



Agenda Item No. B3

By: Lead Scientific and Conservation Officer
To: Kent and Essex IFCA – 30 November 2017
Subject: **2017 Cockle Fishery Management**
Classification: Unrestricted

Summary:

This paper will provide Members with a summary of the cockle fishery management for 2017 for both the Thames Estuary Cockle Fishery Order (TECFO) 1994 and the Permitted Cockle Fishery (chart of fisheries attached).

Recommendations:

Members are asked to **NOTE** this report

Background:

1. Thames Estuary Cockle Fishery Order

The cockle fishery within the area of the Thames Estuary Cockle Fishery Order opened between 10 July 2017 and 20 October 2017. At the Authority meeting on 15 September 2017, the Authority approved the following amended fishing trips allocation:

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

Catches of the maximum of 13.6 m³ were made by most vessels each trip and weather conditions were generally good. The total allowable catch (TAC) of 4053

tonnes that was agreed by the Authority in May 2017 was maintained for the season.

Industry reported low meat yields and poor growth throughout the season.

The vessel monitoring system (VMS+), was used for monitoring and enforcement of the fishery in 2017 and analysis of these data will be used for subsequent Habitat Regulations Assessments of the cockle fishery which are required for the opening of the fishery.

1(a) Cockle Stock Surveys 2017

Cockle stock surveys were completed between 6 and 9 September 2017 for the main cockle harvesting areas within the TECFO on the Maplin and Foulness sands. Last year's spatfall has significantly increased the number of adult cockles on the grounds as seen in Fig. 1 with the stock size going into the winter being the highest since 2008.

Whilst only one spatfall was indicated this year, the size of that spatfall appears to be very good. Whilst not as large as last year's exceptional spatfall or the spatfall of 2013 which was lost to winter storms, it is the largest 'normal' spatfall since 2005.

During 2017 the growth rates of cockles was very poor and condition was low throughout. This could lead to a higher than average mortality through the winter, however much will depend upon the severity of the winter weather and how the cockle stocks survive.

The following graphs show population numbers of adult cockles and spat for 2017 compared to earlier years.

Fig. 1: Adult cockle stock size in Spring and Autumn from 2001 to 2017

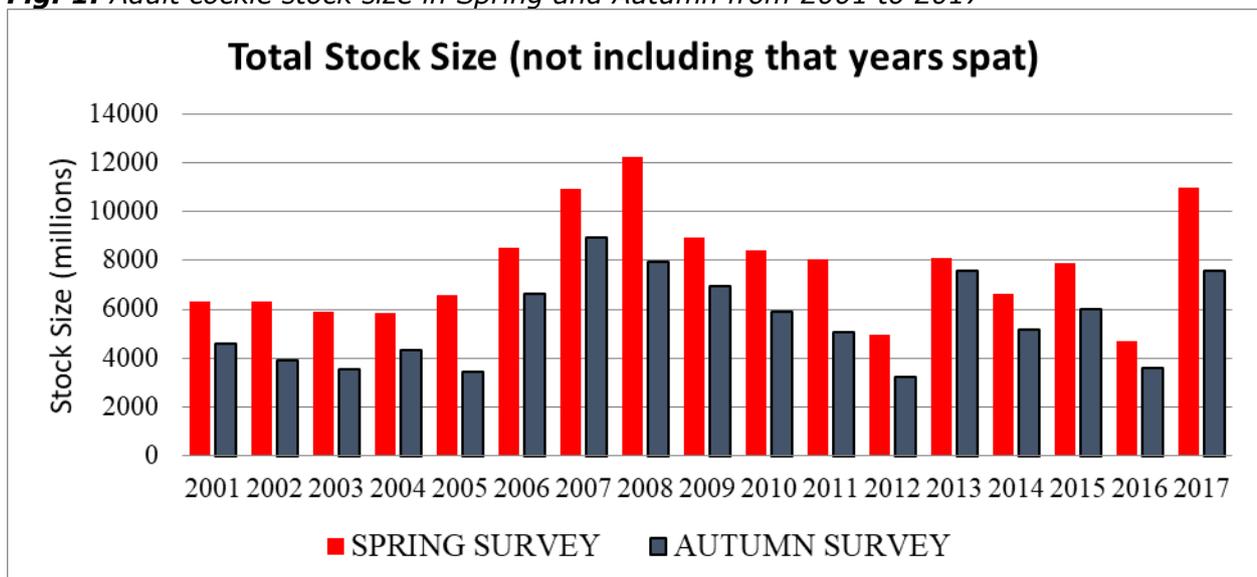
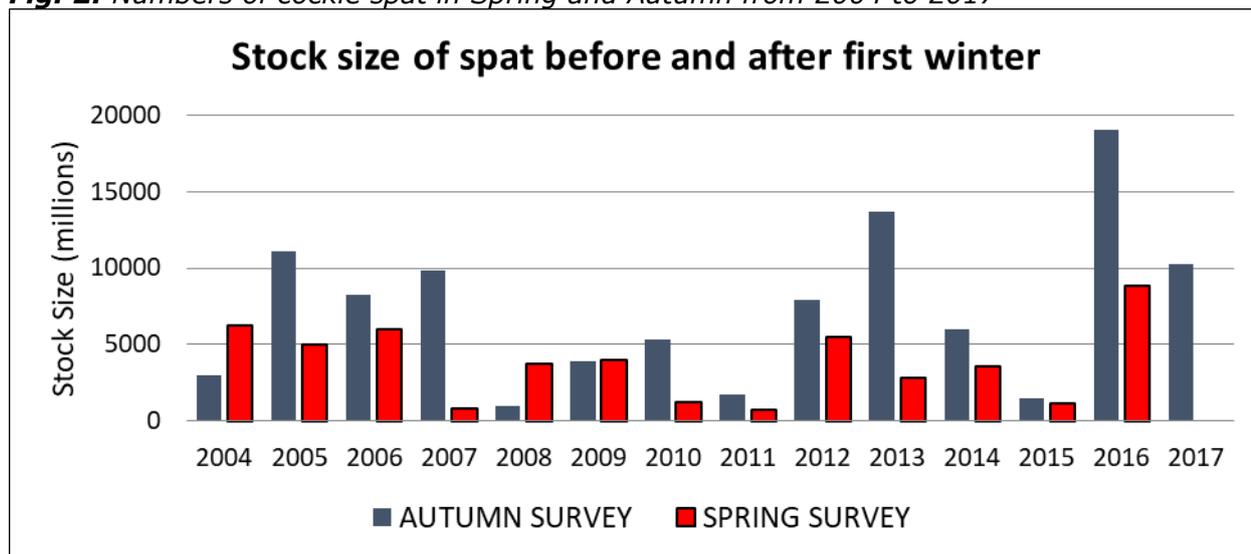


Fig. 2: Numbers of cockle spat in Spring and Autumn from 2004 to 2017



1 (b). Outlook for 2017 fishery and beyond

There is a good outlook for the fishery in the next two years, provided that the cockles which were left on the grounds at the end of the fishery survive the winter and experience good growth rates in spring 2018. Weather and predation will be important factors in the winter survival and the spring cockle survey will assess survival rates and stock available for the 2018 fishery.

2. Permitted Cockle Fishery (outside of the TECFO 1994)

The areas outside of the Regulating Order were surveyed during the spring and it was found that 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.

In 2015 a new byelaw to replace the old suite of byelaws used to manage the permitted cockle fishery was made. As a result of the successful surveys in the spring, the fishery was opened on 3 October 2017.

Prior to the fishery opening 35 permits had been applied for by the 31 March 2017 deadline as specified in the byelaw and as approved at the 23 May 2017 meeting a total TAC of 482 tonnes was set.

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. At the end of August, two officers travelled up to the Wash to ensure that vessels not based in the District were aware of the upcoming fishery and to ensure that gear technical restrictions were being considered by any vessels which needed to make any changes.

During the period 18 September to 29 September vessels both in the KEIFCA district and up in the Wash were visited on multiple occasions in order for

biosecurity inspections to be carried out. During this period all 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.

All vessels which were inspected passed the biosecurity inspections. A number of vessels in the Wash elected not to have any inspections carried out and stated they intended not to travel down for the fishery due to only being allocated one fishing trip.

During the fishery

On the Friday prior to the fishery commencing, the vessels visiting from the Wash arrived at their temporary home port of Brightlingsea, Essex. It became clear at this stage that only the inspected vessels were travelling down and that not all of the permit holders would be taking part in the fishery. Of the 35 permits issued, 25 actively took part in the fishery. Some permit holders approached officers in order to try and increase the trip allocation in light of the reduced number of vessels taking part, however it was explained that there were not sufficient missing vessels to increase the number of trips per vessel.

During this week, all staff were involved in enforcement of the management measures of the byelaw. Nerissa 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 with the same tasking. In addition to this, four officers carried out shore patrols across the district in five ports which were landed into by vessels including, Whitstable, Queenborough, Leigh, Brightlingsea and Paglesham. The output of this effort was that officers effectively enforced all of the management measures employed within the fishery.

The fishery opened with restricted opening times of 9am Tuesday 3 October until 12pm Thursday 5 October. Most vessels completed their trips by the Wednesday however some vessels were still working on the Thursday morning as a result of mechanical issues. A total of 300 tonnes of cockles were landed during this week with the majority of vessels taking their full allocation of 13.6m3.

3. Management of Cockle Beds 2018 – Permitted Cockle Fishery

It is proposed that a decision on the detailed opening of beds for 2018 will be made after Spring surveys have been completed.

Surveys of cockle stocks and monitoring of exploratory fishing activity in areas outside the Thames Estuary Cockle Fishery Order during 2017 indicated modest stocks of adult cockles and some good recruitment in certain areas including in areas other than that fished this year.

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 or population densities are above the Authority's Stock Management Criteria Guidelines beds will be opened.

3. Manila clam stocks

During both cockle fisheries, fishermen reported catches of manila clams mixed in with cockles in greater numbers than previously found. These clams were generally found on the same beds as the cockles and although sometimes separate from the cockles, were often found mixed together.

Following the completion of the cockle fisheries, several members of the Industry contacted officers to enquire about harvesting them. Officers have been in touch with Natural England regarding this and Natural England have provided formal advice to confirm that prior to any harvesting of manila clams, a full Habitats Regulations Assessment would be required.

At the present time, harvesting of these clams is prohibited under the cockle legislation (both the Thames Estuary Cockle Fishery Order and the Cockle Fishery Flexible Permit Byelaw), as both pieces of legislation prohibit 'disturbance' of cockles when the fisheries are not open. Given that the manila clams are found on the same beds as the cockles, harvesting of one is not possible without disturbance of the other. In addition, the cockle beds within the KEIFCA district are not classified under the Shellfish Waters legislation for harvesting of manila clams at this time.

Officers have started to carry out some exploratory surveys of the manila clams to provide information on their location, density and population size. Officers will, in the coming months, be working with Industry to identify beds and test suitable survey methodologies for any stocks found.

Recommendations:

Members are asked to **NOTE** this report

