

By: Assistant Chief IFCO

To: Kent & Essex Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority –
23 May 2017

Subject: **PERMITTED COCKLE FISHERY MANAGEMENT**

Classification: Unrestricted

Summary:

This report provides a summary of the spring 2017 cockle stock assessment surveys. Resulting recommendations on the management of the 2017 permitted cockle fishery outside the Thames Estuary Fishery Order area are included in this report.

Recommendation:

That the Authority **APPROVE** management measures to open the cockle beds in Area 7 for a total of 1 trip per permitted vessel of a maximum landed volume of 13.6m³.

1. Permitted Cockle Fishery 2016

In May 2016, as in 2015, the Authority decided not to open the permitted cockle fishery due to limited biomass and stock size reported from the spring surveys, therefore no permits were issued.

2. Cockle Fishery Flexible Permit Byelaw

The process for the management of this fishery each year is that anyone wishing to apply for a permit is required to apply by 31 March in that year and all stock assessment surveys will be completed before the May Authority meeting. This ensures that the Authority can be presented with a complete picture of the fishery, including the amount of stock available and the number of vessels wishing to work it.

2.1 Appropriate Assessment

The Authority is required 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 to give notice to Natural England of intention to issue permits to fish for cockles within designated SSSI, SAC, SPA and Ramsar inter-tidal sites. The Authority is also required to submit a Habitat Regulations Assessment to Natural England which assess the impact if any of the fishery on protected features of European Marine Sites. 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. A test of likely significant effect has been completed on the recommended management of the 2017 fishery, i.e. that the permitted cockle fishery does not open, and this has been submitted to Natural England. If the authority decides to open the fishery, a further assessment will need to be completed and approved by Natural England.

2.2 Number of Permit Applications

In 2015 the number of permit applications was 42 (40 category one and 2 category two). In 2016, 37 category one permits were applied for, which permit the taking of 13.6 m³ cockles per trip and there were no applications for a category two permit, which permit 6.8 m³ cockles to be taken per trip.

For 2017, 35 category one permits have been applied for. This is similar to the number of permits issued last time the fishery was open in 2014.

2.3 Spring 2017 Cockle Stock Surveys

2.3.1. Method and survey area

Stock surveys of the area outside the TECFO commenced on 3rd April 2017 and the main outside area beds were completed by 10th May 2017. 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 14 survey days to complete using Day grabs deployed from both Tamesis and Nerissa, covering a total area of 54.5 km² (21.0 miles²) with a total of 456 grab samples being taken. The areas surveyed covered the Buxey, Ray and Dengie Sands, Minnis Bay, Leysdown and Pegwell Bay, which include all of the current main production areas outside of the TECFO (a chart showing the production areas is attached in Appendix A).

2.3.2. Results

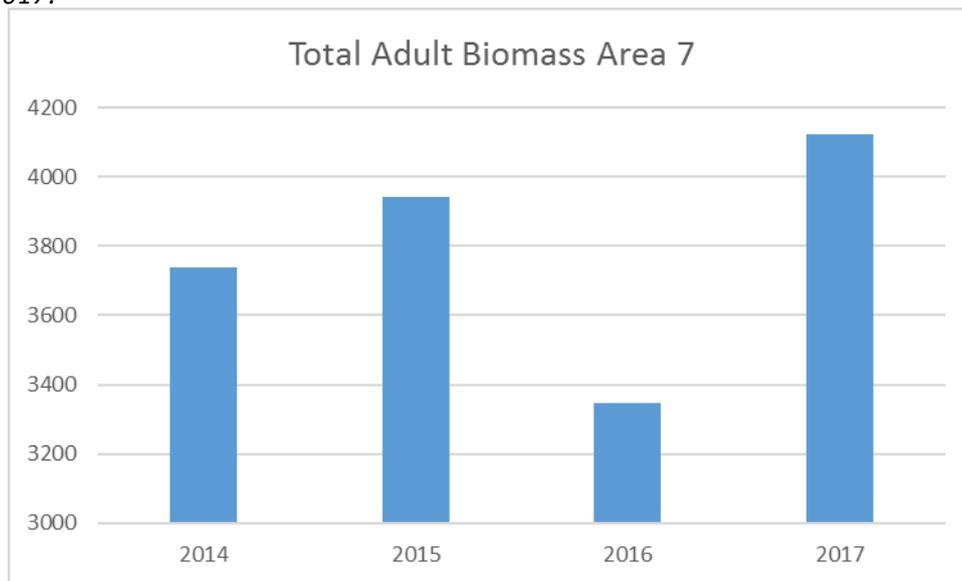
The main harvesting areas outside the TECFO are in area 7 and data from the spring 2017 survey were compared with data from 2015 and 2014 to analyse trends in the three cockle beds in this area. All three beds within Area 7 have shown an increase in the number of adult cockles as well as total number of cockles since 2016.

The total adult biomass is now higher than it has been since last time the fishery was opened in 2014. The number of >16mm cockles has also increased significantly compared to last year, in addition only around 50% of the adult

cockles have reached the 16mm required as a minimum size, with the remainder being <16mm which will grow on for future fisheries.

As is usual, the Buxey Sand and Ray Sand beds contain the majority of the available adult stock, although all three beds have shown an increase, the Buxey very notably. Other areas in the permitted cockle fishery area had very few cockles as has been observed in previous years.

Fig. 1: Biomass of cockles aged 1 year and older on the Ray, Dengie and Buxey cockles beds from 2014 to 2017.



2.4 2017 Fishery Management

The survey shows that as in recent years, the Ray, Dengie and Buxey Sands are the most productive beds and that the other areas contain very few cockles suitable for commercial harvesting. The recommended maximum Total Allowable Catch (TAC) of >16mm cockles that can be taken from the beds in Area 7 is 482 tonnes. This figure is greater than the 350 tonnes provided for in the Permitted Fishery Management Plan. This figure divided by the total number of vessels which have applied for a permit (35) would result in one fishing trip for each vessel.

The regulatory landscape has changed significantly since the fishery was last opened in 2014. This is as a result of the spatial location of the fishery, located as it is within the boundary of the Essex Estuaries SAC and the Blackwater, Crouch, Roach and Colne Estuaries MCZ. Area 7 contains, as well as the cockle beds, a notable Native Oyster population which is protected under the Shellfish Beds byelaw and is the subject of additional proposed management. In addition, trawling has been prohibited in areas within the Essex Estuaries SAC immediately adjacent to these beds. As a result, making conservative decisions regarding this fishery would seem prudent, especially since the last opening of the fishery led to a 2 year closure.

A time-limited, trip-limited fishery would seem to be a suitable approach to beginning to re-establish this fishery within the new legislative landscape of the mid-Essex coast. This also allows an accurate assessment to be carried out on the impacts of the large fleet which wish to operate in this fishery. The provisions listed below are intended to enable the fishery to operate in a time-efficient manner whilst reducing the impact of the fleet upon the ground and reducing fishing mortality as much as possible.

Fishing allocations

The fishery will occur in the week following the last week of the TECFO 1994 cockle fishery which is provisionally set to close on 29th September 2017. The fishery will open on Tuesday 3rd October 2017 and will close on Thursday 5th October. Fishing will be permitted between 0900 on the Tuesday until 1200 on the Thursday. Vessels will be permitted to undertake one trip only.

Vessel Checks

Each vessel and its cockle gear will be cleaned of all cockle debris including the hold, deck and all spaces that may hold cockles. The pumps, pipes, dredges and riddles on each vessel would also be cleaned. This would involve washing with a fresh water pressure washer and scrubbing each part, the vessel and gear would then be allowed to dry. The vessel would then be submitted for inspection.

Vessel owners would be required to contact the KEIFCA office to book a time and date for inspection. All vessels would be inspected in the week prior to the fishery with KEIFCA officers travelling to the most recent working port of each vessel to check the vessel decks and holds are clean and where the pumps and pipes would be flushed through with sea water for an appropriate period of time.

Each vessel taking part in the fishery will be inspected against the requirements of the Flexible Permit Byelaw and the biosecurity plan. If any vessel fails, its inspection then it may not take part in the fishery. In an extreme situation, the permit holder can write to the Chairman and Vice Chairman to appeal the decision, explaining the extenuating circumstances that led to the inspection failure. In such circumstances, it would be at the Chairman and Vice Chairman's discretion for a second inspection to be undertaken. If this inspection fails an inspection certificate will not be issued and the vessel will not be allowed to enter the fishery. If the vessel passes it will be issued with an inspection certificate. After the fishery opens officers would not be able to inspect any more vessels.

Bag inspections

Any cockles which are landed to be transported outside of the KEIFCA district for processing must be landed in bags. The requirements for the inspection of cockle bags are prescribed within the Flexible Permit Byelaw and must either be new bags or cleaned and disinfected using a prescribed process developed in conjunction with CEFAS. The cockle bags will be inspected by the KEIFCA officer during the biosecurity inspection.

Location of vessels

KEIFCA patrol vessels will be at sea throughout the period of the fishery ensuring that vessels only fish within the open areas and to monitor damage and catch rates.

Fishing vessels will be required to give notice to the cockle line upon leaving port providing information on which area they intend to fish in, and will also be required to give notice to the cockle line 2 hours before landing.

2.5 Outlook for 2018 and beyond

There are large numbers of adult cockles below 16mm at some survey points in Area 7 and depending on growth rates over the next year, these cockles may be of harvestable size in 2018. Fishery mortality as well as winter mortality over the 2017/18 winter will be crucial factors in this.

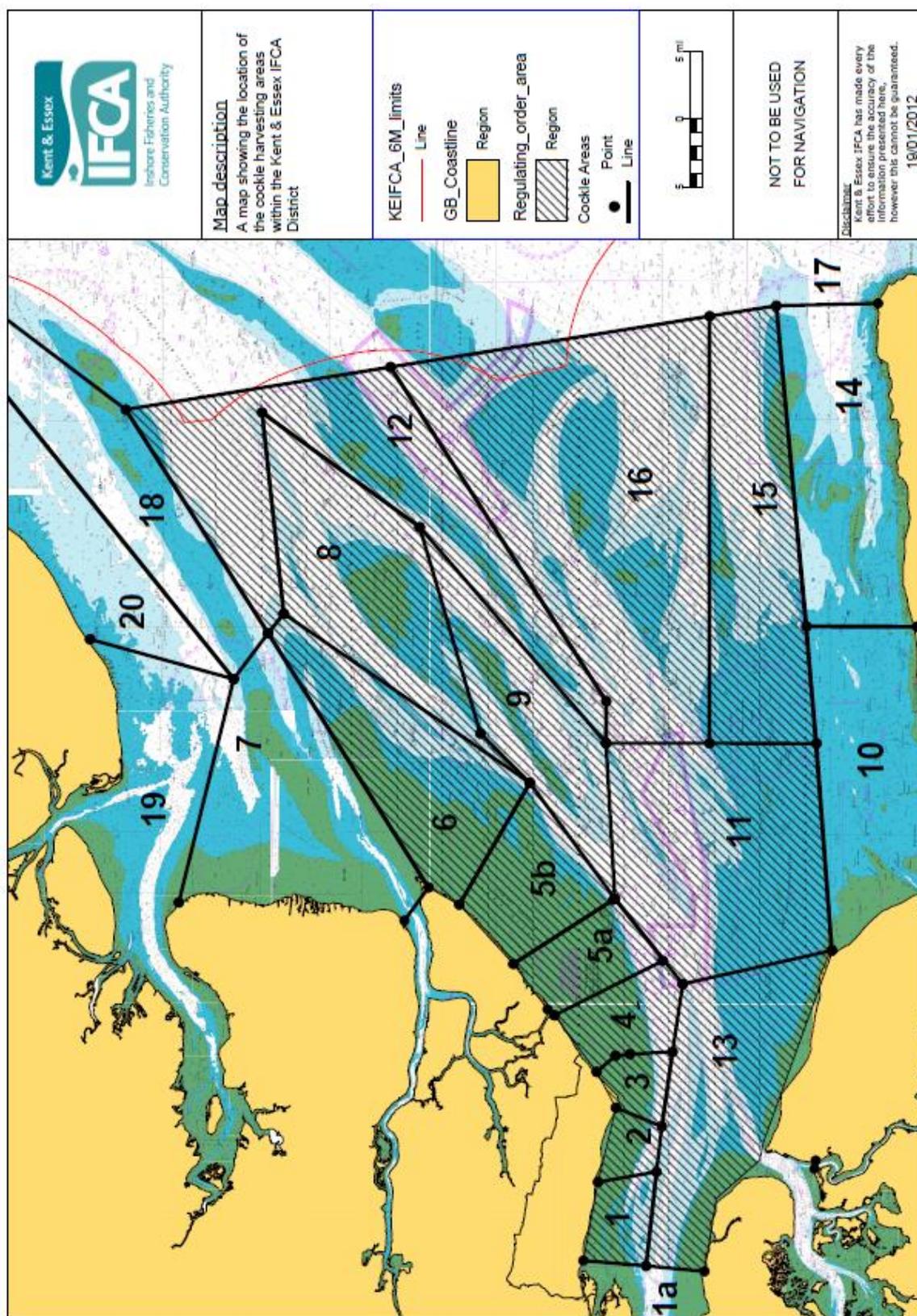
Financial Implications:

None identified in relation to agreed budget headings.

Recommendation:

That the Authority **APPROVE** management measures to open the cockle beds in Area 7 for a total of 1 trip per permitted vessel of a maximum landed volume of 13.6m³.

Appendix A to agenda item B6



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