Agenda Item B5

By:	KEIFCA Chief Fishery Officer
To:	Kent & Essex Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority – 28 January 2022
Subject:	**Fish Local project update**
Classification	Unrestricted

Summary:

This paper will provide Members with an overview and progress on the Fish Local project.

Recommendations:

Members are asked to **COMMENT** and **NOTE** the report.

Fish Local Update

Since the November meeting the Fish Local team have been listening to a wide range of stakeholders about the advantages and disadvantages of selecting different fish species to focus effort and future promotion and branding efforts.

The Fish Local team have compiled their findings into a summary report with recommendations and are now looking to focus their efforts on Herring (Appendix 1) and have developed a pathway for the next steps in the project (Appendix 2).

As the report highlights each potential species came with its own specific challenges and Herring is no exception. Previous efforts to maximise added value through MSC accreditation of Thames Herring stocks over a decade ago struggled due to the small size of the local market not generating enough income to maintain the MSC accreditation fees. If a reliable market can be created there is already a clear management system in place to sustainably harvest this stock.

Thames-Blackwater herring background information

Herring stocks in the North Sea

The North Sea herring are managed as one stock as they all spawn in the autumn, however, research has shown that the North Sea herring stock is in fact a complex of three separate herring stocks each with separate spawning grounds, migration patterns and nursery areas. These three herring stocks mix as adults and juveniles and are caught together in the North Sea herring fishery (which is why they are thus managed as one stock).

Inshore stocks like Thames and Wash (other similar stocks are found scattered around Europe) form a separate sub-species of herring and spawn in the spring. These herring have a smaller length at age and fewer vertebrae than the Atlantic herring and are physically more similar to the Pacific herring. Tagging experiments indicate that the Thames Estuary herring stock is self-contained unit, which does not show significant mixing with other similar stocks in nearby areas Wood (1981). They are recruited to the fishery in their third year and start spawning when they are three years old.

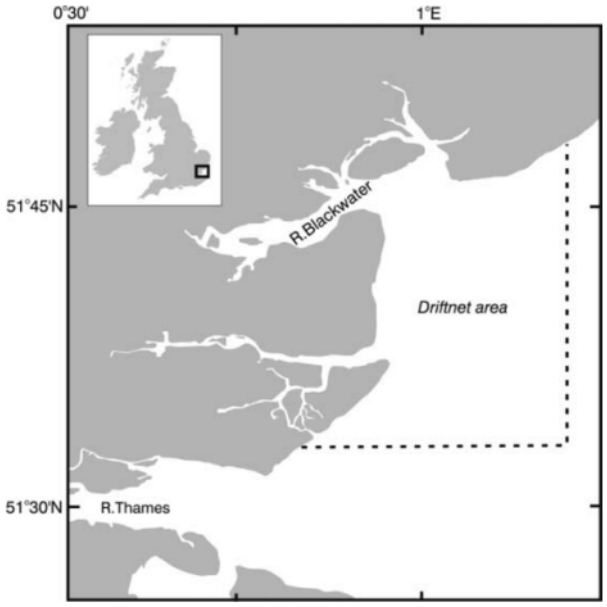
Thames or Blackwater herring spawn exclusively within the Thames estuary late February to early May probably depending on water temperature. Spawning takes place in a number of locations. One of the most important sites is Eagle Bank, but other sites probably exist including Herne Bay off the Kent coast. Dependent on water temperature, larvae hatch and metamorphose to acquire the adult form by July-August.

Brief history of fishing for herring in the Thames

Herring have been caught in the Thames Estuary for centuries, but the so-called Blackwater stock, also referred to as Thames Estuary herring, was not recognised as separate from the North Sea stock until the early 1800s (Wood, 1981). Mature Thames herring are small when compared to North Sea herring and, therefore, their catches could not compete successfully in the local markets. Only when the East Anglian herring fishery began to collapse in 1955 and there was a shortage of North Sea herring could Blackwater herring be sold without any difficulty.

Fishing capacity grew and by 1968 some 22 trawlers and driftnet vessels were targeting the stock; catches peaked at 606 t in the 1972-1973 season. A series of poor year classes followed and, as the stock declined, catch restrictions were implemented. However, the stock continued to decline and eventually the fishery was closed during winter 1979. The fishery was reopened in winter 1980 after a research survey identified clear signs of stock recovery.

At the start of the 1988-1989 fishing season, a redefined area for a licenced, driftnet-only herring fishery was introduced in the Thames Estuary. Herring caught inside this area were considered to belong to the Blackwater spring-spawning



stock and landings were monitored so as not to exceed the annual Total Allowable Catch (TAC). Herring caught outside the exclusive driftnet area are counted against the UK southern North Sea allocation of quota.

In 2004 the Thames-Blackwater Herring Drift Net fishery became the first MSC accredited fishery in the world, however this recognition did not raise significant interest or sales and the accreditation lapsed in 2010.

Since the mid-2000s the fishery has continued intermittently at a small scale and the pair trawling vessels, which targeted herring outside the driftnet area have sold-up and retired.

Management of Thames herring

The boundaries of the Drift-net Regulatory Area are cited in the ICES herring stock assessments for areas IVc and VIId and are now part of the annual UK-EU fisheries negotiations under the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA).

The Thames and Blackwater herring licence is issued under the Sea Fish (Conservation) Act 1967 by the MMO and the boundaries of the Drift-net Regulatory Area are set as a licence condition, within which drift-netting is the only legal method of fishing for herring. Under this licence the MMO sets a specific annual TAC per licence holder and has the ability to set a specific minimum size.

There are also a number of historic KEIFCA bylaws that work with the MMOs specific Thames and Blackwater licence.

- minimum mesh size of 54mm for drift-nets within the Drift-net Regulatory Area (west of 1 deg.20 min. East longitude);
- minimum mesh size of 50mm for trawl nets (west of 1 deg.20 min. East longitude); · no herring fishing allowed between 1 March and 30 April any year when fish are actively spawning, from the Thames Estuary west of 1'' 10' East except in the area known as the Blackwater herring box. The box allows a limited extension of the fishery to enable fishermen to benefit from catches when herring from elsewhere are in short supply;
- No trawling or dredging allowed on Eagle Bank between 1 Feb – 1 June.

Wood, R. J. 1981. The Thames Estuary herring stock. MAFF: Fisheries Research Technical Report, 64.

Recommendation: Members are asked to **COMMENT** and **NOTE** the report.