



Agenda item B3

Success Criteria: 2, 3, 4 & 6

By: Lead Scientific and Conservation Officer
To: Kent and Essex IFCA – 24th November 2015
Subject: **Cockle Fishery Management**
Classification: Unrestricted

Summary: Report of cockle fishery management and survey data during 2015

1. Thames Estuary Cockle Fishery Order

The cockle fishery within the area of the Thames Estuary Cockle Fishery Order (TECFO) opened between 14th June and 16th October 2015. At the last Authority meeting on 4th September 2015, the Authority approved the following fishing trips allocation (amended from the original plan approved on 19th May):

Proposed Specified Landings per Specified Fishing Period

14th June – 19th June (1 week) 2 specified landings per period
21st June – 3rd July (2 weeks) NO SPECIFIED LANDINGS
5th July – 10th July (1 week) 2 specified landings per period
12th July – 23rd October (15 weeks) 3 specified landings per period

During the first week of the fishery, vessels were permitted to make two landings. However, due to concerns over reported low meat yields, it was decided to close the fishery for two weeks to allow cockle growth rates to increase before harvesting. The fishery re-opened on 5th July with two landings permitted per vessel in that week. Following the closure, industry reported that meat yields had increased but were still below average. Permitted landings increased to 3 per week the following week.

The September cockle survey revealed very low spat fall and this was also observed by licence holders. Due to this and the poor growth rates observed, discussions were held with licence holders and it was decided to reduce the fishing allocations in an attempt to protect stock for future years. Following consultation between the Chairman, the Vice Chairman and the Chief Officer a letter was sent to licence holders detailing these changes on 25th September. The permitted landings over the

whole season per vessel were therefore reduced from 50 to 43 and the following fishing allocation occurred:

Actual Landings per Specified Fishing Period

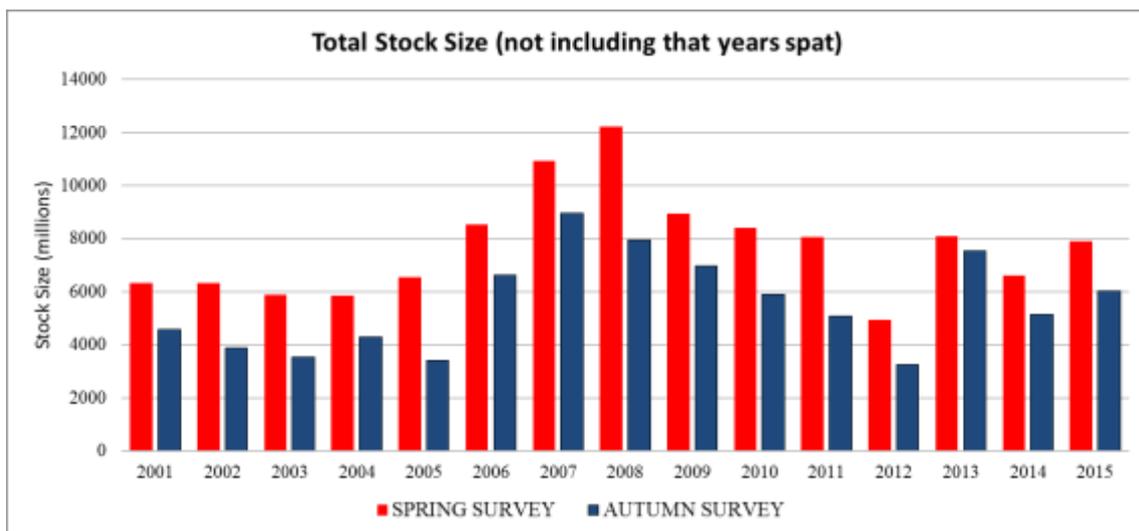
- 14th June – 19th June (1 week) 2 specified landings per week
- 21st June – 3rd July (2 weeks) NO SPECIFIED LANDINGS
- 5th July – 10th July (1 week) 2 specified landings per week
- 12th July – 25th September (11 weeks) 3 specified landings per week
- 27th September – 16th October (3 weeks) 2 specified landings per week

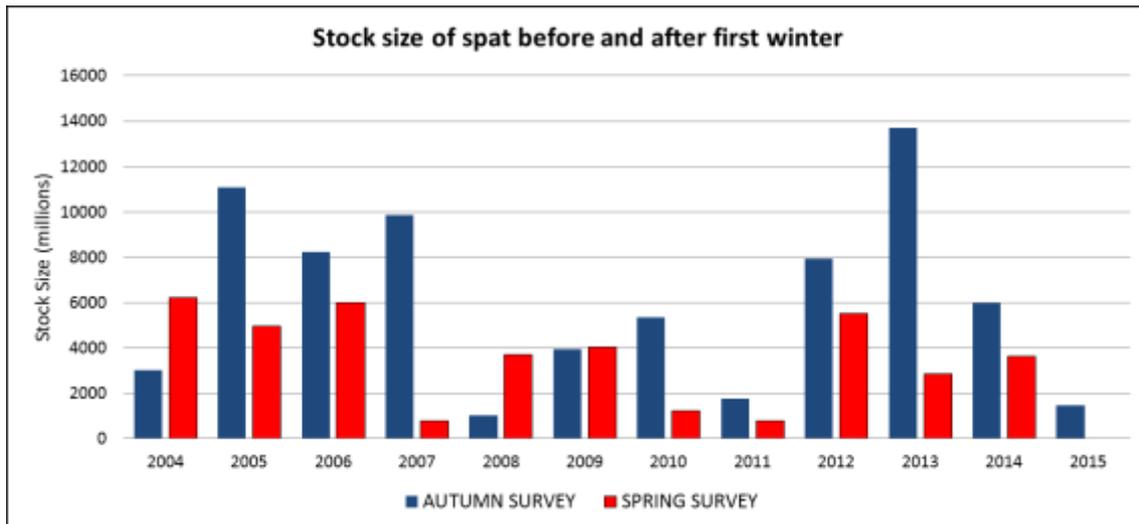
Catches of the maximum of 13.6m³ were made by most vessels each trip and weather conditions were generally good. The initial proposed total allowable catch (TAC) of 7700 tonnes was reduced to 6622 tonnes due to the factors discussed above.

1(a) Cockle Stock Surveys 2015

Cockle stock surveys were completed from 12th to 16th September for the main cockle harvesting areas within the TECFO on the Maplin and Foulness sands. The number of adult cockles was slightly higher than last year, however the average weight of each year class of cockle was lower than in previous years resulting in a reduced overall biomass. The lower growth rates that resulted in the lower average weight may be attributable to lower temperatures earlier in the year and a delay in the growth of cockles. This slower and possibly delayed growth of cockles appears to have reduced reproduction of the cockles with the lowest amount of spat observed since 2008.

The following graphs show population numbers of adult cockles and spat for 2015 compared to earlier years.





1 (b). Outlook for 2016 fishery and beyond

The low spat fall observed this year may be due to a delay in spawning and the amount of spat may be found to have increased during the April 2016 survey. However, autumn spat growth rates would have to be high and winter weather conditions mild and delayed for any late spat fall to survive over winter. Given this, it is likely that the 2016/17 fisheries will be impacted upon unless spat fall increases this year.

Given the slow growth rates this year and the lower than expected biomass it is expected that the TAC for 2016 may be lower than in 2015. Natural mortality, especially over winter will be a significant factor in the cockle fishery management. A mild winter and late autumn growth may improve the outlook and a more accurate assessment of the harvestable stock will be made following the spring stock assessment.

Members are asked to **CONSIDER** this report and **APPROVE** the management as specified above.