

By: Deputy Chief IFCO and Cockle Officer/IFCO

To: Kent and Essex IFCA – 25 November 2025

Subject: **2025 Cockle Fishery Management**

Classification: Unrestricted

Summary:

This paper provides Members with a summary of the Autumn cockle survey as well as fishery management for 2025. This includes the new Thames Estuary Cockle Fishery (No. 2) Order 2024, the Permitted Cockle Fishery (chart of fisheries attached) and a summary on the autumn cockle stock surveys.

Recommendations:

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

TECFO 2024 fishery:

Background

This year's cockle fishery was the first to open under the new Thames Estuary Cockle Fishery (No. 2) Order 2024 (TECFO). The fishery opened on 17th August and closed on 31st October 2025. At the June 2025 Authority meeting, Members approved a Total Allowable Catch (TAC) of 5,940 tonnes.

Changes to the TECFO fishery this year included an additional licence, spatial changes (where fishing occurred) and temporal changes (when the fishery opened). At the August Authority meeting, the new licence holders list was agreed increasing the fleet from fourteen to fifteen vessels. The TECFO fishery boundaries have been altered (Fig. 4) from that of TECFO 1994, and the delay in the opening of the fishery saw TECFO landings continue up until the end of the approved Habitats Regulations Assessments period (the end of October).

2025 fishery management

Each of the fifteen licence holders were permitted to land a maximum of 13.6m³ per trip, approximately 11 tonnes, across a total of 33 landings between 1800hrs on

the Sunday to 1200 hrs on the Friday each week. Industry reported to officers that there were good patches of cockles in the East and West Barrows (Area 7 and 8) as well as a new bed of cockles found on the Knob (Area 9). Catch rates were slower on the Maplin Sands (Area 1-6) with one bag taking over an hour to fill and feedback from industry indicated that this was generally poor. The slow catch rates on the Maplin Sands resulted in vessels frequently landing less than the maximum permitted catch per trip. In comparison, catch rates on the Barrow Sands and the Knob were quicker, taking between one to nine hours to harvest the maximum permitted catch. Promising signs of spat was found across all TECFO fishery cockle beds. The average yield of cockles harvested this year ranged between 11.5 to 13.8%, with those from the Maplin sands presenting lower percentage yields than on other beds.

There was an increase in data collection this year following the rollout of a new online catch return form and the instalment of the Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM) system on all vessels in the fleet. The opening and closing of specific areas as well as the number of trips permitted for each area were adjusted accordingly throughout the fishery (Table 1) as a result of the combination of this data and industry feedback. Masters were also provided with a copy of our damage rate forms to gain a better understanding of our process and, should they wish, collect some of this data themselves. Anyone who did collect onboard damage rates shared this additional data with officers.

Vessels in the TECFO fishery typically land in tonne bags marked with a load line, however, this year the Boy Lukie LO89 was trialling landing cockles into solid steel stillage boxes. Officers worked with the licence holder to obtain the exact volume of 1.13m³ for each of the 12 boxes. During landings the licence holder was asked to do cross-checks between the boxes and an approved bag to identify any differences in volume with officers. The licence holder also looked at total live weight comparisons between the cockles landed by Boy Lukie LO89 and the Mary Amelia LO86 (who was landing into bags) and shared some of this data with officers. The cross-check inspections saw the cockles sitting below the bags load line and the total live catch weight data shared was less than that of the Mary Amelia LO86 after every trip.

Table 1: The final specified landings for the TECFO 2024 fishery.

Date	Number of weeks	Number of landings per week
17 Aug – 29 Aug	2 weeks	3 landings per week – no more than 1 per week from Area 7, 8, 9
31 Aug – 19 Sept	3 weeks	3 landings per week – no more than 2 per week from Area 7, 8, 9
21 Sept – 17 Oct	4 weeks	3 landings per week: no more than 2 per week entirely from Area 7, 8, 9 no less than 1 per week from Area 4, 5, 6
19 Oct – 31 Oct	2 weeks	3 landings per week: no more than 2 per week from area 8

Outlook for 2026 and beyond

The intentions for the 2026 TECFO fishery are that it will open during a more traditional period of mid to late June. Having the fishery opening at this time may allow vessels to obtain a higher percentage yield and more comfortable windows of fishing opportunity as the weather is usually more forgiving than that seen at the end of this years season. The decent spat fall across all beds is a promising sign, however, with winter approaching a more accurate representation of next year's stock will become apparent during the spring survey.

2. Permitted Cockle Fishery (outside of the TECFO 2024)

Background

As part of the operational reallocation following the delays to the opening of the TECFO fishery, this year's Cockle Flexible Permit Byelaw was opened earlier than usual on the 13th of July and ran up to the 8th of August. At the June 2025 Authority meeting, members approved the provisional TAC of 612 tonnes. Thirty-four category two permit applications were received for this year's fishery from vessels based both within and outside of the district.

The two most significant changes to this year's permit fishery were spatial and temporal. In addition to the shift in the opening of the permit fishery from its usual September/October forward to July, the introduction of new TECFO boundaries led to those of the permit fishery being altered. Notable beds to which this applied included Scrapsgate, the Spile and Margate Sands. This year's fishery was also spatially restricted as a result of the Manila Clam Trial fishery requiring specified areas of the Buxey Sand (a subsection of Area 20) closed to any cockle dredging. The Dengie Sand (a subsection of Area 20) was also closed due to minimal amounts of adult stock of any size.

2025 fishery management

As in previous years, the specified fishing period ran from 1800hrs on Sunday to 1200hrs on Friday of each week. Under a category two permit, each licence holder was permitted to catch a maximum of 3.39m³, approximately 3 tonnes. Each permit holder was granted six trips in total across the four-week period, as specified in Table 2 below. Given the revised area boundaries introduced by TECFO 2024 the permit fishery trips were split into zones, north and south. Two landings were permitted on beds north of TECFO (Area 20) and four landings were permitted on beds south of TECFO (Areas 12-18) (Fig. 4).

Table 2: The specified landings for the Cockle Flexible Permit Byelaw Fishery 2025.

Date	Number of weeks	Number of landings per week
13 July – 25 July	2 weeks	2 landings per week – no more than 1 per week from Area 12-18 (South of TECFO)
27 July – 8 Aug	2 weeks	1 landing per week from Area 12-18 (South of TECFO) (All other Areas closed)

Of the thirty-four vessels which applied for a category two permit, twenty-four completed their biosecurity inspections. Of the twenty-four, the same twenty-three vessels consistently took part in a minimum of one landing each week across the four-week fishery (Fig. 1). Between thirteen and twenty of those vessels completed a second landing in weeks one, two and four. All vessels completed two landings each in the third week of the fishery.

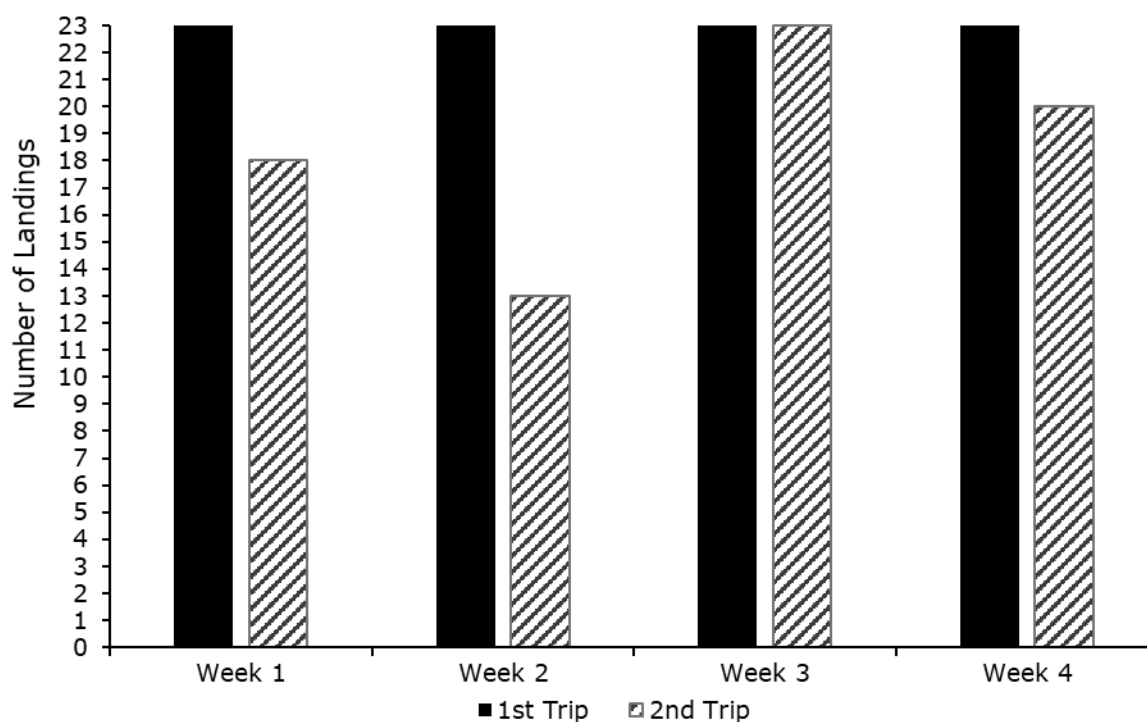


Figure 1: Number of trips completed each week by the vessels partaking in the permit cockle fishery 2025. Of the 34 category two permit holders, 23 vessels took part. Week 1 saw 23 vessels complete one landing each, with an additional 18 completing a second landing that week. Week 2 saw similar with 23 vessels completing one landing and 13 vessels completing a second landing. 23 vessels completed two trips each in the third week. Week 4 saw 23 vessels complete one landing and of those, 20 vessels completed a second landing.

Percentage yields north of TECFO were averaging less than 10%, whilst beds south of TECFO were producing higher averages of between 13.12-13.5%. Catch rates also reflected the productivity of these beds as fishing was much slower north of TECFO resulting in not all of the vessels landing the maximum permitted catch for those trips. South of TECFO catch rates were faster with some vessels able to harvest the maximum quantity in just over an hour.

Similarly to previous years, vessel masters were required to notify Kent and Essex IFCA two hours prior to commencing harvesting and landing cockles. This allowed for a total of 43 landing inspections this season. The close communication and working with industry also permitted officers to board fifteen vessels and complete damage rate inspections.

Fishery conclusions

Overall, the permit fishery was 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 suggests that the current management of this small-scale permit cockle fishery could be one that the industry can rely on as we move forwards. The opening of the permit fishery before the TECFO fishery allowed industry and factories to start supplying markets with Thames cockles.

This year was the first year the permit vessels were given access to the Margate Sands and Hook in its entirety. Percentage yields were lower this year in comparison to previous years; however, this may be due to the earlier start in cockle harvesting.

Several of the vessels which did not take part in the fishery, despite holding permits, were either: smaller vessels, those who were looking to take part for the first time or, those vessels which needed to travel from neighbouring districts.

Outlook for 2026

We intend to open the fishery as usual in September/October in 2026. This may see the percentage yields return to their typical mid-teen figures and once more produce high value cockles associated with the Margate sands. Albeit any management measures regarding the opening and closing of these beds will be made following the completion of the spring 2026 survey.

3. Autumn Cockle Stock Surveys 2025

The Autumn Cockle Stock Surveys were completed in the first half of September (6th-9th). We recorded a slight reduction in adult stock compared to the autumn 2024 survey, continuing a slow downward trend observed since 2020 (Fig. 1), albeit that trend isn't present in the spring surveys over the same period. Despite the lower quantity of adult cockles, we recorded a relatively high spat fall (second highest since 2020) (Fig. 2), suggesting that the cockle population is relatively stable. The over winter survivorship will be important for replenishing the cockle adult population and setting TAC for 2027.

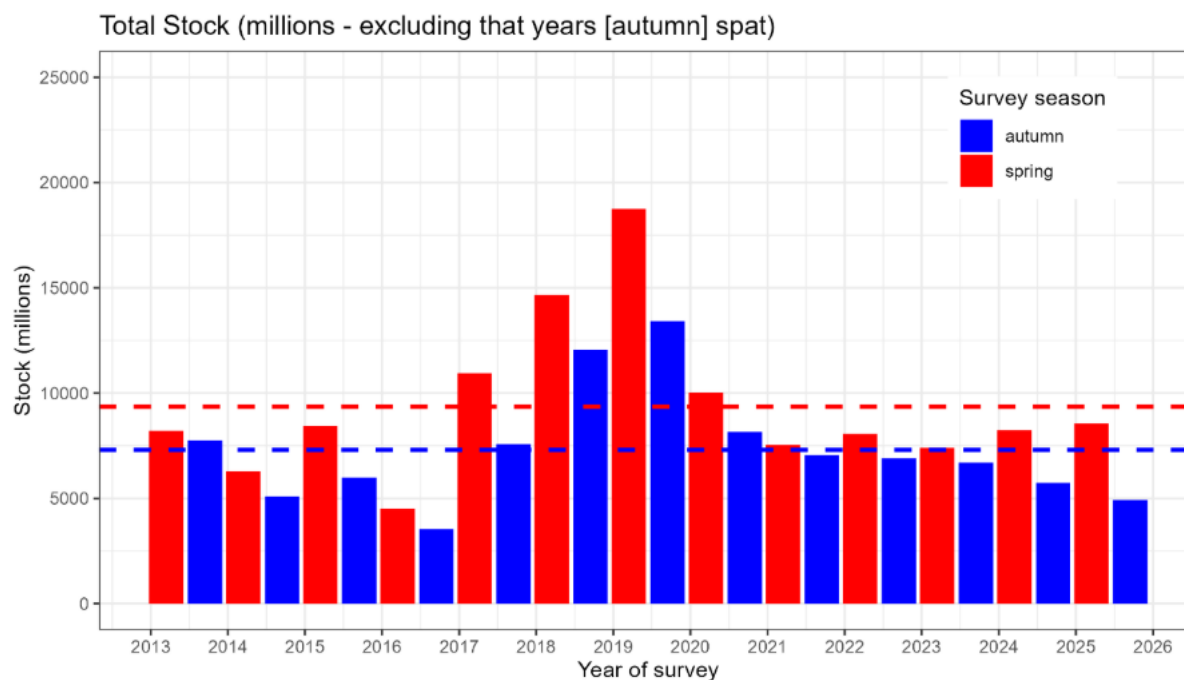


Figure 2: Adult cockle stock size in Spring and Autumn from 2013 to 2025.

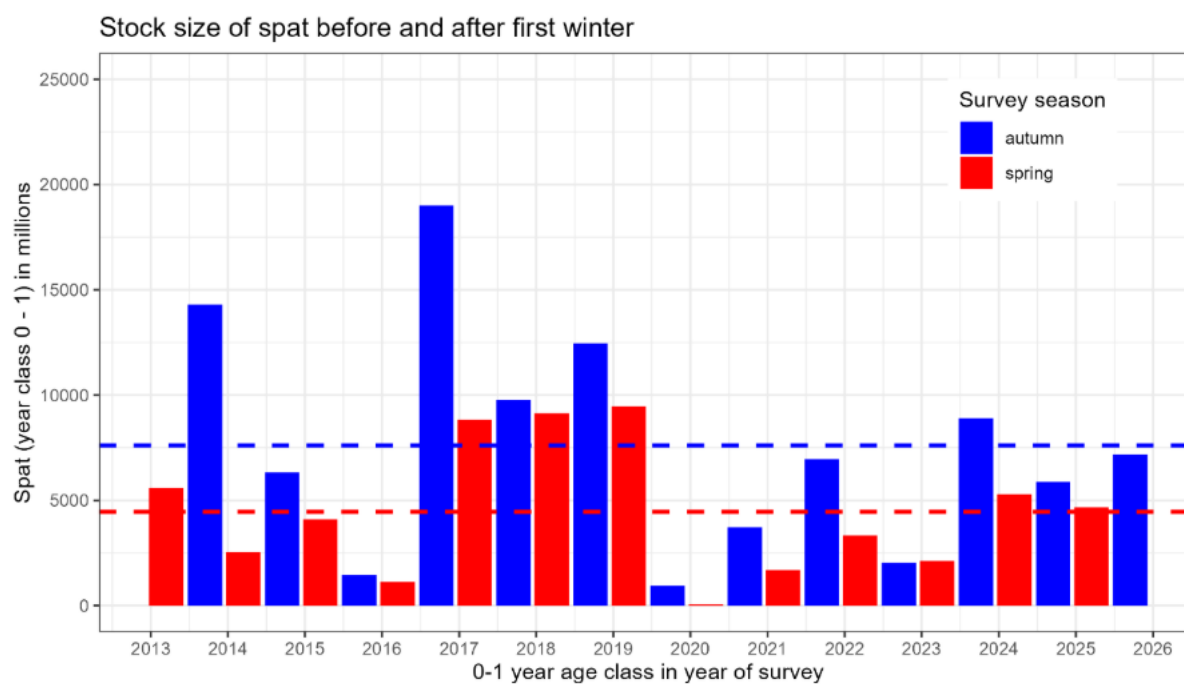


Figure 3: Quantity of cockle spat in Spring and Autumn from 2013 to 2025.

Recommendations:

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

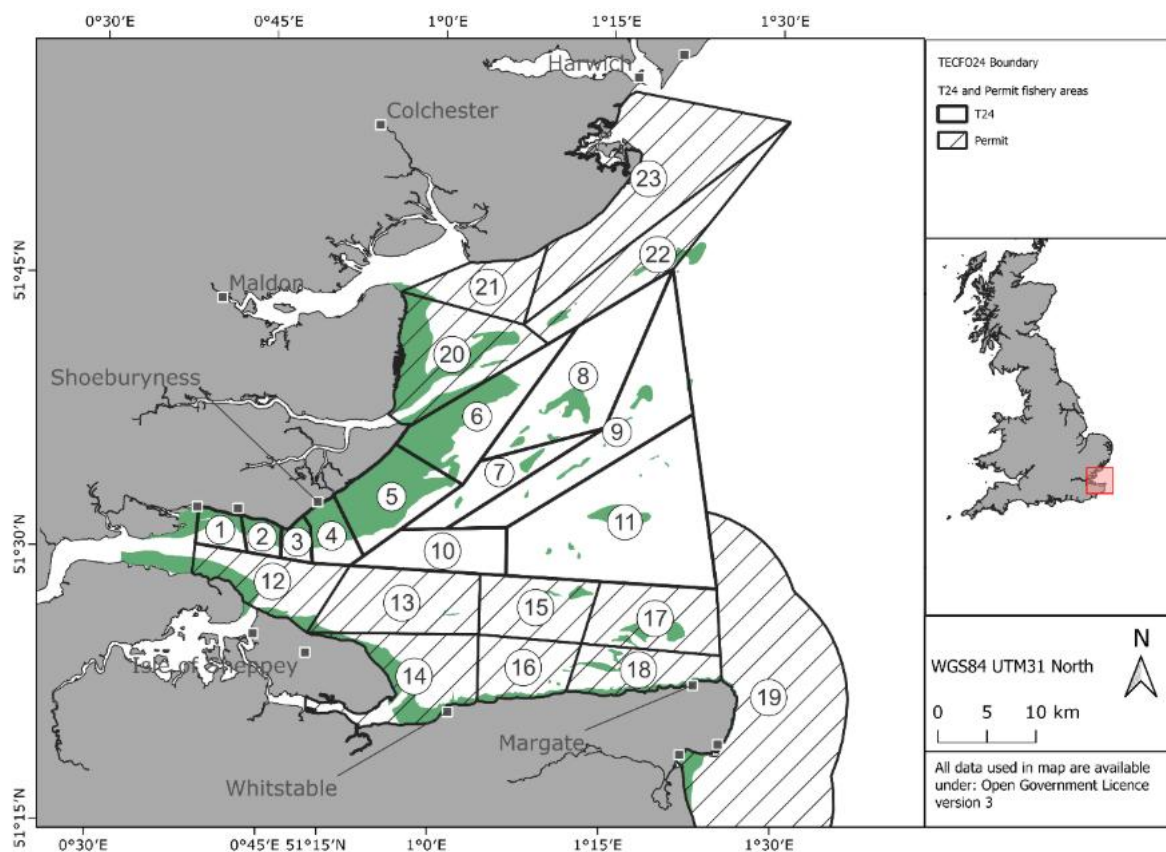


Figure 4: Thames Estuary Cockle Fishery (No. 2) Order 2024 (TECFO) area boundaries and the Permitted Cockle Permit Fishery boundaries as of 2025.