

Agenda Item No. B5

By: Cockle Officer

To: Kent and Essex IFCA – 14 September 2026

Subject: 2026 Permit Cockle Fishery Management Update

Classification: Unrestricted

Summary:

This report provides members with an update on the management of the 2026 KEIFCA permit cockle fishery.

Recommendations:

1. Members **APPROVE** the increase in TAC from 816 tonnes to 1,020 tonnes; and
2. Members **NOTE** the report

FLEXIBLE PERMIT BYELAW COCKLE FISHERY

Permits 2026

At the May meeting it was reported that there were thirty-four Category 2 permit applications received. Of these applications, twenty-nine vessels arranged biosecurity and preseason inspections with officers to take part in the fishery.

Officers have offered a new approach to this year's fishery, with all permit holders given the opportunity to apply for the exemptions presented and approved by the Authority in May (Item No. B7). The two exemptions offered were a 'Fishing Gear Exemption' and a 'Tonnage Exemption'. Permit holders are required to meet certain requirements to work under their chosen exemption throughout the duration of the fishery (see Annex 2, Table 3). Twenty-seven permit holders applied for at least one of the exemptions offered and all vessels have been fitted with REM gear sensors as part of this. Officers and industry have worked together to ensure requirements were met prior to the opening of the fishery.

2024 Permit Fishery Management

The permit cockle fishery opened at 1800hrs on 6 September and is open for five weeks through to 1200hrs on 9 October. The management measures agreed at the May meeting and trip allocations (Table 1) have been amended following additional surveys on beds in the estuary.

Table 1. Preliminary management measures approved in May 2026 for the KEIFCA permit cockle fishery.

Dates	Number of weeks	Number of landings per week
6 September – 2 October	4	2 landings of 3.4m ³ or no more than 6.8 m ³ per week (6 bags)

Officers completed additional surveys on high value beds such as the Margate Sands and the Spile, primarily in response to the extremely high summer temperatures and their impacts on the TECFO beds. However, the relatively protected subtidal beds on the permit fishery seem to be showing a very different response to those temperatures than the more exposed intertidal beds of TECFO. The results on the Spile showed an increase in biomass, whilst cockles on the Margate Sands, showed an overall significant increase in biomass. The data has allowed for an increase in the Total Allowable Catch (TAC) from 816 tonnes to 1,020 resulting in the extension of the fishery by one week and the addition of three trips (Table 2).

Table 2. Confirmed specified landings per specified fishing period for the KEIFCA permit cockle fishery 2026.

Date	Number of weeks	vessels with no exemptions	vessels with a tonnage exemption to carry more than 3.4m ³ .	vessels with a tonnage exemption to operate on quantities less than 3.4m ³
6 September – 2 October	4 weeks	2 landings of 3.4m ³ (3 bags/120 baskets*) – in total no more than 2 trips to be taken from the Spile and no more than 6 trips to be taken from Margate Sands	1 landing of 6.8 m ³ per week (6 bags/240 baskets) – in total no more than 1 trip to be taken from the Spile and no more than 3 trips to be taken from Margate Sands	No more than 6.8 m ³ per week (6 bags/240 baskets) – in total no more than 6.8m ³ to be taken from the Spile and no more than 20.4m ³ to be taken from Margate Sands
4 – 9 October	1 week	2 landings of 3.4m ³ (3 bags/120 baskets*) from Margate Sands and 1 landing of 3.4m ³ (3	1 landing of 6.8m ³ (6 bags/240 baskets) from Margate Sands and 1 landing of 3.4m ³ (3	No more than 6.8m ³ (6 bags/240 baskets) from Margate Sands and No more than 3.4m ³ (3 bags/120

Date	Number of weeks	vessels with no exemptions	vessels with a tonnage exemption to carry more than 3.4m ³ .	vessels with a tonnage exemption to operate on quantities less than 3.4m ³
		bags/120 baskets*) from Area 20	bags/120 baskets*) from Area 20	baskets*) from Area 20

**Please note a basket is in reference to a 6-gallon basket only.*

Closed areas

During the specified fishing periods, all areas other than 'North Kent Coast' (Areas 12, 13, 15-18) and part of Area 20 will remain closed in conjunction with the ongoing manila clam trials (See Annex 1).

Classification of beds

Bivalve mollusc (shellfish) harvesting areas are classified according to the extent of microbial contamination as shown by monitoring of E. coli in shellfish flesh. Treatment processes are stipulated according to the classification status of the area. In all cases, the health standards in Annex III of EU Regulations must be met. Molluscs must not be subject to production or collected in prohibited areas. The Food Standards Agency (FSA) has statutory responsibility for ensuring that monitoring and classification programmes are in place to meet legal requirements.

This is operationalised through the local authority environmental health teams who arrange for sampling to be carried out on a regular basis for all commercial shellfish beds.

Recommendations:

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2. Members **NOTE** the report

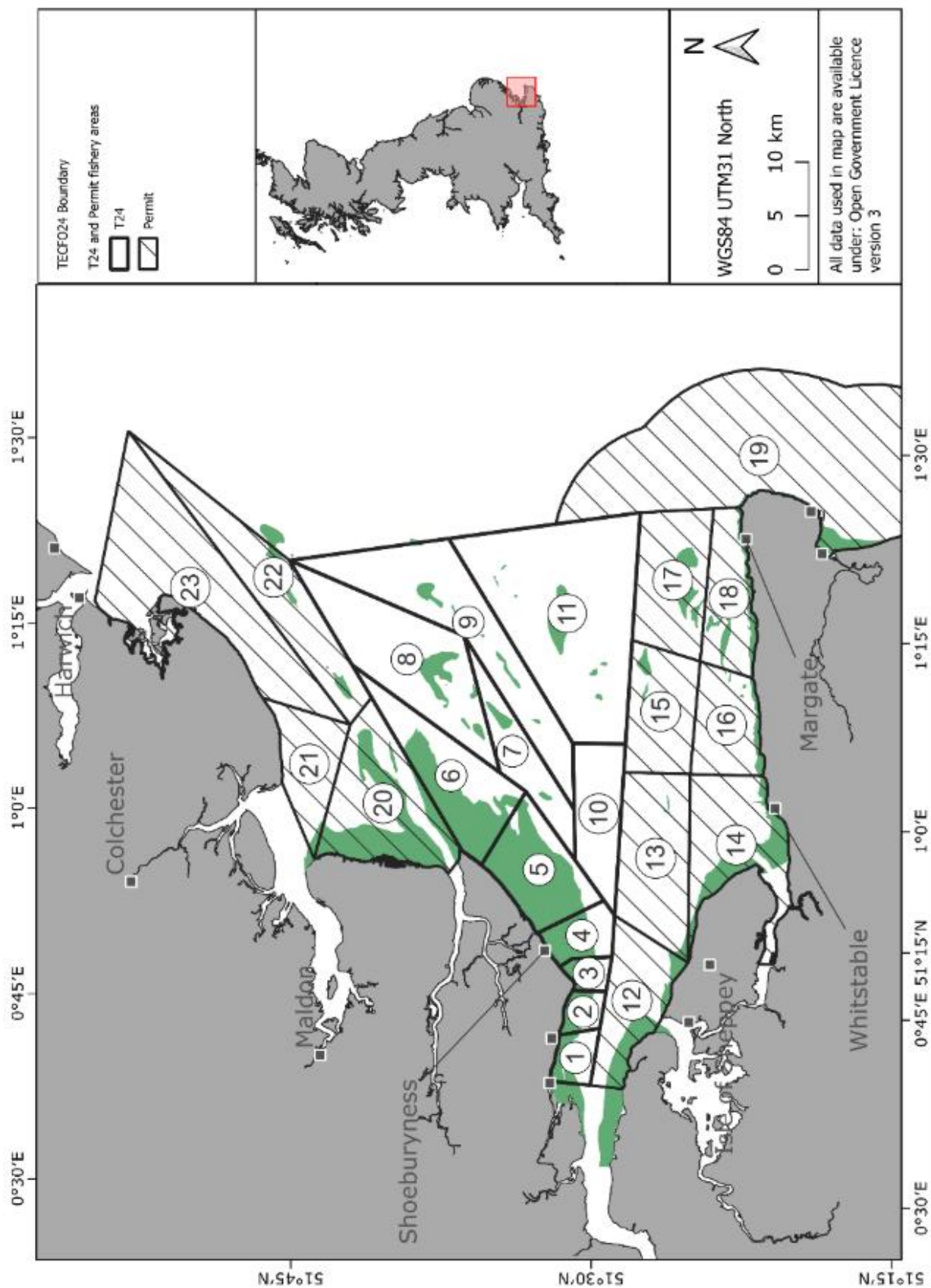


Figure 1. Thames Estuary Cockle Fishery (No. 2) Order 2024 (TECFO) area boundaries (Areas 1 – 11) and the Permitted Cockle Permit Fishery boundaries (Areas 12 – 23) as of 2025.

Annex 1 – Spatial Management

Area 20 spatial management

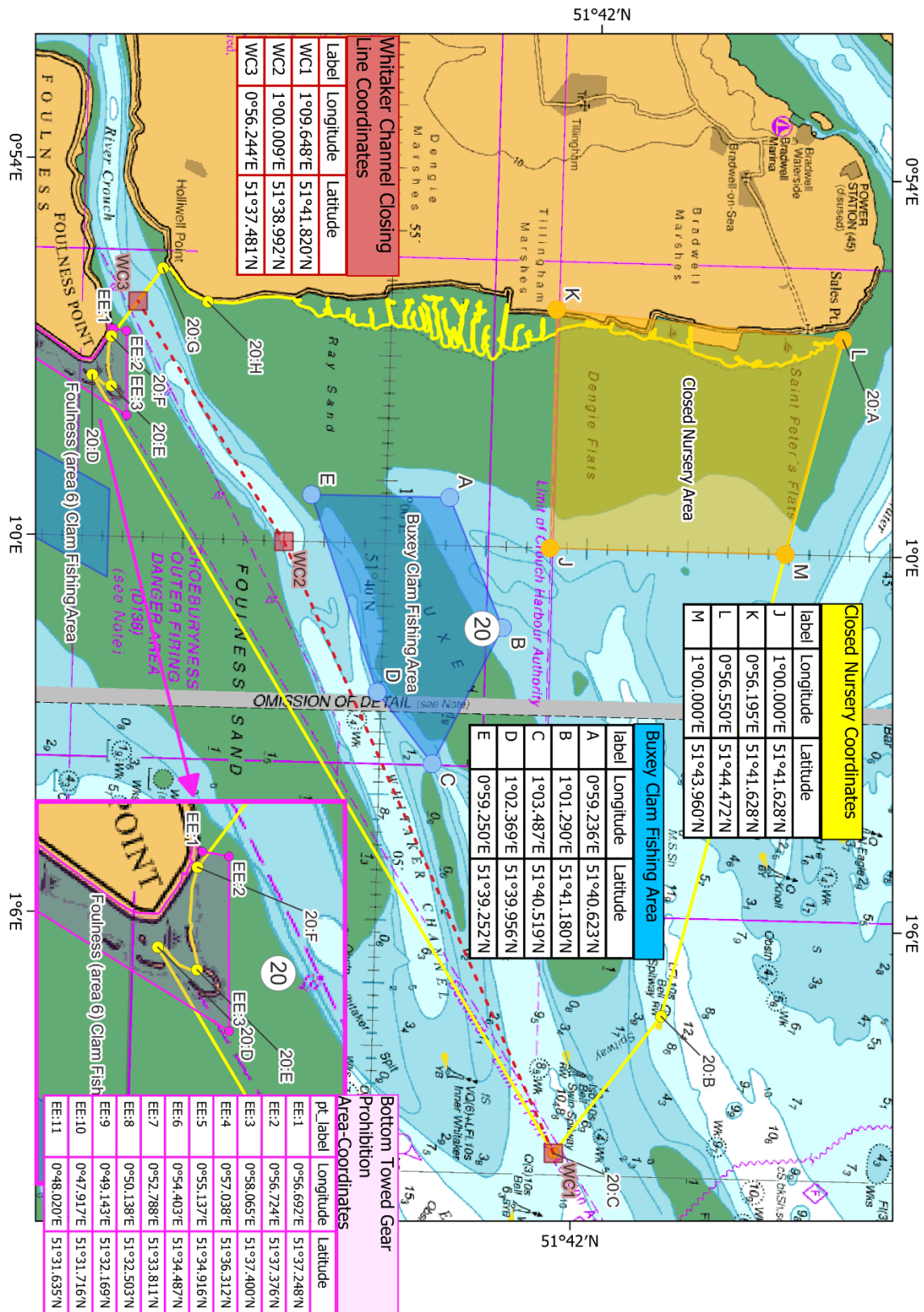


Figure 2. KEIFCA permit cockle fishery closed areas within Area 20 in conjunction with the KEIFCA Bottom Gear Prohibition Areas Byelaw, the Manila clam trial fishery and closed nursery grounds.

North Kent coast spatial management

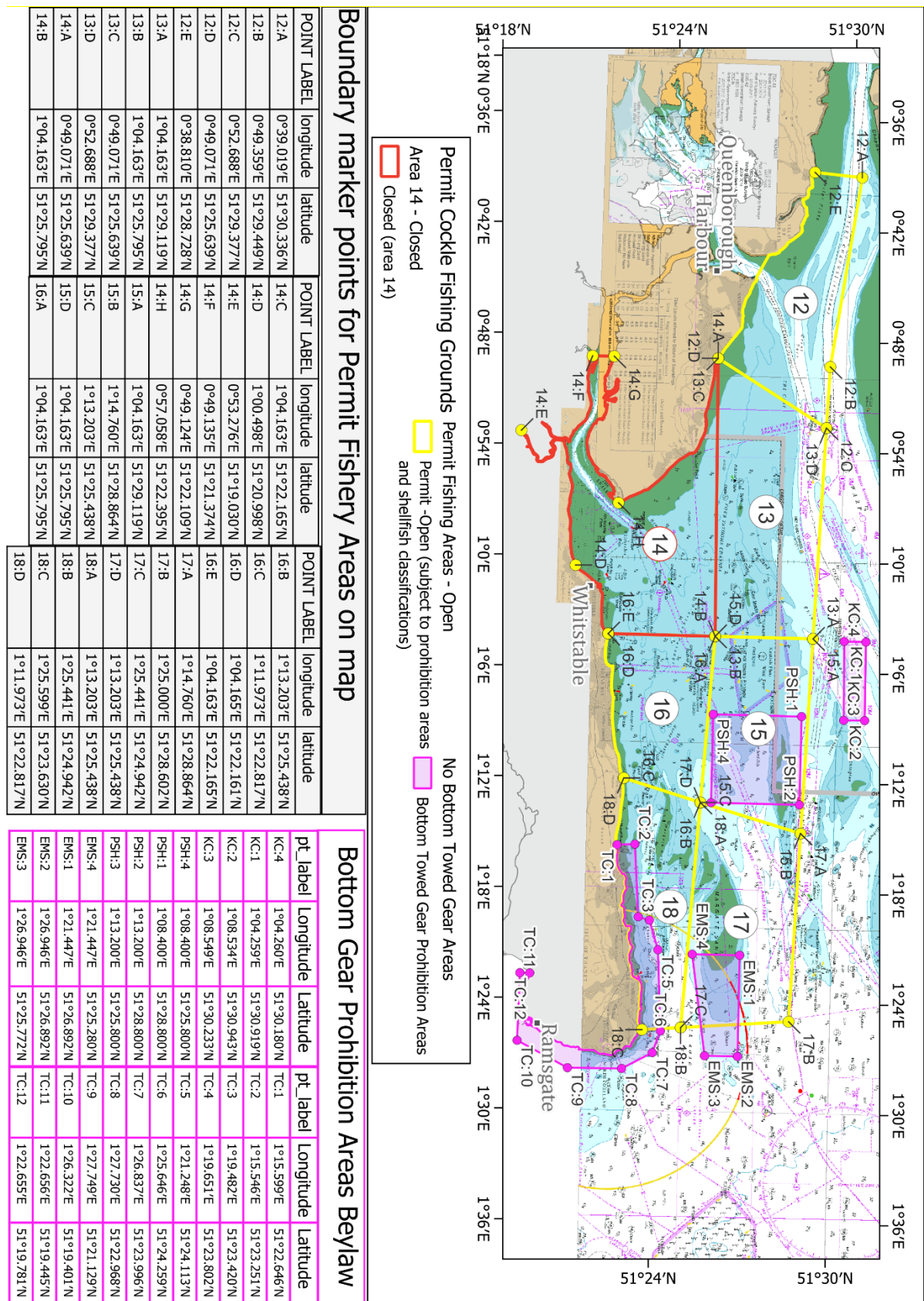


Figure 3. KEIFCA North Kent coast spatial management. Area 14 closed to any cockle harvesting. Additional areas within Area 15, 17, 18 are also closed in conjunction with the KEIFCA Bottom Gear Prohibition Areas Byelaw.

Annex 2 – 2026 Flexible Permit Byelaw Cockle Fishery Exemptions

Table 3. An overview of exemptions a permit holder could apply for in the 2026 KEIFCA permit cockle fishery, of which each permit holder will have a relevant copy on their permit.

Permit condition	Exemption	Exemption conditions
Catch and landing conditions: Under a category two permit, the "maximum permitted catch" of cockles is 3.4 cubic metres (3 tonnes) per trip (Permit Conditions - Paragraph 23)	1. Tonnage per week exemption: restriction on the quantity of cockles that may be landed during a single fishing trip shall not apply, provided that the total quantity of cockles landed does not exceed the weekly catch limit.	1. Maximum permitted catch of cockles landed must not exceed the specified amount (i.e. 6.8m³) within any weekly Specified Fishing Period. No allowance shall be made in respect of any shell, sand, other species or debris mixed with the catch. 2. A KEIFCA approved Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM) device which remains operational and transmits vessel position and gear sensor data at all times during all permit fishery operations. 3. Daily catch return must be submitted no later than 24 hours after landing via email or WhatsApp.
Gear restrictions: Cockle Containers and Bags must be of the specified volume, which is 1.13m³ in respect of a category one permit and 0.028m³ in respect of a category two permit. (Flexible Permit Conditions - Paragraph 9)	4. Carriage exemption: Permit holders may carry and land cockles in either: 1. Approved cockle bags with a capacity of 1.13m³ ("tonne bags"); or 2. Sacks filled to a maximum quantity of 0.028m³ (28 litres / 6 gallons). For operational purposes: • 40 sacks = 1 approved cockle bag (1.13m³) • 240 sacks = 6 approved cockle bags (6.8m³ weekly limit)	All container types are subject to approval by an IFCO during pre-season inspection. Approved tonne bags a. Must be marked with an approved load line. b. Must be tagged by an IFCO. c. Must be clearly marked on at least two sides with the words: "Kent & Essex Permit Cockle Fishery". Sacks d. Must not contain more than 0.028m³ (28 litres / 6 gallons) of cockles. e. Must be of a type approved by an IFCO during pre-season inspection. f. Catches landed in sacks will be cross-checked by IFCOs during landing inspections through volumetric sampling.
Gear restrictions: cockle harvesting equipment must incorporate a riddle which is at least 1750 millimetres in length	7. Riddle length exemption: restriction requiring a minimum riddle length of 1750 mm shall not apply to approved gear	1. Gear must be tested and approved by the Authority prior to the commencement of fishing, and pass both the

(Flexible Permit Conditions - Paragraph 3)	operating under this exemption.	minimum size and damage rate requirements.
Gear restrictions: all surfaces of the cockle harvesting equipment acting to retain the catch (dredge) must consist of parallel bars, where the bars are spaced at least 16 millimetres apart (Flexible Permit Conditions - Paragraph 6)	4. Dredge construction exemption: restriction requiring dredge to be constructed of 16mm spaced parallel bars shall not apply to approved gear operating under this exemption.	2. Proposed modifications to approved gear must be notified to the Authority in writing before the modified gear is used. The Authority may permit continued use without further testing, or require the gear to undergo a further approval test. 3. Use of modified or unapproved gear without the written approval of the Authority will constitute a breach of this exemption condition.