging around 12%. The first week of fishing resulted in large numbers of clams being mixed in with the catches, up to approximately 25% of the catch. By the second week, the percentages of clams had reduced to 5-10% as the vessels mapped out the beds and located patches which were primarily comprised of cockles.

Catch rates varied but the best was around 1 tonne per hour. Catch rates were lower than would be expected on a TECFO bed as the vessels were trying to avoid patches of clams and in fishing less known areas, the catch rates did decrease.

Date	Number of weeks	Number of landings per week
11 September – 6 October	4 weeks	1 landing per week from area 7 of a maximum of 3.39m ³ /125 baskets per fishing trip (approx. equivalent 3 tonnes).

The number of vessels completing trips varied over the course of the fishery. Of the 30 permitted vessels, 19 had biosecurity inspections carried out and 18 took part during the first week of the fishery. This reduced for the second and third weeks before increasing again somewhat for the final week. This is shown in the figure below. In total 159 tonnes were landed by the fleet by the end of the four weeks and catch rates were continuing to decrease. Therefore officers, in discussion with the Chairman and the Vice Chairman, made the decision not to reallocate the remaining TAC to the fleet.



Fishery conclusions

The fishery was overall a success, the stocks maintained the number of vessels fishing for the full four weeks and the fishery was open and stable for the length of time envisioned at the start. This is a positive first step in refocussing the permit fishery as a reliable, small-scale fishery which can take place every year and the industry can rely upon.

Several of the vessels which did not take part in the fishery despite holding permits were smaller vessels who were looking to take part in the cockle fishery for the first time. Starting from scratch with gear development unfortunately meant that these vessels did not have gear operating at a commercial level in time for the fishery, however work has progressed very well and some of these vessels are in a very good position to take advantage of the opportunities during 2024.

Comments made by some of the fleet regarding the management for 2023 were that an earlier start time in 2024 would make better use of the available fishing time and enable permit holders who are not full time cockle fishermen to access the fishery early in the week and undertake other employment in the latter part of the week. Fishermen agreed that opening the fishery during the TECFO fishery was very sensible as it allowed factories to cook permit fishery cockles at the same time as the far larger quantities landing from the TECFO. Some suggested that opening the fishery earlier in the year would be avoid the worsening weather as autumn approaches – with July suggested as a good time.

Outlook for 2024

Officers are working with Thanet District Council to enable classification of the cockle beds in Area 14 – namely South Margate Sands and Minnis Bay. KEIFCA vessels will be collecting the required samples for TDC throughout the winter to enable this.

Since the May Authority meeting, KEIFCA have received correspondence from representatives of the Faversham Oyster Fishery Company which has private fishing

rights within the Swale, extending out into Area 10. These rights are established in the Faversham Oyster Fishery Act 1930. FOFC have raised concerns regarding the lack of clarity in KEIFCA charts and diagrams regarding their boundaries. The title to the land is manorial and has no defined extent and there is no filed plan. Moreover, the description of the boundary provided in the Act itself refers to place names which officers have not been able to locate either at the present time or when investigated previously. As a result, KEIFCA officers are continuing to engage with FOFC to clearly establish the boundaries for the private grounds.

Officers are continuing to engage with and work with permit holders with smaller vessels to try and assist where possible in gear development through the winter. Following the completion of the spring 2024 surveys, decisions will be taken on the flexible permit fishery for next year.

Recommendations:

Members **NOTE** and **APPROVE** the report

