



Agenda Item B3

By: Assistant Chief IFCO

To: Kent and Essex Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority – 20 May 2014

Subject: **COCKLE FISHERY MANAGEMENT**

Classification Unrestricted

Summary: To consider management of the 2013 Cockle Fishery

1. THAMES ESTUARY COCKLE FISHERY ORDER 1994

As previously reported the 2013 fishery started on 23 June and finished on 4 October giving a total of 15 weeks fishing. During this period a total of 6160 tonnes were taken from within the area of the Thames Estuary Cockle Fishery Order.

1.1 Spring 2014 Cockle Stock Surveys

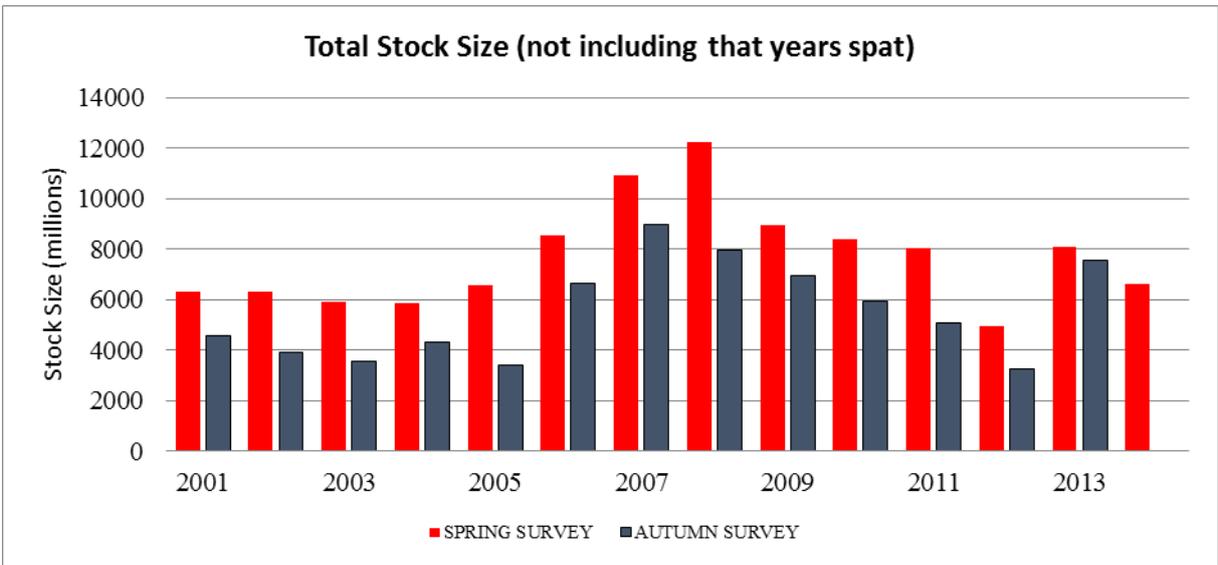
Stock surveys commenced on 2 April over the low ebb spring tides which gave best access to the drying sands that extend out to 3 miles offshore in some sections. At this time of year the cockles are coming into condition for their spring spawning following the winter dormant period. These surveys took a total of 5 days to complete, covering a total area of 55.7 km² (21.3 miles²) with a total of 534 quadrat samples being taken. The surveys were undertaken using the two Honda All Terrain Vehicles for transportation. The surveys were undertaken by the Authority's officers in teams of two. It is necessary to complete surveys during periods of spring tides when the ebb tide leaves the sands dry. This means surveying either at day break or evening. The areas surveyed covered the Foulness and Maplin Sands, which include all of the current major production areas (a chart showing the production areas is attached at Appendix A).

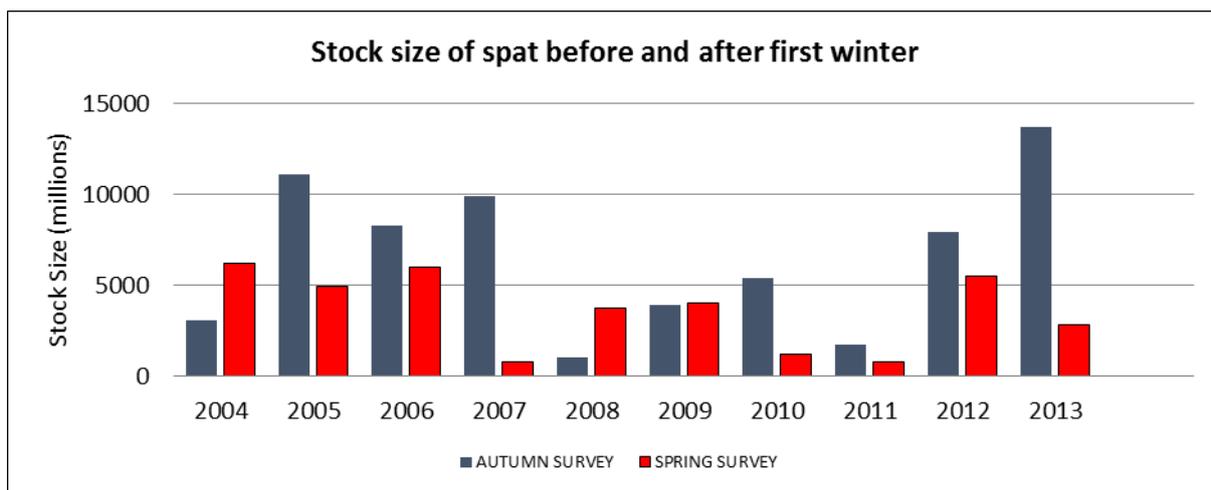
Whilst undertaking these surveys additional samples were collected for Marine Ecological Surveys Ltd that are working for DP World in assessing whether the port dredging has an impact on cockle stocks.

As reported below the Authority’s management of the fishery is subject to an Appropriate Assessment which has been provided to Natural England. This includes details of specified management criteria.

Analysis of this survey data has now been completed. The survey shows that survival has been poor and populations of large adult cockles are small. There are good quantities of the 2012 year class on the grounds, although growth has been poor. The 2013 year class of spat has experienced severe mortalities across the areas surveyed, with only 3% survival in area 6. Due to fishing pressure and low recruitment in those years, the 2011 and 2010 year class cockles are now at a low level, and whilst this is bolstered by the 2012 year class, due to the significant mortality over the 2013/14 winter the recommended TAC is at a similar level to that in 2013.

The graphs below show the latest stock situation.





Surveys of additional cockle grounds beyond the major harvesting areas will be undertaken in June. Initial indications are that they will contribute a slightly lower amount than last year.

Analysis of survey data indicates that the recommended Total Allowable Catch (TAC) that can be taken from the major beds will be 6160 tonnes which is a result of lower biomass and stock size figures for the population than in recent years, and the need to protect the adult year classes and last year's spat fall to attempt to attain good spawning events over the next few years in order to retain the sustainability of the fishery. Recruitment this year will again be a key point in the sustainability of the fishery.

1.2 On 12th May a meeting is to be held with the cockle fishery licence holders. The management of the fishery along with the specific dates of the fishery and number of trips per week will be discussed and reported to the Authority meeting verbally.

1.3 2014 Fishery Management

Following consideration of the previously discussed items I **RECOMMEND** the following management measures. If additional licences are issued it will be necessary to review management allocations.

(a) An initial Total Allowable Catch (TAC) should be set at 6160 tonnes and that further information related to the stocks will need to be continually reviewed throughout the season to ensure future sustainability.

(b) That a further allocation of additional TAC, and therefore extension of the fishing season, may be made in the event of previously unknown or un-surveyed stocks of cockles being located, conversely if by monitoring of catch rates stocks in individual areas are shown to be falling then those areas may have to be closed.

(c) That the Chief IFCO be authorised, after consultation with the Chairman and Vice Chairman, to implement changes to fishing controls within the limitations of the agreed TAC.

(d) That the fishery will commence at 21.00 hrs on 22nd June 2014.

(e) Provisional fishing allocations will be as follows – this is subject to discussions with license holders and will be reported on verbally. This will also be subject to further amendment.

The fishing season will be divided into weekly specified fishing periods which will run from 21.00 hrs on Sunday to 12.00 hrs on Friday and during these periods licence holders will be permitted to make the following specified numbers of landings (Reg. No. 7). This will maximise production when meat yields and quality are at their best.

22nd June – 18th July (5 weeks) 2 specified landings per period

20th July – 3rd October (10 weeks) 3 specified landings per period

(h) The maximum quantity of cockles that may be landed or carried on board will remain at 13.6m³/500 baskets per fishing trip (approx. equivalent 11 tonnes).

(i) As is usual it is recommended that sections of Areas 1, 2 and 3 should be closed at all times during the period June - September inclusive. These areas are defined as inshore sections of Areas 1, 2 and 3 from Two Tree Island at Leigh-on-Sea in the West to The Coastguard Station at Shoeburyness in the East and also within the area of Shoeburyness East Beach. (This closure applies only to the area inside the moorings and where there are no moorings closer to the shore than a distance of 300 metres measured from mean high water mark.)

Note: Within Areas 1 and 2 Southend Borough Council licencing conditions apply.

(j) The Authority is asked to **APPROVE** the above recommendations

1.4 Licence Fees

Operating costs for management of the fishery have been kept to a minimum and it is proposed that licence fees remain at to £4,968 to achieve cost recovery. It is expected that the licence fee will increase next year as their will be an investment in vessel tracking technology (to allow the VMS system to be used most efficiently).

The Authority is asked to **APPROVE** the above recommendation

1.5 Consideration of Issuing Cockle Fishery Licences - Formal Procedure

The Thames Estuary Cockle Fishery Order gives rights to a licence for those that have held licences during the previous 24 months (section 4(8)(b)). The Authority may also issue, subject to directions given by the Minister, licences in such numbers and to such persons as it may determine as defined in section 4 (5) of the Order.

It will be necessary to proceed with the following formal procedure by considering whether to limit the number of licences that will be issued and if so how many and to whom these should be granted.

As required by the Order, consultation has taken place with those likely to be substantially affected by a limitation on the number of licences issued. This consultation was undertaken via a letter sent to persons likely to be substantially affected. Interested parties were made aware that they could provide representation in writing or apply to the Authority to speak to this meeting – 9 written requests for additional licenses were received. These are included in appendix B.

Consideration will need to be given to the level of stocks and future prospects for the fishery.

Last year the Authority resolved that no additional licences would be granted for the 2014 fishery and that licences would only be issued to the existing 14 licence holders.

Under Regulation 48(3) of the Conservation (Natural Habitats) Regulations 1994, Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 the Authority is required to give notice to Natural England (previously English Nature) of intention to issue licences to fish for cockles within designated SSSI, SPA and Ramsar inter-tidal sites. The Authority is also required to submit an "Appropriate Assessment". This assessment includes survey data, fishery monitoring and details of mitigation implemented to ensure that there is no adverse impact upon these sites as a result of the Authority's action. The Appropriate Assessment and formal notification has been provided to Natural England and a response is currently awaited.

Once a decision has been made by the Authority it will be necessary to inform the Minister to allow him to give directions if so decided under Section 4(5) of the Thames Estuary Cockle Fishery Order.

Recommendation –

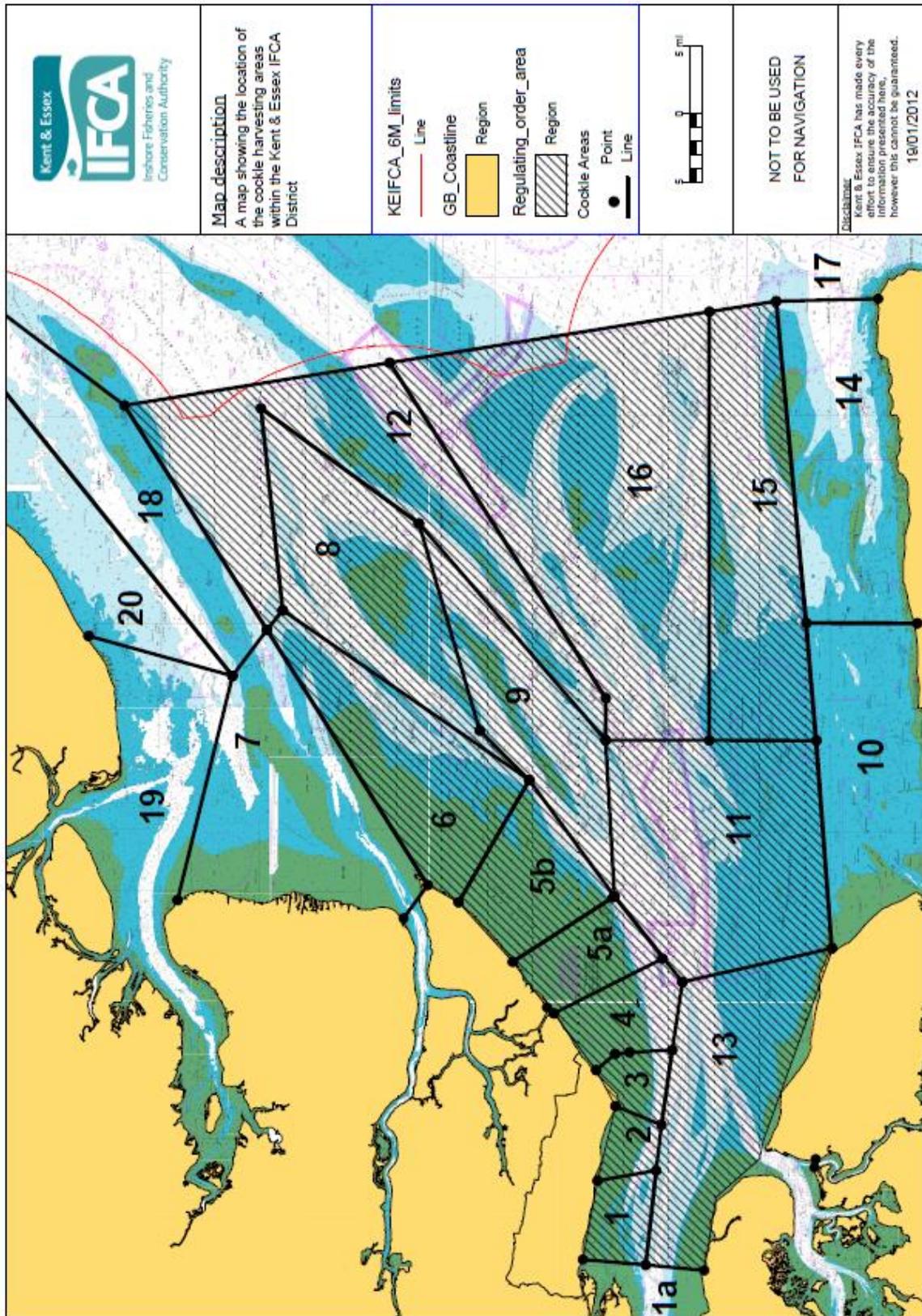
- **Firstly it is recommended that the number of licences should be restricted.**
- **The Regulating Order gives a right, to those that held a licence last year, to be granted a licence for this coming season and therefore those 14 licences should be granted as adequate stocks are available.**
- **The Technical Panel recommends that a precautionary approach should be taken with no additional licences granted for the 2013 fishery.**

2.0 Issue of Permits

As is usual it will be necessary to issue permits to fish for cockles during the coming season. It is likely that under Regulation 48(3) of the Conservation (Natural Habitats) Regulations 1994, Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 the Authority is required to give notice to Natural England of intention to issue permits to fish for cockles within designated SSSI, SPA and Ramsar inter-tidal sites. The Authority is also required to submit an "Appropriate Assessment". This assessment includes survey data, fishery monitoring and details of mitigation implemented to ensure that there is no adverse impact upon these sites as a result of the Authority's action. The Appropriate Assessment and formal notification has been provided to Natural England and a response is currently awaited.

Recommendation – That the Authority APPROVE the issue of permits.

Appendix A to Agenda item B3



A chart showing the cockle production areas within the Kent and Essex IFCA District

Appendix B to Agenda item B3

Responses received for additional licenses