

By: Deputy Chief IFCO

To: Kent and Essex Inshore Fisheries and Conservation
Authority – 18 June 2025

Subject: **PERMIT BYELAW COCKLE FISHERY**

Classification Unrestricted

Summary: To report on the surveys for the 2025 Permit Byelaw Cockerle Fishery
and set out management for the 2025 fishery

1. Revised fishery boundaries

Following the introduction of the new Thames Estuary Cockerle Fishery Order 2024 the boundaries for the permit fishery have now changed when compared to those in previous years. This means that areas which were previously contained within TECFO are now part of the permit fishery. Notable beds to which this applies include Scrapsgate, the Spile and crucially Margate Sands.

The result of this is that management for the permit fishery now needs to consider a far greater range of areas which are distributed across the Thames estuary than it did previously. To this end officers have carried out surveys across the district as usual and the results are presented below. A chart showing the revised areas is attached at Appendix A.

2. Moving the start date of the fishery

Due to the delayed opening of the TECFO fishery, it is suggested that moving the permit fishery to earlier in the year for this year would allow cockle fishing within the Thames to start and to begin a supply to market. Whilst the quantities would obviously not be comparable to those usually supplied by TECFO, it would help fishers to start this year and for fishing to begin again, prior to the anticipated opening of TECFO later in the year.

Bringing the fishery forwards also enables officers to utilise all available resources for both fisheries, which is important in a year when significant

components of both fisheries are changing, including participants, boundaries and available beds.

The fishery normally takes place in September/October, however for this year it is suggested to start the fishery on Sunday 13th July. The fishery would then run for the period detailed below in the management recommendations, ending prior to the TECFO fishery starting.

3. Limiting the tonnage per trip

In a similar manner to the past two years, and following the direction of the Authority, only category 2 permits have been issued for this year. Category 2 permits are limited to a maximum of 3 tonnes per trip, with an option to limit to 1.5 tonnes per trip where required.

We need to be mindful of how we operate the fishery, balancing the needs of the various industry voices, but an irregular, unsustainable fishery is in nobody's interests and a fishery which operates, albeit at a low volume, low level, is far more beneficial than a fishery which does not open at all. If a small fishing opportunity is made available then individual fishers can make an informed decision about whether to take part or not.

Three tonnes per trip allows vessels far more flexibility in where individual vessels work and allows the fleet to exploit smaller beds of cockles than was possible whilst operating on the previous 12-tonne limit. This makes full use of the stocks within the District and allows an economic return by the fleet.

4. Limiting the number of trips per week and spreading out the effort

As for the 2023 and 2024 fisheries, the overarching idea is to encourage the fleet to spread out its effort, to locate new stocks of cockles which they have not had the opportunity to do with a time-compressed fishery in recent years and to allow fishers to take advantage of the fishing opportunity available to them.

If vessels spend extensive period of time in one area in an attempt to take their catch of 3 tonnes/bags then the area could be closed. The minimum catch rate which is economically viable for a cockle vessel is approximately 1 tonne per hour therefore officers would be reviewing any trips where total fishing time within an area was in excess of three hours per vessel.

In addition, officers would again also recommend the removal of the 350 tonne per area requirement criteria for the 2025 fishery as was done for both the 2024 and 2023 fisheries to allow the smaller scale fishery to take advantage of smaller beds of cockles and spread out the effort of the fleet.

5. Appropriate Assessment

The Authority is required under Regulation 48(3) of the Conservation (Natural Habitats) Regulations 1994, Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 the Authority to give notice to Natural England of intention to issue permits to fish for cockles within designated SSSI, SPA and Ramsar inter-tidal sites. The Authority is also required to submit an "Appropriate Assessment". This assessment includes survey data, fishery

monitoring and details of mitigation implemented to ensure that there is no adverse impact upon these sites as a result of the Authority's action. The Appropriate Assessment has been discussed informally with Natural England and a formal submission will be sent taking into account the Authority's decisions regarding this paper.

6. Spatial Management of Area 20 to allow for manila clam trial fishery

Area 20 contains three main beds. The Buxey Sand, Ray Sand and Dengie Sand. Whilst the Buxey and Ray Sands combined contain approximately 2500 tonnes of adult stock, only around 300 tonnes of it is above the 16mm minimum size specified in the byelaw. The Dengie continues to have a minimal amount of adult stock of any size. In addition, area 20 contains stocks of manila clams which are being explored by the manila clam trial fishery.

Therefore, it is proposed that zonal management of Area 20 will again be undertaken as it was last year. The Dengie Sand will be closed to cockle dredging for 2025 and a specified area of the Buxey Sand will be closed to cockle dredging but will be used as part of the manila clam trials discussed elsewhere in these papers. This zonal approach is shown below in Figure 1.

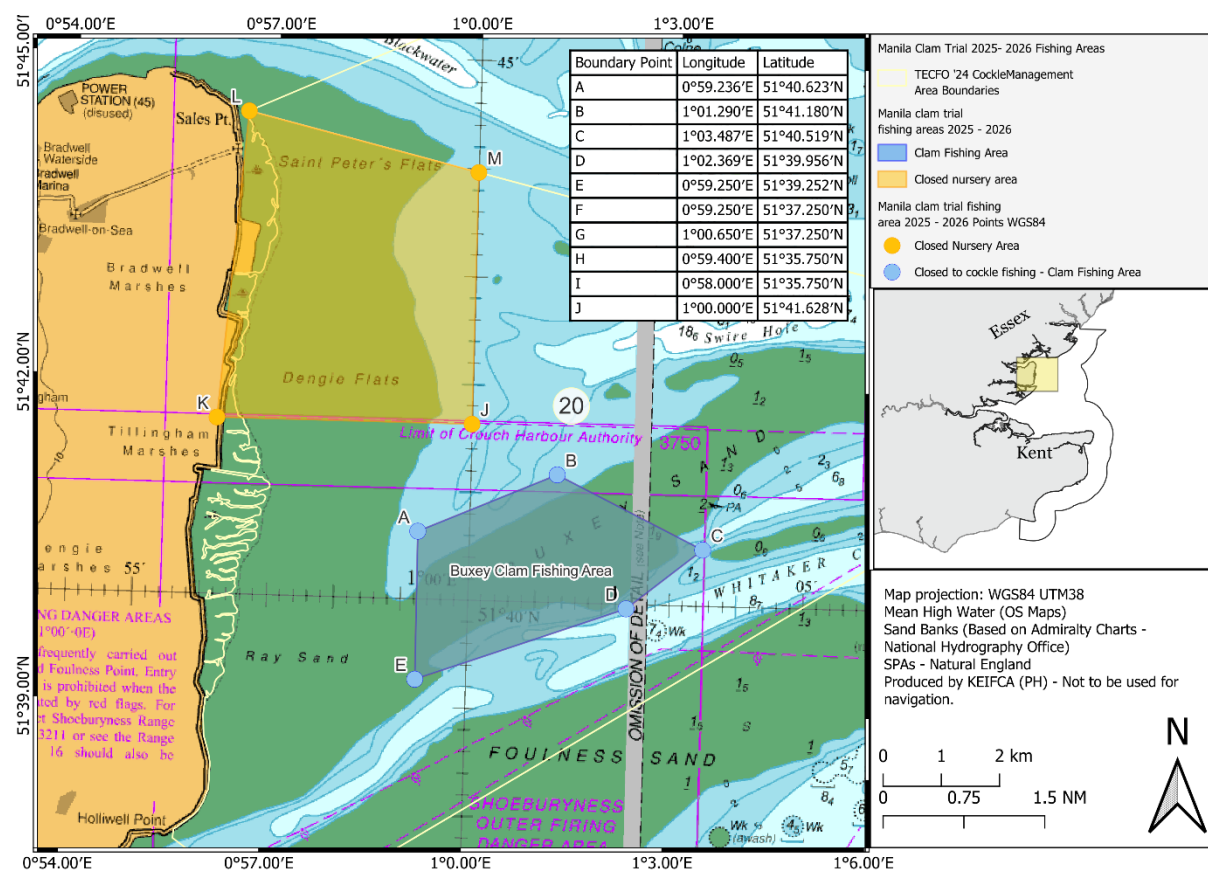


Figure 1. Zonal management of Area 20, orange area closed, blue area closed for manila clam trial

7. Spring 2025 Cockle Stock Surveys

Stock surveys commenced at the beginning of April 2024 and concluded on 14 May 2024. At this time of year the cockles are coming into condition for their spring spawning following the winter dormant period. These surveys use Day grabs, deployed from both FPV Tamesis and FPV Nerissa, and cover a total area of 37.6 km² (14.5 miles²).

The areas surveyed cover the Buxey, Dengie and Ray Sands, Minnis Bay, Margate Sands, Spile and Scrapsgate. These areas include all of the current main production areas outside of the TECFO.

Analysis of the survey data collected has been completed. The survey shows that Area 20 (Buxey Sands) and Areas 17 and 18 (Margate Sands complex) both contain good stocks of cockles, as well as smaller stocks available on the Spile and Scrapsgate. Minnis Bay contains minimal quantities after a stock loss there last year.

The cockles within Area 20 are present in good numbers, concentrated in two main spots – one on the Buxey and one on the Ray. However, a significant amount of these cockles are below 14mm and wouldn't be expected to reach minimum size this year. That said there is still a quantity of cockles over 16mm spread equally between the two beds and the area would likely benefit from being turned over by the fleet.

The survey conducted on the Margate Sands complex, which comprises the Margate Sand and Margate Hook, identified that the bed seemed to have shifted over the winter with the sands moving somewhat. However, the survey identified a similar number of cockles on the ground as the same point last year. In addition, the beds contain a significant quantity of spat, some of which have already reached the minimum size. The adult biomass and >16mm biomass figures shown below use the year classes of 1- 3 year old cockles, which the same as used in all others cockle areas within the Thames. However, this bed is seeing additional stock in the form of 2024 spat growing extremely quickly and contributing to the overall stock available.

Area	Bed	adult biomass (tonnes)	>16mm biomass (tonnes)
12	12:Scrapsgate	63	63
13	13:The Spile	24	24
17	17:Margate Sands	931	925
18	18:Margate Hook	67	67
20	Buxey and Ray	2199	307
	TOTAL	3284	1386

8. Number of Permit Applications

The process for the management of this fishery is that anyone wishing to apply for a permit is required to apply before 31 March in that year and all stock assessment surveys are completed before the May Authority meeting. This ensures that the Authority can be presented with a complete picture of the

fishery, including the amount of stock available and the number of vessels wishing to work it.

In recent years, the Authority has only issued Category 2 permits in its efforts to continue progressing towards a small scale fishery. In 2023, the number of permits was 30. In 2024, 31 applications the number of permits was 31. This year, 34 applications have been received for Category 2 permits.

9. Setting a Total Allowable Catch for the fishery

Given the revised fishery boundaries introduced by TECFO 2024, it is suggested to split the permit fishery trips into two zones – beds north of TECFO and beds south of TECFO, as shown on the chart below. Taking into account the levels of stock in the beds surveyed, including the adult stock, levels of spat as well as the exceptional growth seen in Margate Sands, there is a total initial TAC of 612 tonnes available, comprised of four landings south of TECFO (areas 12-18) and two landings north of TECFO (Area 20).

The Margate Sands within Area 18 is a bed which has completely different stock dynamic to any other area within the Thames – not least because of the speed of growth on this bed. From a management perspective it is also in a period of flux, previously the area was fished by a fleet of 14 vessels, and for this year there will be up to 34 vessels fishing there. This means that KEIFCA needs to be conservative in its initial approach to the management of this bed.

In a situation where all of the TAC is not taken by the third week of the fishery, 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 third week, the remaining TAC can be split amongst the permit holders fishery to allow all of the available TAC to be taken. In addition, officer will take on board feedback from the fleet regarding the fishing opportunity available on Margate Sands as well as feedback from officer observations on the ground including damage rates and catch rates to determine whether additional trips can be allocated on this area.

Dates	Number of weeks	Number of landings per week
13 July – 25 July	2 weeks	2 landings per week – no more than 1 per week from Area 12-18 (South of TECFO)
27 July – 8 August	2 weeks	1 landing per week from Area 12-18 (South of TECFO) (All other areas closed)

10. Vessel Monitoring Systems

Taking into consideration the longer opening period being recommended for the fishery and the much wider spatial area recommended to be opened; officers are setting out an expectation that all vessels should operate a Vessel Monitoring System (VMS). All >12m vessels are already required to be fitted with a VMS+ system which its for example utilised in the management of the TECFO fishery.

The majority of <12m vessels will now have been fitted with an IVMS (Inshore VMS) system as a MMO licensing condition.

11. 2025 Fishery Management

Following consideration of the previously discussed items I **RECOMMEND** the following management measures.

Recommendations:

In respect of the Permitted Cockle Fishery

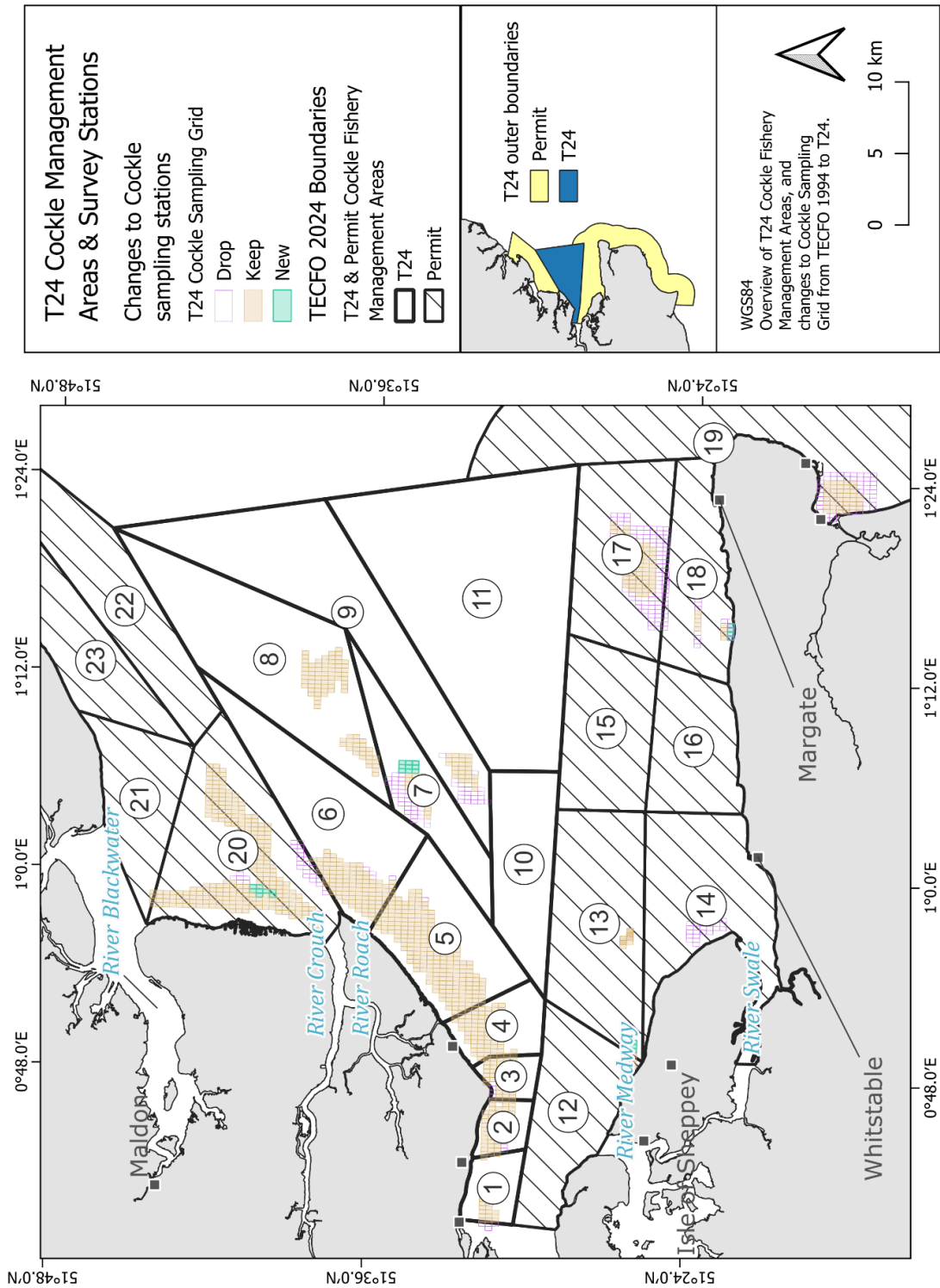
- (a) The Management Plan requirement that any open areas shall contain a minimum of 350 tonnes of cockles shall be waived for the 2025 season, subject to continual review throughout the fishery.
- (b) The Total Allowable Catch (TAC) should be set initially at 612 tonnes and that information related to the stocks will be continually reviewed throughout the season to ensure sustainability.
- (c) Reallocation of TAC, and therefore extension of the fishing season, may be made in the event of any remaining TAC and taking onboard feedback from industry and officers regarding the fishing opportunity in Area 17
- (d) That the Chief IFCO be authorised, after consultation with the Chairman and Vice Chairman, to implement changes to fishing controls to ensure future sustainability including for the purposes of (c). These will be communicated to Members following decisions being made.
- (e) That the described zonal management of Area 20 be undertaken in order to provide for a manila clam fishery trial.
- (f) That all areas subject to the permit byelaw shall be opened to fishing subject to the spatial restrictions in area 20 for manila clam trials, and that information related to fishing activity, catch rates and vessel density will be continually reviewed throughout the season to ensure sustainability.
- (g) That the Chief IFCO be authorised, after consultation with the Chairman and Vice Chairman, to implement changes to fishing controls to ensure future sustainability including for the purposes of (b). These will be communicated to Members following decisions being made.
- (h) That the fishery will commence at 1800 hrs on Sunday 13 July 2025.
- (i) Provisional fishing allocations will be as follows, this will also be subject to further amendment;
- (j) The fishing season will be divided into weekly specified fishing periods which will run from 1800 hrs on Sunday to 1200 hrs on Friday and during these periods permit holders will be permitted to make the following specified numbers of landings.

Dates	Number of weeks	Number of landings per week
13 July – 25 July	2 weeks	2 landings per week – no more than 1 per week from Area 12-18 (South of TECFO)
27 July – 8 August	2 weeks	1 landing per week from Area 12-18 (South of TECFO) (All other areas closed)

- (k) The maximum quantity of cockles that may be landed or carried on board will be 3.39m³/125 baskets per fishing trip (approx. equivalent 3 tonnes).

The Authority is asked to **APPROVE** the above recommendations.

Appendix A



A chart showing the cockle production areas within the Kent and Essex IFCA District