

By: Assistant Chief IFCO

To: Kent and Essex Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority – 15 September 2017

Subject: **Cockle Fishery update**

Classification Unrestricted

Summary:

This report provides Members with an update on the 2017 Thames Estuary cockle fishery and the progress made towards opening the Permitted Cockle Fishery

Recommendations:

Members are asked to **APPROVE** the actions of Officers in:

1. The management of the 2017 TECFO fishery; and
2. The management of the Flexible Byelaw Permit Cockle Fishery

Background:

The TECFO hydraulic dredge cockle fishery was opened by the Authority on 10th July 2017. Prior to the opening of the fishery, yield checks from each area were carried out by a vessel, processor and a KEIFCA officer. The proceeds from the sale of the cockles collected for yield checks were donated by the processor and fishermen to the Fishermen's Mission. These yield checks agreed with the results of the Authority survey and resulted in a delayed start to the fishery.

Catch rates have generally been poor throughout the season with yields also down on recent years. As reported at the last Authority meeting, there are significant numbers of 2016 cockles on the ground. However, growth has been poor and vessels are mainly still working on 2015+ cockles. Catches of the maximum of 13.6 m³ or approximately 11 tonnes were made by most vessels each trip and weather conditions have been good. There are reports from the industry regarding the presence of cockle spat (young cockles) on the grounds however, not in the quantities seen last year. The presence and extent of spat will be confirmed during the September surveys.

Total Allowable Catch for 2017 TECFO Fishery

It was agreed at the last meeting that a provisional total allowable catch (TAC) of 4053 tonnes would be allocated and that any increases or changes would be subject to survey results and discussions with license holders showing that stocks were available in other areas and that growth was good.

Prior to the start of the season, there were some changes made, as notified to Members. This was as the result of the Authority receiving a letter signed by all 14 vessel skippers agreeing to abide by certain voluntary measures in order to be able to have more flexibility on the areas worked due to working within Shoeburyness Range boundaries.

At the start of the season, vessels began working in Area 8, East Barrow Sand. Catches in this area were generally good and the ground continued to support the fleet for several weeks. During August, another quantity of cockles was found in Area 1, just off Leigh-on-Sea. Both of these sites were producing cockles of better quality than the main beds of Area 4, 5 and 6. The main beds started to be fished at the start of September, although catch rates remain low and many of the licence holders are frustrated by these catches.

The allocation of fishing trips has changed since that agreed by the Authority as a result of discussions with the industry. These initially concluded that delaying the start of the fishery so that cockles would have time to grow would be beneficial. This resulted in a 4 week period of 3 trips being planned in the middle of the season when yields should have been at their peak. However, further discussions with licence holders a few weeks into the fishery then concluded that increasing to 3 trips per week was not advisable, and that at the current catch rates, 2 trips per week would work better logistically and would be beneficial to the ground by reducing the intensity of impact.

The number of trips has remained the same, and discussions are ongoing with the industry on a weekly basis to react flexibly to fishing catch rates and damage rates. Additional damage rate and catch rate checks are being carried out by officers. The cockle fishing season is due to end on 29th September in order to allow the opening of the permitted cockle fishery outside of the TECFO the following week. It is likely that fishing activities will be resumed on the TECFO from 9th to 20th October, for two more weeks, in order to allow the full TAC to be taken. This may change if catch rates increase dramatically as 2016 cockles come up to minimum size. However, officers and the industry are agreed in their aim to ensure the sustainability of the fishery and to work towards a better year in 2018.

Specified Landings per Specified Fishing Period

10 th July – 29 th September (12 weeks)	2 specified landings per period
9 th October – 20 th October (2 weeks)	2 specified landings per period

Flexible Permit Byelaw Cockle Fishery

As approved at the last Authority meeting, the outside cockle fishery is to open this year at the start of October. As this will be the first time that this fishery has opened for three years, and because it will be the first time under this byelaw, KEIFCA officers have been working closely with industry to ensure it runs smoothly. Officers went up to the Wash in August to carry out some preliminary checks on gear, prior to the full biosecurity checks in September. Full biosecurity checks for all vessels will be completed by the end of September, with most been completed between 25th and 29th, prior to vessels travelling to the District ahead of the fishery.

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2. The management of the Flexible Byelaw Permit Cockle Fishery