

Agenda Item: C2

Shore Report: Essex

Kent and Essex Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority

Quarterly Report for the Period: January 2025 to June 2025

Overview:

The first quarter of 2025 marked a notable departure from 2024, beginning with cold, dry conditions in January and February, followed by an exceptionally sunny and dry March, one of the driest on record. In contrast, the same period in 2024 was wetter and more unsettled, restricting fishing activity across many ports.

Fishing activity in early 2025 was further supported by a continuation of the seasonal sprat run into early January, with some vessels venturing out from Mersea and Leigh-on-Sea to take advantage of the opportunity before sea temperatures cooled further. These landings provided a useful early-season income for several fishers. Catches of sprat were recorded as good, however, they were inconsistent.

February and March also marked the seasonal closure for bass, in line with regulations, which limit fishing and landing during this period. However, with the reopening of the bass fishery in April, coinciding with calm spring conditions, several commercial vessels operating in the northern section of the district resumed activity, reporting successful catches and landings. This contrasts with 2024, when unsettled weather limited the ability to capitalise on the season's reopening.

Thornback rays have started to reappear in local waters. The end of this period saw smoothhound, sea bass, and dogfish being reported frequently by both commercial and recreational fishers, particularly in Clacton and Mersea, indicating encouraging early-year conditions for both effort and catch. Some commercial vessels remain on hard standing, undergoing maintenance and Maritime Coastguard Agency survey work throughout the district. Officers have dedicated time and resources to inspecting both recreational and commercial fishers throughout this period, with successful enforcement results in varying areas of the district.

Harwich & Walton

Fishing activity in early 2024 was subdued due to erratic weather and low catches. In contrast, 2025's cold but dry January and February, followed by a settled, sunny March, created more consistent opportunities. Potting activity is on the rise, with brown crab and lobster beginning to crawl in, albeit in relatively small numbers, as reported by commercial fishers. Additionally, the occasional spider crab has started to appear in catches. These early signs of crustacean movement suggest a promising start to the shellfish season. While Dover Sole catches remain below expectations for trawlers, there are signs of gradual improvement in availability. Vessels that had previously struggled with poor conditions likely saw an operational boost in Q1 2025. Officers have consistently inspected recreational anglers on Walton pier during this quarter, with no offences found. Regular catches include smoothhound, sea bass, thornback ray, and dabs.

Number of active commercial vessels fishing from these ports: 16

Brightlingsea, Wivenhoe & Clacton

In 2024, commercial and charter vessels saw reduced effort due to harsh early-year weather and maintenance downtime. By comparison, 2025's stable weather allowed more regular operations. Thornback rays have been consistently appearing in commercial catches, signalling positive conditions for this species. Clacton Pier has remained a staple hotspot for recreational anglers, with catches including a variety of species such as smoothhound and thornback ray. One angler reported a catch of 32 dogfish in a single session, all of which were released for sport. Charter vessel activity has also been on the rise, with better weather days encouraging more anglers to take to the water. This vibrant recreational fishing scene contrasts with reduced activity reported in March 2024. Officers dedicated time to patrolling Clacton pier throughout this period, monitoring activity and recording any offences found, with several successful outcomes occurring in this quarter.

Number of active commercial vessels: 7

Number of active charter vessels: 5

West Mersea & Tollesbury

The Mersea oyster fishery remains consistent, with oyster dredgers actively working private grounds throughout the period. This steady effort has supported the local industry. The reopening of the bass season in April has provided a significant boost, benefiting commercial fishers with the return of this highly sought-after species. Additionally, whelks continue to be a consistent catch landed in Mersea, with supplies coming from waters outside of the district, contributing to the area's fishery diversity and income. The beginning of this quarter saw whiting, sprats, and herring being landed into Mersea; however, this phased out by mid-quarter. The end of this period saw smoothhound, sea bass,

dover sole and thornback ray dominating commercial catches in West Mersea, as is expected for this port and the gear types used by local fishers.

Number of active commercial vessels fishing from these ports: 19

Number of active charter vessels: 3

Maldon & Bradwell

Activity in Maldon and Bradwell remained limited, with only a few commercial vessels active, primarily focused on netting and trawling. Bradwell saw a decrease in commercial fishing presence as some vessels moved to other districts, though new vessels occasionally arrived. Notably, Bradwell has a high concentration of privately owned vessels, many of which are used for recreational angling rather than commercial purposes. March saw reports of haddock being caught recreationally by rod and line within the district, an unfamiliar sight in north Essex. As the bass fishery reopened in April, calm spring conditions prompted several vessels in Bradwell to resume commercial activity, many of which fished throughout May and into June, focusing on netting and trawling for catch.

Number of active commercial vessels fishing from these ports: 5

North Fambridge, Burnham-on-Crouch, Wallasea Island, Barling, Paglesham & Rochford

Fishing activity at North Fambridge, Burnham-on-Crouch, Wallasea Island, Barling, Paglesham, and Rochford during the first quarter of 2025 reflected a mix of small-scale operations and a gradual return to activity. In Barling, vessels predominantly worked private grounds, focusing on more localised catches. These operations were often less visible but still important to the area's fishing economy. Wallasea Island, on the other hand, saw most of the activity within the region, although the commercial presence remained relatively low throughout the quarter, several commercial vessels from across the KEIFCA district were hauled for maintenance, which is normal for this period. However, as the quarter progressed and conditions improved, charter vessels began to venture out, marking the beginning of a busier season for recreational fishing. Recreational catches from charter vessels include sea bass, thornback ray, smoothhound, and spurdog. Additionally, officers focused on landing charter vessels to inspect catch, with no offences noted at the end of this quarter.

Number of active commercial vessels fishing from these ports: 2

Number of active charter vessels: 3

Southend-on-Sea & Leigh-on-Sea

Vessels based in Leigh-on-Sea focused on the sprat run during the early part of the quarter, taking advantage of the seasonal abundance before it phased out in late February. These vessels contributed valuable early-season landings, though catches were somewhat inconsistent. As the sprat run diminished, most other commercial vessels shifted their focus to annual maintenance, which is typical for this time of year. This downtime for maintenance, including necessary checks and surveys, meant that fewer vessels were actively fishing during February and March. A single charter vessel remained operational throughout the quarter, catering to recreational fishers. With the arrival of calmer spring conditions and the reopening of the bass fishery in April, there is anticipation that commercial activity will pick up again in the coming months as vessels complete their maintenance and prepare for a busier season. Officers have maintained a proactive presence on Southend pier throughout this period and into the later months of this quarter, inspecting recreational anglers and recording/investigating several offences.

Number of active commercial vessels fishing from these ports: 14

Number of active charter vessels: 1

Holehaven & Thurrock

Hole Haven and Thurrock, as usual, have relatively low commercial and recreational activity, with only one commercial vessel netting during this quarter. Commercial catch is usually limited to mullet, due to the nature of the gear used and location.

Number of active commercial vessels fishing from these ports: 1

Number of active charter vessels: 1

Max Nicolic,

Senior Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Officer