



Agenda Item No. B4

By: Assistant Chief Officer
To: Kent and Essex IFCA – 22 November 2022
Subject: **2022 Cockle Fishery Management**
Classification: Unrestricted

Summary:

This paper will provide Members with a summary of the cockle fishery management for 2022 for both the Thames Estuary Cockle Fishery Order (TECFO) 1994 and the Permitted Cockle Fishery (chart of fisheries attached).

Recommendations:

Members are asked to **NOTE** this report and provide **COMMENT**.

Background:

1. Thames Estuary Cockle Fishery Order

The cockle fishery within the area of the Thames Estuary Cockle Fishery Order opened between 26 June 2022 and 7 October 2022. At their May 2022 Authority meeting, members approved a TAC of 5,852 tonnes, over 38 fishing trips per vessel. The scheduling changed over the course of the season as officers worked with the industry through a difficult season.

The weather throughout the summer was very hot, with some periods of extreme heat warnings by the Met Office. Many of these coincided with low tide over intertidal areas in the Thames and as a result, cockles were repeatedly exposed to very high temperatures. Water temperatures were also high, and the very limited amount of rainfall resulted in much reduced quantities of runoff from land. The final schedule was as shown overleaf. Throughout most of the season catch rates were average to poor and yields varied markedly by time and by area.

Date	No. of weeks	No. of landings per week
26 th June – 12 th August	7 weeks	2 landings per week
14 th August – 2 nd September	3 weeks	3 landings per week
4 th September – 23 rd September	3 weeks	3 landings per week, a maximum of 1 of which must be taken in Area 15
25 th September – 31 st September	1 week	2 landings per week
2 nd October – 7 th October	1 week	1 landing from Area 6 only

Growth was unexpectedly poor this year, with cockles failing to grow much during the summer. In addition, very little spawn and spat was reported by the industry whilst fishing and during processing operations.

This poor growth and increasing fishing times led to a reduction in the number of permitted trips and consequently the overall TAC and landings. The scheduled number of trips reduced from 38 to 35 with the TAC dropping from 5,852 tonnes to 5,390 tonnes. This reduction in the number of trips was mitigated to a small degree by the completion of further surveys on Area 15 Margate Sands which resulted in an additional 3 trips per vessel in this area which provides improved yields and sizes when compared to the other beds.

1(a) Autumn Cockle Stock Surveys 2022.

Cockle stock surveys were completed between 10 and 12 September 2022 for the main cockle harvesting areas within the TECFO on the Maplin.

The quantity of spat found during the course of the surveys was very low, this lined up with what the industry had reported throughout the season. Numbers of adult cockle on the ground remain stable, however these individuals did not increase in size in the usual way we would expect. As a result, their condition going into the winter is lower than normal which may have an impact upon winter mortality. The following graphs show population numbers of adult cockles and spat for 2022 compared to earlier years.

Fig. 1: Adult cockle stock size in Spring and Autumn from 2004 to 2022

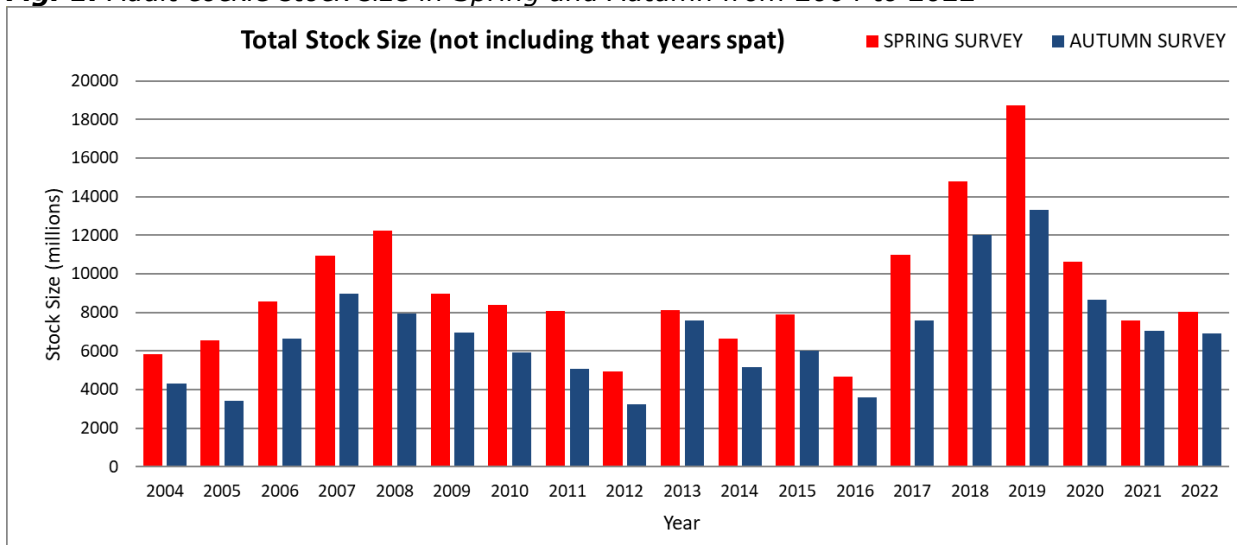
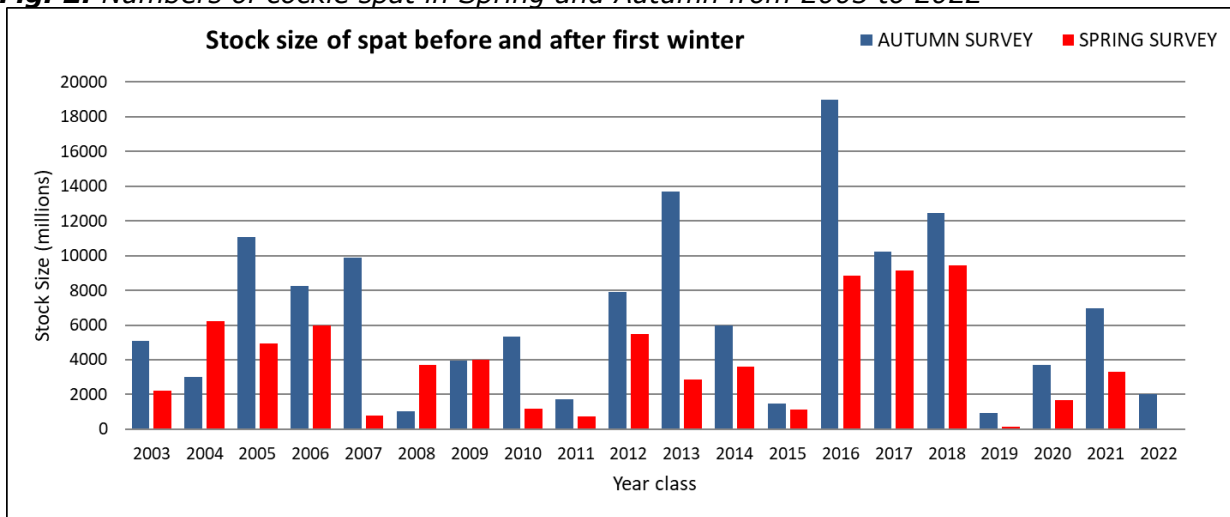


Fig. 2: Numbers of cockle spat in Spring and Autumn from 2003 to 2022



1 (b). Outlook for 2023 fishery and beyond

The outlook for the 2023 and 2024 fisheries is not clear at present, although there are some concerns. Much will depend on how the current adult year classes survive the 2022/23 winter period. A harsh winter could reduce the stock considerably from its already relatively low level.

The surviving cockles will need to grow in size and weight next year, produce a spawning event during spring 2023 and provide for a commercial fishery. The lack of a significant spatfall during 2022 will also limit how much stock comes into the fishery during the course of next year, as these cockles should reach minimum size during the course of the season.

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

At the May Authority meeting, Members approved the opening of the fishery based upon the spring surveys for a total of three fishing trips per permit holder. As a result of the poor growth and catch rates experienced within the TECFO, the industry requested that the permit fishery area be resurveyed.

Area 7 of the permit fishery was resurveyed at the start of September. The results of this survey showed a significant decrease in the amount of available stock with less than 1 trip per permit holder being available. These beds are geographically close to the main beds of the TECFO and were subject to the same combination of hot weather, high water temperatures and low rainfall as those main beds.

As a result of these surveys, and following discussion between the Chief Officer, Chairman and Vice Chairman, the decision was made to keep the fishery closed for 2022 and refund all permit fees as per the requirements of the permit byelaw.

3. Management of Cockle Beds 2023 – Permitted Cockle Fishery

At the October 2022 cockle review meeting, Members approved the following recommendations for the 2023 permit fishery:

- The permit fishery will issue both categories of permit – category 1 and category 2
- The permit fishery will be opened for category 2 permits four weeks prior to opening the fishery for category 1 permits
- The decision on whether to permit TECFO-licenced vessel for the outside area will be taken once the 2023 stock assessment has been completed.
- The outcomes of the permit fishery consultation concerning tonnages per category will be discussed as part of the 2023 management discussion after the 2023 surveys.

Following the completion of the spring 2023 surveys, decisions will be taken on the flexible permit fishery for next year taking into account the decisions reported above.

Recommendations:

Members are asked to **NOTE** this report and provide **COMMENT**.

