

Agenda item B7

From: Principal Science and Conservation Officer/Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Officer (Science and Conservation)

To: Kent and Essex Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority
-14th September 2026

Subject: Manila Clam Trial Update

Classification: Unrestricted

Summary

To update Members on the outcomes of the 2026 Manila clam trial fishery and to outline the next steps for the next trial phase.

Recommendation

Members are asked to **AGREE** to further work during the 2027 manila clam trial to further the development of the evidence base required for sustainable management of clam stocks.

Background

Manila clams (*Ruditapes philippinarum*) are a non-native shellfish species that are now established within parts of the Thames Estuary. They are one of the most valuable commercial shellfish species worldwide and could provide a much-needed income stream to the inshore fishers within Kent and Essex.

Since 2024, KEIFCA has been working with local fishermen to assess whether a future Manila clam fishery could be both environmentally sustainable and economically viable within the Thames Estuary. The table overleaf briefly summarise the key outcomes from 2024 to 2026.

Table 1: Summary of the Manila clam trial fishery programme between 2024 and 2026.

Year	Timing	Participants	Key outcomes
2024	October	8	Demonstrated the operational viability of a Manila clam fishery and identified effective gear and sorting methods.
2025	November	Trial Paused	Suggested that a mid-November fishery may be unsuitable due to market and product quality concerns.
2026	March-May	4	Evaluated the viability of a spring fishery, tested REM as a management tool, and explored the distribution of Manila clams within the estuary.

A detailed report of the 2026 trial fishery is provided in Appendix 1; a concise summary is set out below.

2026 Trial Fishery

The 2026 trial fishery was conducted from 16 March 2026 to 1 May 2026 and involved four commercial fishermen selected through an application process. Fishing took place in Areas 6 and 20, with additional prospecting undertaken in five designated prospecting areas along Kent and Essex (see figure 1).

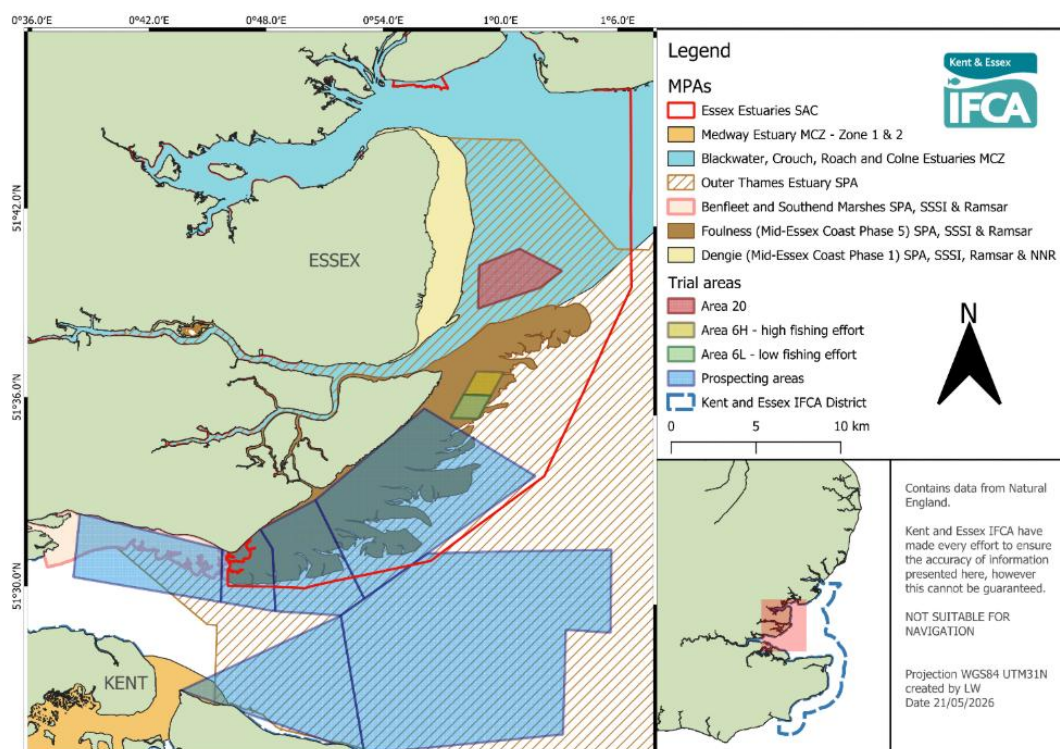


Figure 1: Map of the 2026 trial areas and overlapping MPAs. Area 6 was narrower and Area 20 was extended westwards compared with the 2024 trial.

A total of 46 fishing trips were completed during the seven-week trial period. Approximately 15.3 tonnes of Manila clams were landed, with the majority harvested from Area 6H. All commercial catches were successfully sold to UK markets, demonstrating continued demand for the product.

The trial was designed around five key themes:

- Monitoring and adaptive management
- Manila clam distribution and future fishing opportunities
- Understanding the effects of fishing pressure on the clam populations
- Trial design from an industry perspective
- Fishery timing and viability

The findings from each area are summarised briefly below.

1. Monitoring and Adaptive Management

The trial tested the use of Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM) with gear-in-gear-out technology as a management tool for a future fishery. Each vessel was fitted with the REM system which tracks the location and fishing activity of each vessel, significantly improving information on where and when fishing is happening.

REM data was used to develop two dashboards; one for trialists and one for management. These dashboards provided maps of fishing tracks, quantified fishing footprint, catch per unit effort (CPUE), and cumulative activity within each area. The dashboards improved transparency, supported day-to-day management decisions and provided participants with regular feedback throughout the trial.

By the end of the trial, the fleet had generated an estimated fishing footprint of approximately 0.265 km², equivalent to around 37 football pitches. Of this area, approximately 0.015 km² was subjected to multiple passes of the gear. Overall, the fishing footprint represented around 1.8% of the combined area available to the fishery. The trial demonstrated that REM can successfully provide a robust and transparent evidence base for monitoring fishing activity and gathering the evidence base needed to support the establishment of a future fishery.

2. Manila Clam Distribution and Future Fishing Opportunities

The trial design included dedicated prospecting trips to identify additional Manila clam beds within the Thames Estuary. Eleven prospecting trips were completed across five designated prospecting areas.

The most significant outcome was the identification of a commercially viable Manila clam bed in the north of the Maplin Sands. Subsequent fishing trips confirmed that the area could support commercially viable catches, resulting in approximately 2.3 tonnes of clams being harvested from the newly identified bed.

The discovery of additional clam resources is important because a future fishery is currently constrained by the number and size of known commercially viable beds. Identifying further commercially viable areas may improve the resilience and long-term viability of the fishery.

3. Understanding the effects of fishing pressure on clam populations

Survey data collected before and after the Manila clam fishing trial, both within fished areas and in unfished control areas, indicate that the current level of fishing effort has had no statistically significant effect on Manila clam density and, by extension, population size. Changes in clam density observed between the pre-trial and post-trial surveys did not differ between fished and control areas. Furthermore, no measurable effect was detected in areas that received a relatively greater proportion of the fishing effort (e.g. Area 6H).

The data also showed that a substantial proportion of the available fishing ground was not fished during the trial period. Fishing effort was unevenly distributed, with activity concentrated in a limited number of locations, leaving much of the fishery area unaffected by fishing.

Incidental data collected from within and adjacent to fishing tracks recorded lower clam densities than in fishing tracks than adjacent to them, within the same fishing zones. This suggests that any effects of fishing are highly localised and largely confined to the areas directly contacted by the fishing gear, with little evidence of impacts extending into immediately adjacent ground - however, this requires a more detailed study to confirm the level of impact.

Together, these findings suggest there is scope to increase fishing effort going forward without population-level impacts on Manila clams. However, continued monitoring would be necessary to confirm that this remains the case as fishing effort raised.

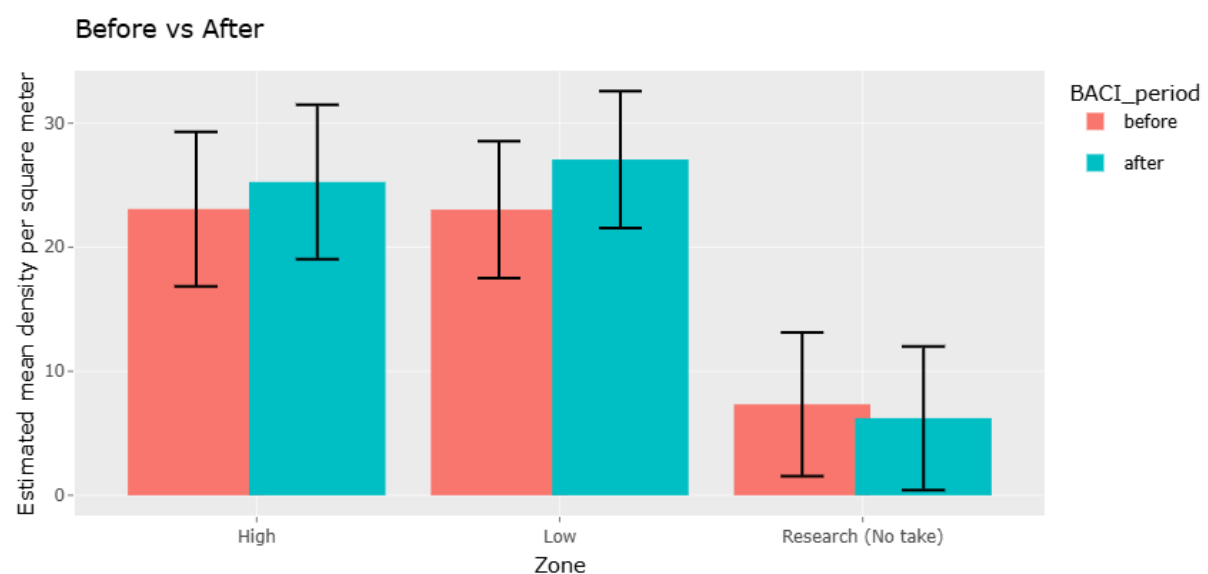


Figure 2. Densities of Manila clams before and after fishing in the three fishing effort zones on The Foulness Sand.

Please see Appendix 1 for the full report on the effects of fishing effort on the Manila clam population.

4. Trial Design and Industry Feedback

At the conclusion of the trial, all participants were interviewed regarding the effectiveness of the trial design and management. Feedback was generally positive, particularly regarding communication, standard operating procedures, management support and the use of WhatsApp updates throughout the fishery.

Post-trial feedback indicated support for fortnightly trip allocations and practical, economically viable catch limits. Some trialists requested defined gear specifications for the next trial; however, the set-up used by trialists appeared suitable during the trial. A flexible approach is therefore proposed for the next trial to allow further evidence gathering before any long-term gear requirements are determined.

Several opportunities for improvement were identified, including aspects of the application process and approaches that may improve participation and commitment in future trials. These findings will be considered during planning for future trial stages.

5. Fishery Timing

The trial evaluated a spring fishery and found strong evidence of commercial demand. Approximately 15 tonnes of clams were sold during the trial and participants generally reported that market conditions were stronger than those experienced during the autumn trial.

However, the trial also identified several factors which may constrain a future spring fishery, these include poor weather, overlap with existing fisheries such as whelk, bass and cockle fisheries, and the availability of resources required to manage concurrent fisheries.

From a biological perspective, no immediate changes in clam abundance, biomass or size structure were detected during the small-scale trial, although further evidence is required before conclusions can be drawn regarding larger-scale fishing activity. Members should refer to Appendix 1 for further information on the impacts of fishing pressure on the Manila clam beds during the 2026 trial.

Key Findings

The 2026 trial demonstrated:

- A small-scale spring Manila clam fishery appears capable of supporting a profitable commercial fishery.
- REM successfully monitored fishing activity and enabled development of management dashboards to support adaptive fishery management.
- Fleet fishing footprint can be quantified and monitored in near real-time.

- Fishing effort is uneven, and patchy. Current fishing effort levels are too low to influence the Manila clam population size within the fished areas.
- A new commercially viable Manila clam bed was identified in the north of the Maplin Sands
- Industry feedback was broadly positive and identified practical improvements for future trials.

Next Steps

KEIFCA propose to continue developing the evidence base required to determine whether a sustainable Manila clam fishery can be established within the Thames Estuary. Next steps may include the following, however further detail will be brought to the Authority prior to actions being taken.:

- Expanding the scale of future trials.
- Comparing spring and autumn fisheries.
- Continuing the use of REM as a core management tool.
- Further developing dashboards and feedback tools.
- Continuing monitoring and population assessment work.
- Increase fishing opportunity by allowing greater fishing effort, with respect to population assessment surveys, and continue monitoring the population.
- Investigating the newly identified bed in the north of the Maplin Sands and additional fishing opportunities.
- Refining the application and participation process.
- Improving understanding of the impacts of fishing pressure on Manila clam populations.

Recommendation

Members are asked to **AGREE** to further work during the 2027 manila clam trial to further the development of the evidence base required for sustainable management of clam stocks.