



Agenda item B6

From: Inshore Fisheries and Conservation IFCO
To: Kent and Essex Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority- 19 May 2026
Subject: Manila clam trial update
Classification: **Unrestricted**

Summary

To report to Members on the work undertaken by Industry during the 2026 Manila Clam trial

Recommendation

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

Background

The key focus of this 2-year Manila Clam trial is to start to assess fleet-level effects on the biology, stocks, and economic considerations and enforcement of our management. It is particularly important to understand how the clam stocks will hold up to commercial levels of fishing, both within a fishing season and then the following season. The main objective of this years' trial was to achieve an experimental design that allows for assessing the impact of uneven distribution of fishing effort and its footprint in multiple fishing zones.

Survey data collected between autumn 2024 and spring 2025 identified a substantial decline in Manila clam biomass. This reduction was greater than could be accounted for by reported fishing activity alone. While natural processes, such as overwinter mortality, are likely to have contributed, there is evidence to suggest that areas subjected to fishing pressure in 2024 experienced a greater decline than unfished areas.

In order to investigate these patterns, defined fishing-effort zones were established within Area 6 as part of the 2026 trial design. Area 6H was

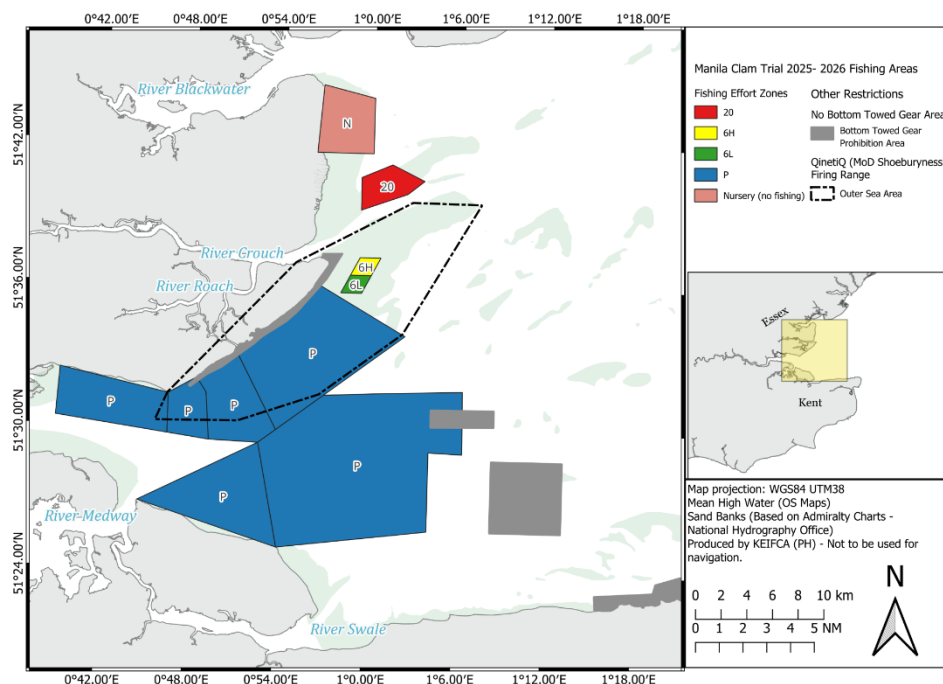
designated as the high-effort zone, Area 6L as the low-effort zone, and an additional control area was set aside where no fishing activity takes place.

Baseline surveys were completed prior to the start of the 2026 trial, with follow-up surveys planned in May to assess changes in stock abundance and biomass across these zones.

Using vessel tracking technology (REM- remote electronic monitoring), the trial aimed to assess the impact of different intensities of clam fishing on both the clam stocks, the cockle stocks and on the seabed.

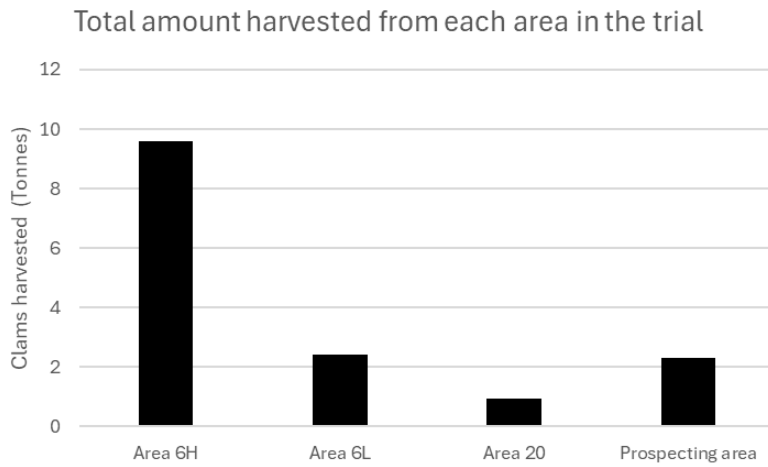
Trial summary

- 4 trialist vessels took part in the 2026 Manila Clam Trial
- The trial period was 7 weeks from Monday 16th March 2026 (an extension week was added)
- The trial areas were split into four specified areas: Area 6H, Area 6L, Area 20 and the Prospecting Areas (P)
- Each trialist was allocated 15 trips in total 11 to the trial areas, 3 trips to the prospecting areas and a final trip in either the trial areas or the prospecting areas but not in area 6L.

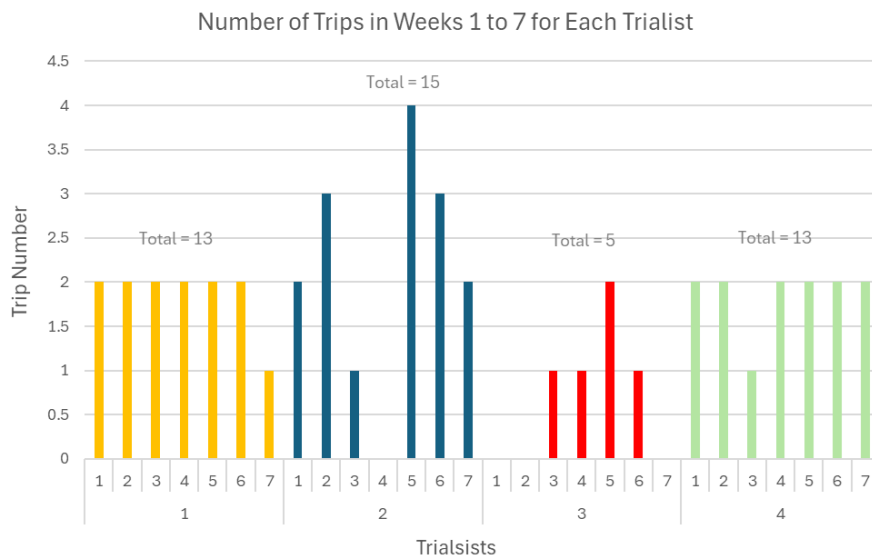


- Each vessel completed one damage rate during the trial
- KEIFCA officers completed 5 landings of trialists to weigh and record any undersized catch.

- ▶ Compared to the 2024 trial most of the fishing effort focused on Area 6 rather than Area 20.



- ▶ Not all the vessels completed their allocated trips.



Data collection



To collect data on the fishing operations of the trialists participating in the trial, each vessel was required to have a Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM) system on board, which recorded the vessel's position and when their gear was in the water, to collect data on fishing footprint, and catch per unit effort. During

the first year of the trial, trialists were required to use a handheld GPS unit and fill out a form on board of their separate tows.

During the trial, KEIFCA used WhatsApp to remain in contact with the trialists.

Before the trial started, each trialist was given a pack containing the fishery SOP, Catch Per Unit Effort Forms, labels, and cable ties. Each coloured cable tie corresponded to different fishing areas of the trial- yellow: area 6H, green: area 6L, red: area 20 and blue: prospecting areas. The trialists were required to label their bags or boxes accordingly. On landing the trialists were required to weigh their catches and note the individual bag/ box number, area and weight on the Catch Per Unit Effort form and send this to KEIFCA officers via WhatsApp.

Damage rates

During the trial, each vessel was boarded to collect a damage rate sample. Achieving and maintaining low damage rates is important for both the sustainability of the stock, and the value of the product. Low levels of physical damage to individuals that are being discarded increases their probability of survival, and ability to contribute to future fishable stock through growth and reproduction. Low damage rates to discarded catch therefore increase the sustainability of the fishery in the long term. Keeping damage rates low in retained catch is also important, as this increases the proportion of catch that survives the depuration process and can be sold into the live market. Therefore, in order to maintain a thriving, sustainable fishery, both financially and ecologically, low damage rates are essential.

Three dredge tows were conducted by the vessel and during each tow a KEIFCA officer collected two samples from the sorted retained catch and one from the discarded catch (returned to sea). A total of six samples collected per boarding were then processed. Processing involved splitting each samples into species (cockle and clams), size (over 35mm, under 35mm, over 16mm, under 16mm) and then into damage levels (whole, chipped, smashed). Each group was counted and weighed, and from this data, the damage rate and percentage of undersize catch was calculated.

Landings

KEIFCA also conducted several shore-based landing inspections throughout the trial, weighing overall catch and recording any undersized clams.

Trial, week by week

	Start	Finish	No. trips	Landings permitted per trip
Week 1	16 Mar @ 08:00	20 Mar @08:00	2	400 kg
Week 2	23 Mar @ 08:00		4	400 kg
Week 3		3 Apr @ 12:00		
Week 4	6 Apr @ 08:00		4	500kg
Week 5		17 Apr 12:00		
Week 6	20 Apr @ 08:00	24 Apr @ 12:00	Contingency week for missing trips due to weather disruptions	
Prospecting trips				
Weeks 2-6	23 Mar @ 08:00	24 Apr @ 12:00	1	300 kg
			1	300 kg
			1	400 kg
1 Week trail extension				
Week 7	27 Mar @ 08:00	1 May @ 12:00	1*	400 kg
			1**	400 kg

* One trip just in Area 20

**One trip may be taken in any area 6H, 20 or prospecting area (area 6L closed)

Week 1

During Week 1, trialists were permitted to undertake up to two fishing trips each in the trial areas, with a catch limit of 400 kg per trip. Of the four participating trialists, three completed their full allocation of two trips. Two trialists conducted both trips within Area 6H. The third trialist completed one full trip in Area 20 and one split trip across Area 20 and Area 6H.

A damage rate was taken by an officer aboard Trialist 1 on area 6H, passing with a damage rate of 3.72%.

Week 2 – 3

During Week 2 – 3, trialists were permitted to undertake up to four fishing trips each in the trial areas, with a catch limit of 400 kg per trip. Of the four participating trialists, two completed their full allocation of four trips, one trialist completed three trips, and one trialist completed one trip. Two trialists conducted all four trips within Area 6H. The third trialist completed one split trip across Area 20 and Area 6H, one full trip in Area 6H and one split trip across Area 6H and 6L. The fourth trialist completed their first trip in Area 6H.

A damage rate was taken aboard Trialist 2 and Trialist 3 on area 6H, passing with a damage rate of 3.12 and 5.77%.

Closure of 6H, allocating one trip per vessel in 6L

A management decision was taken at the end of Week 3 to close Area 6H to further fishing activity and allocate effort to Area 6L.

Fishing activity in Area 6H during the initial weeks of the trial was productive, with consistently strong catch rates reported by the fleet. However, this resulted in a rapid accumulation of fishing effort and associated spatial footprint within the high-effort zone. By the end of Week 3, the fleet's footprint in Area 6H was approaching the agreed threshold for this zone, while little to no fishing effort had been recorded in Area 6L.

The closure of Area 6H was therefore implemented to prevent the fishing-effort threshold from being exceeded and to enable controlled allocation of effort within Area 6L. A limit of one fishing trip per vessel was introduced in Area 6L to ensure a measurable but proportionate level of fishing activity. These measures were intended to maintain the integrity of the trial design and to allow for robust comparison of fishing impacts between high-effort, low-effort, and control zones following post-trial survey work.

Week 4 – 5

During Week 4 – 5, trialists were permitted to undertake up to four fishing trips each, with a catch limit of 400 kg per trip.

Of the four participating trialists, two completed their full allocation of four trips, and two trialists completed three trips. All four trialists completed trips to 6L with the closure of 6H. Once these trips were reviewed a decision was made to reopen 6H to fishing in Week 5.

There was no fishing activity from Trialist 2 in week 4.

Trialist 4 had a damage rate taken during Week 5 and this was 17.78%. KEIFCA had planned to take another damage rate during the following week but the vessel did not go out to fish again.

Trialist 1 went to prospect on a piece of ground on the Kent side of the prospecting area to have a look at viability of fishing. The trialist did not retain any clams from this area, despite the clams being of good quality. The tows were picking up stones and mud boulders, some tows that bad with mud and stone the trialist did not bother having it aboard. Each tow estimated about 5kg of clams retained in a tow. The trialist deemed the fishing unviable.



By the end of Week 5, two trialists had completed their 10 allocated trial trips.

Week 6

During Week 6, trialists were permitted to use this week as a contingency to catch up on any missed trips and prospecting trips. A management decision was made during week 6 to extend the trial by 1 week.

Following a review of the current fishery, a short extension to the trial along with the allocation of additional trips (as one vessel pulled out of this year's trial) was granted.

The trial was extended by one week and ran from Monday 27th April 2026 08:00 – Friday 1st May 2026 18:00. During this period, each vessel was allocated two additional trips at 400 kg per trip, subject to the following spatial conditions:

1. One trip must be taken in Area 20
2. One trip may be taken in any area open to fishing (6H, 20, prospecting)
3. Area 6L will remain closed to fishing

This extension could also be used by trialists to catch up on any outstanding trips from the first 6 weeks of the trial due to the adverse weather conditions during Week 6.

As the trial finishes on Friday 1st May 2026 18:00 any outstanding trips not taken before then would be lost.

The trialists started to pick up their prospecting trips in Week 6 and found good ground on the Maplin Sands. The Kent side of the prospecting areas did not bring about viable fishing.

Week 7

Some of the trialists used this week to complete their allocated extra trips, while some used it to catch up on missed trips due to adverse weather conditions during the trial.

As of Friday 1 May 2026, the trial has now been successfully completed. The next phase of the process will involve conducting post-trial questionnaires and feedback sessions with the 2026 trial participants to assess their experiences and gather insights on how the trial was managed and received. These post-trial surveys are scheduled to take place over the coming week.

A further update, including an overview of the feedback received and any key findings arising from the trial, will be presented at the next Authority meeting. A letter from one of the trialists is included as Appendix 1.

Recommendation

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