



Agenda item B2

By: Assistant Chief IFCO
To: Kent and Essex Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority – 12 September 2023
Subject: **2023 Cockle Fishery Management Update**
Classification Unrestricted

Summary:

This report provides members with an update on the 2023 KEIFCA cockle fisheries

Recommendations:

This report is for **NOTING** and **COMMENT** only.

THAMES ESTUARY COCKLE FISHERY ORDER 1994

General overview

The TECFO hydraulic dredge cockle fishery was opened by the Authority on 2 July 2023. Catch rates during the season have been good, with good growth rates. Catches of the maximum of 13.6m³ or approximately 11 tonnes have been consistently landed. In general, weather has been 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.

Area 15 – North Margate Sands

At the last Authority meeting, officers were instructed to carry out further survey work on area 15. In early August, officers conducted an additional survey. As a result of these surveys, and following discussion with the Chief Officer, Chairman and Vice-Chairman, three additional trips were added to the trip allocation for all vessels for area 15, taking the total number of trips of the fleet on Area 15 up to five.

Catch rates have again been excellent on this bed, similar to in recent years with vessels catching the maximum authorised quantity in around 2 hours. The growth on these cockles has again been very good, with the sizes of individual cockles more than doubling between the April survey and August survey. Yields have been as high as 20% on occasion, with size being in the range of 400-500 meats per kilo. Spatfall has again been reported on this bed and young cockles seen by the fleet, so it is hoped that this bed will continue to produce cockles moving forwards.

September surveys and outlook

The September cockle surveys area are scheduled to take place over the first weekend in September. Members will be updated at the meeting on the provisional findings.

Total Allowable Catch for the 2023 TECFO fishery

It was agreed at the meeting that a provisional total allowable catch (TAC) of 4620 tonnes would be allocated and that any increases or changes would be subject to survey results and discussions with licence holders regarding available stock and growth during the season.

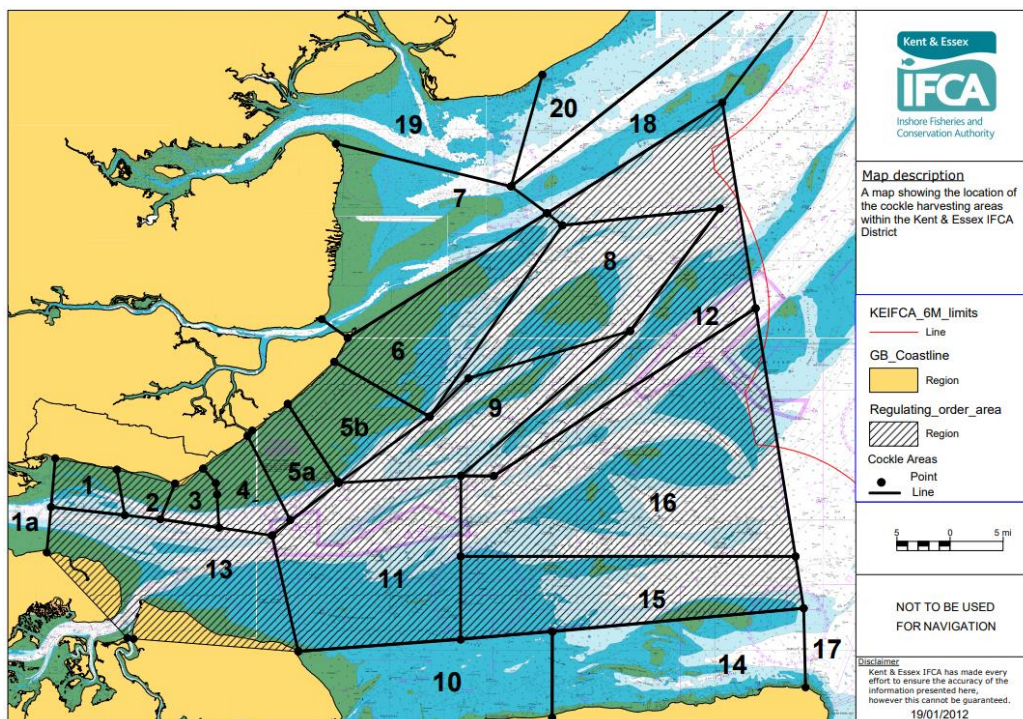
Effort over the course of the season has been spread across the main harvesting areas. Areas 1-3, 9, 11 and 15 have provided some trips, but the majority of activity has been on the main bed areas of 4 and 5, which are, historically, the basis of the TECFO.

As a result of the additional trips allowed on area 15, the total number of trips for the fleet increased from 30 to 33, resulting in a current TAC of 5082 tonnes. The scheduling of trips over the course of the season was altered to that shown below to accommodate these additional trips.

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)

FLEXIBLE PERMIT BYELAW COCKLE FISHERY

At the last Authority meeting, the results of the April surveys on the Permit fishery beds were reported to Members. It was reported that in addition to the usual beds within Area 7, cockles had also been found in Area 10 and Area 14 both of which are on the North Kent coast. It was also reported that these areas were not classified for food health purposes and that if the fishery were to be opened officers would start the application process to classify these areas.



Permits

At the May meeting it was reported that there were 36 permit applications received, 33 of which were for category one permits and 3 for category 2 permits. Following the decision of the Authority to only issue category 2 permits for the 2023 fishery, KEIFCA officers wrote to all permit holders to offer them the option of either a full refund for their category one permit or to exchange their category one permit for a category two permit and receive a refund of the application fee difference. Six full refunds were given and 27 converted to a category two permit which means that there are currently 30 permits issued for the fishery, subject to biosecurity inspections for the vessels as detailed below.

Classification of beds

Following the Authority's approval to open the fishery, officers held discussions with the Local Authorities concerned for this stretch of coast; Swale District Council, Canterbury City Council and Thanet District Council. Canterbury City Council agreed to lead on the area 10 application and Thanet DC on the area 14 application. Following those discussions, applications were submitted in early July to have the entirety of both areas classified for cockles.

When CCC undertook due diligence regarding area 10, the owners of private grounds located within area 10 raised concerns regarding the whole area being classified. Faversham Oyster Fishery Company and Seasalter Shellfish both have private grounds within area 10. In addition to this, local cockle vessel skippers

provided opinion that there were not sufficient cockles there to classify the area. As a result, the application was halted and area 10 therefore will not be open for fishing this year. KEIFCA officers will explore area 10 further prior to the 2024 fishery to identify any additional stocks in the eastern part of this area.

Following KEIFCA submission of the classification application to Thanet District Council, due diligence was carried out and a TDC environmental health officer accompanied officers on board Nerissa to carry out an examination of the cockle beds within area 14. The application was then submitted to the Food Standards Agency and a response is currently being awaited. It was hoped that due to the close presence of area 15 cockles which are already classified in proximity to this bed, that the area could be subjected to 'fast track' classification. However, due to the national conversations regarding water company actions, especially along the North Kent coast, officers are anticipating that this will not be permitted. As a result, it will take at least 10 weeks following FSA feedback to open the area, which would not be until the end of October. The HRA for the Thames cockle fisheries only applies June to October inclusive. As a result, it is currently unlikely that area 14 will be open to fishing this year. However, officers have already started discussions regarding classifying other areas in Northeast Kent prior to the 2024 fishery.

Fishery Management for 2023

This means that for 2023, only area 7 will be available for fishing. A letter was sent to all permit holders advising them of this and officers are now contacting permit holders in order to conduct biosecurity inspections prior to the start of the fishery. Any vessel that does not have a biosecurity certificate will not be permitted to fish. In order to provide enough time for vessels to prepare for the fishery, the start of the fishery was delayed by one week to 11th September 2023 and will now close on 6th October. The much-improved growth this year seen across all cockle beds is suggesting that area 7 contains enough cockles for the trips as planned. Therefore, the provisional TAC will remain at 432 tonnes.

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).

In a situation where all of the TAC is not taken, remaining TAC can be split between the fleet to allow a more efficient uptake of the available stock – essentially this means that if there is stock remaining at the end of the four-week period, the remaining TAC can be split amongst the permit holders to allow as much of the TAC to be taken as possible. Officers are working hard to establish this small-scale fishery which has been borne out of the cockle review process. However, changing a fishery which has been run in a very different way for the past 20-30 years does present challenges.

The Authority is asked to **NOTE** the actions listed above and provide **COMMENT**