Agenda Item No. B8

By: Chief Fishery Officer

To: Kent and Essex IFCA – 14 September 2026

Subject: Thames and Blackwater Herring – Future of Management Consultation

Classification: Unrestricted

Summary:
The Thames-Blackwater herring fishery targets a biologically distinct spring-spawning stock that has historically supported a small inshore fishery within the Thames Estuary. However, declining participation, limited uptake of available quota, low economic returns and the increasing challenges of collecting sufficient fisheries data for stock assessment purposes have prompted Defra, Cefas and regulators to consider whether the current monitoring and management arrangements remain proportionate and effective.

Recommendations:
Members are invited to:

1. **Note** the report and **support** the principle of reviewing future approaches to stock assessment and management for the fishery.

2. **Approve** the undertaking of a stakeholder consultation with fishers, industry representatives and other interested parties, and receive a further report on the outcomes of that engagement and any potential management options identified for future consideration by the Authority.

North Sea Herring Fishery

The wider North Sea herring fishery is one of Europe's largest fisheries. It targets herring in the North Sea and eastern English Channel.

In 2024, the UK quota for North Sea herring was 99,205 tonnes, worth approximately £79 million. Scottish vessels caught around 74% of the UK's allocation, with English vessels taking 17% and Northern Irish vessels 9%.

The fishery is economically important for ports such as Peterhead and Lerwick, where herring contributes significantly to annual landing values.

History of Thames-Blackwater Herring Fishing

Herring have been caught in the Thames Estuary for many centuries, with records dating back to the Domesday Book.

Historical fisheries targeted spring-spawning herring in both the River Medway and the River Blackwater. Although some large catches were reported during the nineteenth century, the fishery had largely declined by the end of that century.

A major challenge was that Thames herring were smaller than North Sea herring and therefore less attractive to major fish markets. During periods when North Sea herring were abundant, Thames herring were difficult to sell and were often processed locally instead.

Commercial interest increased after the collapse of the East Anglian herring fishery in the mid-1950s. By 1968-69, around 22 vessels were targeting the stock, and catches reached a record 606 tonnes in 1972-73.

A Herring Management Committee was established in 1976 to manage catches and support stock conservation. However, a series of poor year classes led to stock decline and fishery closure in 1979-80.

The fishery reopened following strong recruitment in 1980-81 and has since operated under an annual TAC system based on scientific advice from Cefas.

In 2000, the Thames-Blackwater drift-net fishery achieved Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certification. Despite this, the accreditation did not significantly improve prices or market demand and was discontinued in 2008.

More recently, projects such as Fish Local have sought to promote Thames herring as a local sustainable seafood product, although catches remain variable and often low.

Stock Assessment

The Thames-Blackwater stock is assessed to determine an appropriate Total Allowable Catch (TAC).

The assessment is based on:

- Commercial catch records submitted by fishermen.
- Fishing effort estimates.

- Biological sampling of landed fish.
- Age and growth analysis carried out by Cefas.
- An annual fishery-independent survey conducted each November.

Scientists use these data to estimate stock size, recruitment, and fishing mortality. Stock assessments are normally conducted twice a year and used to recommend TAC levels.

Historically, however, catches of Thames-Blackwater herring taken outside the regulated drift-net area were not counted against the TAC. This limited the effectiveness of the TAC as a tool for fully controlling fishing mortality.

Changes to Assessment Methods

By 2004, Cefas reviewed the assessment and management system. Commercial catches and effort data had become sparse, making traditional stock assessment methods increasingly difficult. Given the fishery's relatively low economic value, there was also a desire to reduce assessment and management costs while maintaining appropriate conservation measures.

Current Management

The Thames-Blackwater herring fishery is managed through a combination of licensing controls, catch limits, and local byelaws designed to protect this unique spring-spawning stock while allowing a sustainable commercial fishery to continue. Management measures focus on limiting fishing effort, protecting spawning grounds and spawning fish, and monitoring stock status through scientific surveys and assessments. Together, these measures aim to maintain the long-term health of the stock and ensure that fishing activity remains at sustainable levels.

Licensing

The Thames-Blackwater herring licence is issued under the Sea Fish (Conservation) Act 1967.

Key requirements include:

- Applicants must have a registered and licensed fishing vessel.
- Licences are issued annually.
- Fishing is restricted to a designated Drift-Net Regulatory Area where drift-netting is the only legal method of targeting herring.

Kent and Essex IFCA Byelaws

Current management measures include:

- No vessels over 14 metres may participate.
- A minimum landing size requirement applies.
- Minimum mesh sizes are specified for both drift nets and trawls.

- Seasonal fishing closures protect spawning fish.
- Dredging and trawling are prohibited on Eagle Bank between 1 February and 1 June.

Future of the Fishery

The fishery remains highly variable, with spawning times and stock availability influenced by environmental factors such as water temperature. In recent years, the Thames-Blackwater herring fishery has become increasingly marginal in economic terms. Annual catch limits have been set at very low levels to reflect the status of the stock, while industry participation and uptake of the available quota have remained limited. This combination of low catches, low economic value and declining fishing activity has raised questions about whether the current management and assessment arrangements remain proportionate and effective. As a result, Defra and Cefas are exploring alternative approaches to collecting the scientific information required to monitor the stock and inform future management decisions. This work aims to identify more efficient and cost-effective methods of assessing stock status, particularly given the challenges associated with maintaining traditional fishery-dependent datasets from a fishery with low participation and sporadic catches.

Alongside consideration of future monitoring and assessment arrangements, there is also an opportunity to review whether the current management framework remains appropriate. The existing regime has evolved over several decades and includes a dedicated licensing system, a defined drift-net regulatory area, catch controls and a series of local byelaws designed to protect spawning fish and spawning habitats. Any review of future management options would therefore need to consider the continued necessity and effectiveness of these measures, including the Kent and Essex IFCA byelaws associated with the fishery.

Potential future approaches could range from retaining the current management system with revised monitoring arrangements, through to integrating the fishery more fully within wider North Sea herring management measures. Such options would need to balance the conservation requirements of the Thames-Blackwater stock with the desire to reduce regulatory burden, improve the proportionality of management measures and ensure that any future arrangements remain evidence-based and capable of delivering sustainable fisheries management outcomes.
At this stage, no preferred option has been identified and further work is required to understand the implications of any changes. However, given the continued low value of the fishery, low levels of quota uptake, and the challenges associated with maintaining a robust stock assessment from limited commercial catch data, there is a clear rationale for considering whether alternative approaches could deliver the same conservation outcomes more efficiently.

Regardless of the option ultimately pursued, any future management framework would need to continue to support the conservation of the Thames-Blackwater herring stock, provide sufficient information to assess stock status, and ensure that management measures remain proportionate, evidence-based and effective. Key considerations are likely to include:

- Maintaining appropriate protection for spawning fish and known spawning grounds.
- Securing reliable information on stock status and recruitment.
- Reducing unnecessary regulatory and administrative burdens where possible.
- Ensuring management measures remain proportionate to the scale and value of the fishery.
- Taking account of the views of industry, regulators, scientists and other stakeholders.

The exploration of future options therefore represents an opportunity not only to review how information is collected and used, but also to consider whether the overall management framework remains the most effective means of delivering sustainable management of this distinct herring stock.

KEIFCA Industry Consultation

Recognising the challenges associated with the long-term management of the Thames-Blackwater herring fishery, Kent and Essex IFCA (KEIFCA) intends to undertake a targeted consultation with licence holders, fishing industry representatives and other interested stakeholders over the next six months. The purpose of this engagement will be to gather views from those with direct knowledge and experience of the fishery to help inform Defra's consideration of future stock assessment arrangements and potential changes to the current management framework.

The consultation will provide an opportunity for stakeholders to comment on how information on the stock could be collected more effectively in the future, particularly in light of the reduced scale of the fishery, low quota uptake and declining availability of commercial catch data. It will also seek views on whether the existing management measures remain appropriate and proportionate, and whether alternative approaches could deliver equivalent conservation outcomes while reducing regulatory burdens on industry.

Specific topics are expected to include:

- Future approaches to stock assessment and scientific monitoring.
- The continued role and value of the dedicated Thames-Blackwater licensing system.

- The effectiveness of the Drift-Net Regulatory Area and associated restrictions.
- The continued suitability of the current Total Allowable Catch (TAC) arrangements.
- The operation and effectiveness of the KEIFCA byelaws that apply to the fishery, including measures designed to protect spawning fish and spawning habitat.

It is anticipated that the consultation will be run following the next Authority meeting, to which officers intend to present a draft consultation document for discussion and approval. The findings will being used to inform discussions between KEIFCA, Defra, Cefas and industry representatives on the future management of the Thames-Blackwater herring fishery. Any proposals for change would be developed in light of the evidence gathered through this process and would be subject to further consideration and engagement before any decisions are taken.

This consultation will provide an important opportunity to ensure that future management arrangements reflect both the conservation requirements of this unique spring-spawning stock and the practical experience of the fishing communities that have historically depended upon it.

Recommendations:
Members are invited to:

1. **Note** the report and **support** the principle of reviewing future approaches to stock assessment and management for the fishery.

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