

Agenda item B2

Success Criteria: 2,3,4 and 6

By: Assistant Chief IFCO
To: Kent and Essex IFCA – 21 November 2014
Subject: **Cockle Fishery Management**
Classification: Unrestricted

Summary: To report on management of the fishery during 2014 and survey data

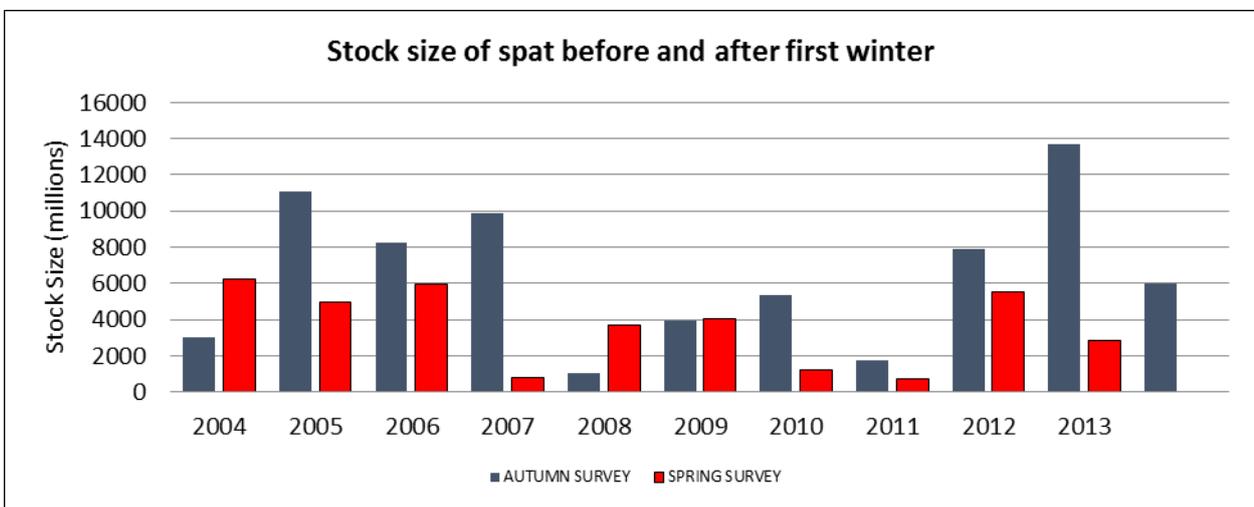
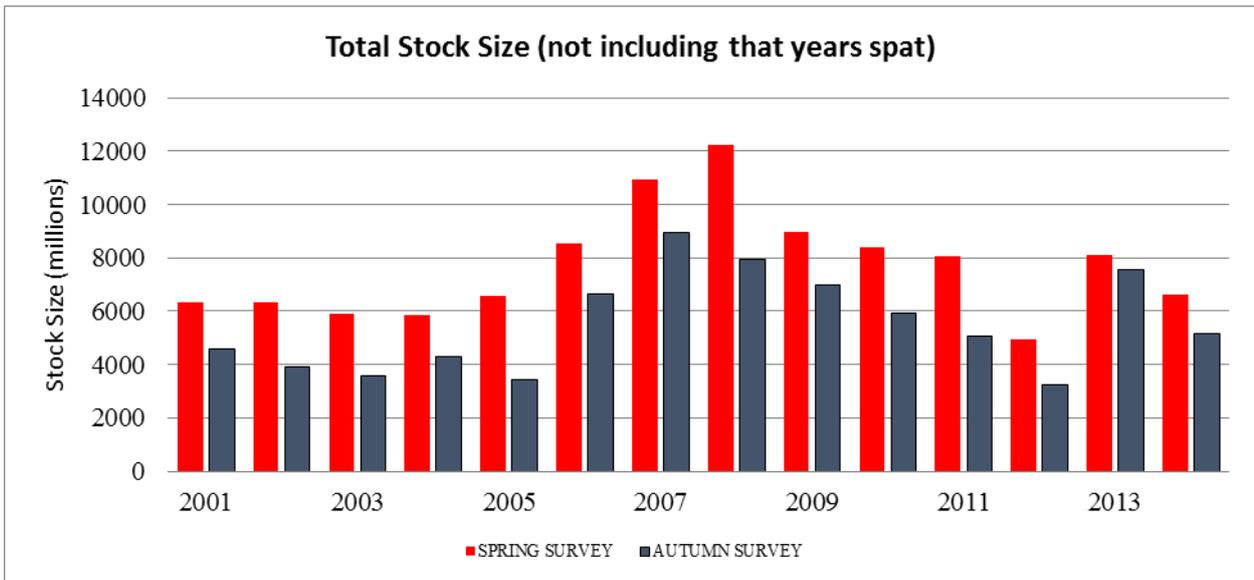
1. Thames Estuary Cockle Fishery Order

The fishery on cockle beds within the area of the Thames Estuary Cockle Fishery Order opened on 22 June 2014. During the first two weeks of the fishery vessels were permitted to make two landings per week, increasing to three landings per week. Licence holders generally reported satisfaction with the three landings per week and felt that it allowed the cockle grounds time to recover through the season. The fishery ended on 26 September 2014 by which time a total allowable catch (TAC) of 6468 tonnes had been taken.

1(a) Cockle Stock Surveys 2014

Cockle stock surveys were completed during September; these showed that total adult stock biomass has increased slightly from last year's level as expected, but that following excellent growth rates throughout the 2014 fishery, the majority of the adult population is now in excess of the minimum landing size of 16mm with few smaller adult cockles than usual. The spat fall was average and this will help continue to balance the cockle populations. However, the fishery and the industry cannot be reliant upon a single year class and so further healthy recruitment in 2015 and beyond is required along with good survival rates through the winter to ensure sustainability in the fishery. Over the 2013/14 winter, significant quantities of spat were lost as a result of bad weather and storm surges. It is hoped that the excellent growth of the 2014 spat will enable them to be in a condition sufficient to better withstand any similar weather patterns over the 2014/15 winter.

The following graphs show population numbers of adult cockles and spat for 2014.



1 (b). Outlook for 2015 fishery

As a result of the large spat falls in recent years and the average spat fall this year found during the September surveys the general outlook is similar to last year provided that the 2014 spat survives the winter period. The outlook for 2015 however is likely to be a slightly higher TAC than in the 2014 fishery as a result of the majority of the adult cockles having reached the minimum landing size of 16mm. Natural mortality can significantly impact upon this outlook and is an important factor in the management of the cockle fishery, especially through the winter period and so a complete overview of the 2015 fishery will be forthcoming following the April surveys in 2015.

2. Cockle Fishery Outside the Area of the Regulating Order

The areas outside of the Regulating Order were surveyed during the summer and it was found that the whilst a good number of the cockles present had reached the minimum landing size of 16mm, there were also significant number on the Essex coast which were between 14-16mm.

KEIFCA have been working on a permitting byelaw to include biosecurity and to modernise the existing management system, however unforeseen regulatory issues arose which would have taken longer to resolve than the time available this year. As a result of this, an emergency byelaw has been made which introduced measures to mitigate against the risk of transferring a mortality causing issue to the Thames from other parts of the country which have experienced atypical mortality events.

Following the Authority's ratification of the emergency byelaw the fishery opened on 5th October 2014. All persons wishing to harvest cockles from this area this year were required to have submitted a completed permit application form no later than 25th August 2014. This enabled KEIFCA Officers to calculate the number of trips and the detail surrounding the logistics of managing the fishery. In addition, new bags were required for each trip.

Prior to the fishery

The management of the fishery fell into two distinct areas, the biosecurity and technical measures inspections prior to the fishery and the duration of the fishery itself. During the week 26th September to 5th October two officers operated in the Wash, two officers inspected vessels in Essex and two officers inspected vessels in Kent. Three further officers provided an additional supporting function carrying out inspections at ports including Lowestoft, Leigh, Wivenhoe, Hullbridge and Whitstable.

During this week all 38 vessels which had applied for a permit had an initial inspection carried out by KEIFCA officers following the procedures laid down in the byelaw and approved by the Authority. Of these vessels, seven failed the inspection primarily based on the deck or fishing gear not being cleaned in a manner which was in compliance with the byelaw. Following the procedures, each of these vessels was required to write to the Chairman asking for a second inspection.

Following discussion with the Chairman and Vice Chairman, these vessels were permitted a second inspection on the understanding that no further inspections would be permitted and if they failed the second inspection they would not be allowed to fish. The seven vessels all passed their second inspections. During this week 217 staff hours were spent by ten officers carrying out these inspections, with some officers working well in excess of their contracted hours.

During the fishery

On the Friday prior to the fishery commencing, concerns were raised by the industry relating to weather conditions during the coming days. Therefore following discussion between the Chief and Assistant Chief Officers with the Chairman and

Vice Chairman, the start of the fishery was moved forward from midnight to 19:00 hours, to allow all vessels to arrive at the grounds in daylight and get a feel for the number of vessels and sea conditions at the site.

During this week, all staff were involved in enforcement of the management measures of the byelaw. The Ken Green, which is usually based in Ramsgate, was transferred (complete with her crew of four officers) to Brightlingsea for the duration of the fishery. The Ken Green then operated in the day enforcing spatial closures and monitoring the fishing vessels and their active fishing time, with Tamesis and her crew of three officers working the night hours through the week with the same tasking. In addition to this, four officers carried out shore patrols across the district in six ports which were landed into by vessels including, Whitstable, Queenborough, Leigh, Brightlingsea, Hullbridge and North Fambridge.

A total of 288 staff hours were spent during this week on the enforcement of cockle fishery management measures. Sixty two landing inspections were carried out by shore officers and vessel crews carried out three landing inspections by boarding those vessels as they were landing their catches. Seventy eight records of sightings of cockle vessels working are recorded in the patrol vessel logs.

As can be seen by the total figure of 505 staff hours between 26th September to 10th October, all of the officers worked extremely hard during these two weeks, far in excess of what would normally be asked of them. In addition to the officers, our Administration Assistant (who can normally be found in our Ramsgate Office) also accompanied officers during the week of the fishery and assisted in inspections of vessels landing into Brightlingsea. The output of all of this effort was that officers effectively enforced all of the management measures employed within the fishery, including the new biosecurity measures contained within the emergency byelaw to ensure that the mitigation which the Authority had requested against mortality issues was upheld.

Most vessels completed their trips by the Wednesday however some vessels were still working on the Friday as a result of mechanical issues. A total of 699 tonnes of cockles were landed during this week with the majority of vessels completing both of their allocated trips of 13.6m³ despite the very poor weather conditions which prevailed throughout the fishery.

The new flexible permit byelaw is currently going through statutory process and subject to consultation responses will be in place for next year's fishery. Stock assessment surveys to inform the Authority's discussion relating to the opening of these beds in 2015 will be completed in April.

3. Management of Cockle Beds 2015 - Outside the Area of the Thames Estuary Cockle Fishery Order - Closure of Beds Byelaw

It is intended that cockle fishery management will be implemented under the new flexible permit byelaw, subject to consultation and statutory process. However, for the present, the existing legal process for the current byelaw must be complied with.

It is proposed that in accordance with the above-mentioned byelaw all beds will be closed for the whole year with the exception of specified periods in specified areas.

It is proposed that no specified fishing periods will be allocated during the period midnight on 31 December 2014 to midnight on 30 July 2015 and midnight on 31 October 2015 to midnight on 31 December 2015. This measure will protect remaining stocks at a time of year when meat yields are low and initial spawning is taking place. The measures will also give some protection to juvenile cockles on the grounds.

It is also proposed that a final decision on the detailed opening of beds for the period commencing midnight on 31 July 2015 and ending midnight on 31 October 2015 will be made after Spring/Summer surveys have been completed.

Surveys of cockle stocks and monitoring of exploratory fishing activity in areas outside the Thames Estuary Cockle Fishery Order during 2014 indicated modest stocks of adult cockles and some good recruitment in certain areas.

It will be necessary to monitor the growth of these cockles during the coming year. If the majority of cockles within defined areas grow to above the minimum size, population densities are above the Authority's Stock Management Criteria Guidelines and dependent upon progress made regarding mortality issues beds will be opened.

As required under this byelaw, all permit holders have been informed of these proposals and have been invited to submit any comments that they may wish the Authority to take into account when considering this matter. All responses received will be reported on the day of the meeting.

Notice of Proposed Closure:

Cockle Fishery – Closure of Beds Byelaw

The Kent and Essex Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority gives notice that the whole of its District, outside the area of the Thames Estuary Cockle Fishery Order 1994, will be closed to fishing for cockles for the period commencing at midnight on 31 December 2014 and ending at midnight on 31 December 2015 with the exception of specified periods in specified areas.

A list of specified periods and areas, authorising the taking of cockles, subject to the conditions of the byelaws, will be provided to each permit holder.

Members are asked to **CONSIDER** comments received and **APPROVE** cockle bed management as specified above.