



## **Agenda Item: C2**

### **Shore Report: Essex**

#### **Kent and Essex Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority**

#### **Quarterly Report for the Period: January 2024 to May 2024**

##### **Overview:**

During the onset of February and March, commercial fishing operations experienced a subdued phase. Erratic weather patterns, lower catch rates, and escalating fuel costs dampened activity in the early months of the quarter, particularly along the Essex coastline where only limited quantities of sole, thornback ray, whiting, and dogfish were caught.

The seasonal closure on bass, implemented throughout February and March, enforced a fishing hiatus, fostering the replenishment of stocks. Fishing activity in March deviated to available species, such as sole, thornback ray, smoothhound, and limited amounts of cod. Concurrently, it became customary for several vessels to undergo maintenance and refitting procedures during this lull in activity. While the Thames and Blackwater herring fishery commenced as scheduled in the previous quarter, its productivity dwindled by early February. Some vessels continued targeting sprat until mid-February when catch rates also declined. Recreational anglers reported inconsistent catches comprised mainly of thornback ray, dogfish, smoothhound, and whiting.

The arrival of April marked the reopening of the bass fishery to both the commercial fleet and recreational anglers, a development greeted with enthusiasm by many. April and May have seen an increase in charter vessel operations, buoyed by more clement weather conditions that rendered chartering ventures more appealing. May can be attributed to a progressive increase in commercial fishing activity, with more favourable weather conditions, sunlight, and warmth. However, the presence of phytoplankton 'blooms' (*phaeocystis spp.*) is reportedly hindering fishing efforts according to the Essex fleet.

## **North Essex:**

A lull in activity occurred within the first two months of this quarter (February and March) for the North Essex fleet with many vessels either undergoing maintenance, impacted by unfavourable weather conditions, or generally low levels of catch. Activity remained steady but, fish caught were at relatively low levels for West Mersea and Harwich vessels that braved the elements. Whilst vessels in Walton-on-the-Naze, Clacton, Bradwell, Brightlingsea, and Manningtree rarely ventured out, due to adverse weather conditions or vessel maintenance.

Generally, poor levels of catch were reported by several members of the fleet, potentially due to a combination of environmental factors, including, but not limited to large quantities of freshwater entering the sea from the Essex Rivers. This is echoed by the monthly Met Office report that mentions relatively mild temperatures, coupled with extensive levels of precipitation for February, with some areas experiencing two to three times the monthly average rainfall or even exceeding previous records (Met Office, February 2024 Monthly Weather Report, 2024).

April has reintroduced bass into the market, with Walton-on-the-Naze, Harwich, Wivenhoe, and West Mersea vessels actively catching and landing a relatively 'in-demand' species that commands greater financial reward. Activity is increasing and hopefully as the waters warm and we move into the summer months, general fishing conditions will be more productive for all involved.

## **Essex Rivers:**

Charter vessel activity was relatively low for the initial two months of the quarter, again due to adverse weather and conditions being less favourable. However, more charter vessels are active as the weather warms with vessels gearing up for the start of the season and heading out from the river Crouch, river Blackwater, river Colne, and Brightlingsea Creek. Reoccurring sizeable Bass have been caught on several vessels in the later months of this quarter with thornback ray and smoothhound in February and March.

Commercial activity has started to increase in April and May on the Essex Rivers with fixed gear present in varying rivers throughout Essex in attempts to increase the fishing effort and catch quantities. Wivenhoe vessels have ventured out with reports of low catch levels and poor conditions for the first half of the quarter. Finally, it is business as usual for the Mersea oyster vessels, with dredging continuing throughout February, March, and April.

## **South Essex:**

During the TECFO closed season, Southend and Leigh exhibit a reduction in fishing activity due to the inaccessibility of the cockle grounds. This quarter is generally quiet, prompting some vessels to engage in alternative fishing practices such as pelagic trawls, which ceased at the beginning of February in Leigh-on-Sea.

To conclude, several vessels are prioritising vessel maintenance to ensure readiness for the upcoming cockle season. As this quarter has progressed into April and May, only one to two vessels maintain trawling activities, while the majority allocate their efforts towards the meticulous preparation of the cockle fleet for the anticipated 2024 season. Vessels in Holehaven Creek and Thurrock remain relatively inactive, with little movement at the start and end of this quarter.

**Max Nolic,**

**First Mate / IFC Officer, Essex**

## **References:**

Met Office, February 2024 Monthly Weather Report. (2024). Available at: [https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/binaries/content/assets/metofficegovuk/pdf/weather/learn-about/uk-past-events/summaries/mwr\\_2024\\_02\\_for\\_print\\_v1.pdf](https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/binaries/content/assets/metofficegovuk/pdf/weather/learn-about/uk-past-events/summaries/mwr_2024_02_for_print_v1.pdf).

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