



Item No.B7

By: Chief IFCO

To: Kent and Essex Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority – 17 September 2024

Subject: **RECORDING SPECIES CHANGES IN THE DISTRICT**

Classification Unrestricted

Recommendations:

Members are asked to **DISCUSS** the changes in abundance of species in the district and **AGREE** to develop and run a project designed to record and quantify changes in species as outlined in the text.

Background

Across the fishing industry within the KEIFCA district, there has been an ever-growing drum beat of concern regarding the significant reduction of once common key commercial species. Species that were staples of the industry over a decade ago like cod, have all but disappeared from commercial landings and fisheries targeting sole have found decent catches harder and harder to come by over the years. Thornback ray stocks that until a few years ago were thriving have become scarce.

Whereas once the lack of quota was the constant frustration in meetings, now it is the lack of fish to catch. Netters that never in a million years wanted to become whelkers, are now entering the whelk fishery to avoid going out of business because finfish landings can't support them.

There are many theories as to the reason why this is happening. The increase in windfarms and cable laying has been dramatic over the last 10 years, however massive ongoing dredging campaigns and sewage including the cocktail of modern medicines and chemicals are the issues raised at the start of most conversations on this topic. The steady incremental rise in sea temperatures has been a constant background theme, however a lot of the reflection from the industry focuses on faster and more localised changes. As well as changing commercial species, worrying reports have also trickled back concerning drops in species like hermit crabs and a general decline in species diversity.

Although KEIFCA, as a fisheries regulator, has limited resources and scope to unpick and address many of these issues, we would not be doing our job if we did not engage and respond to the concerns of the industry and wider community. Acknowledging and trying to quantify what has changed, as well as getting a feeling of the extent and speed of change could better help crystalise the problems and highlight this issue both at a national level and to other regulators.

Working with stakeholders to record and quantify change

Using a list of species (below) the project would, where possible, pull together national data sources (e.g. landings data, CEFAS data, ICES data) to highlight the changes and trends in species numbers as well as gather evidence of changes from individuals in the commercial and recreational fishing industry in the form of a basic interview asking a set of standard questions.

- lobsters • cockles • cod • sea bream • sole • common seals
- brown crabs • manila clams • whiting • pouting • lemon sole • grey seals
- spider crabs • oysters • spotted dogs • thornback rays • plaice • porpoises
- shore crabs • Pacific oysters • smooth hounds • conger eel
- hermit crabs • mussels • bass • herrings • May weed
- whelks • wrasse • sprats • seaweed

Using the list of agreed species, interviewees would be asked to indicate, based on their experience, whether they have seen numbers increase, decrease or stable over a period of time, using a 5-point scale. Interviewees will then be asked if they could provide a good illustration of this change (i.e 3 years ago I landed 6 boxes of 'x' and now I only land 1) and if there are any other important species, they have seen change. Rather than focusing on landings the interviews would attempt to capture the changes in abundance and availability of different species. The results from the interviews per species will then be aggregated and presented alongside the national data sets.

By including a wide range of species, we can use the results to highlight any trends and changes across the food web. This analysis would help us see if the same trends are seen across all the species in the food web or if there are specific 'winners' and 'losers'. As we understand the role or niche of many of these species, we might be able to analyse the results to see if different species inhabiting a similar niche (i.e. bottom feeding fish) show similar trends.

To get the project off the ground quickly we are looking at using some of the DEFRA's Fisheries Management Plan (FMP) money to extend the 6-month contract of the part-time Angling Officer post, by an extra 2 months (≈£3,000) and task this post with undertaking the interview component of the project. Using feedback from Authority members we would develop an interview questionnaire and 'road test it' with a few fishers to see if the interview works well before we roll it out across the district. We would aim to report back some initial findings of the project to the next KEIFCA meeting in November.

Recommendations:
 Members are asked to **DISCUSS** the changes in abundance of species in the district and **AGREE** to develop and run a project designed to record and quantify changes in species as outlined in the text.

