



Inshore Fisheries and
Conservation Authority

Agenda Item No. B6

By: Lead Scientific and Conservation Officer
To: Kent and Essex IFCA – 30 November 2018
Subject: **2018 Cockle Fishery Management**
Classification: Unrestricted

Summary:

This paper will provide Members with a summary of the cockle fishery management for 2018 for both the Thames Estuary Cockle Fishery Order (TECFO) 1994 and the Permitted Cockle Fishery (chart of fisheries attached).

Recommendations:

- i. Members are asked to **NOTE** this report
- ii. To **APPROVE** the invitation of all permit holders to the May Authority meeting
- iii. To **APPROVE** the provision of legal advice related to cockle TAC allocation in the permitted fishery

Background:

1. Thames Estuary Cockle Fishery Order

The cockle fishery within the area of the Thames Estuary Cockle Fishery Order opened between 17 July 2018 and 28 September 2018. At the Authority meeting on 14 September 2018, the Authority approved the following amended fishing trips allocation:

Landings per Specified Fishing Period

17th June – 28th June (2 weeks)	2 specified landings per period
1st July – 7th September (10 weeks)	3 specified landings per period
10th September – 14th September (1 week)	3 specified landings per period (with 1 trip in area 6)

17th September – 28th September (2 weeks)

3 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 5390 tonnes that was agreed by the Authority in May 2018 was increased to 6622 tonnes in line with the management flexibility permitted by the Authority.

Industry reported variable meat yields but excellent catch rates especially at the start of the season. Growth however was relatively slow until very close to the end of the season, which was suggested by both industry and officers to be related to the extremely high temperatures experienced this summer. Towards the end of the season, growth of adult cockles increased markedly.

The vessel monitoring system (VMS+), was used again for monitoring and enforcement of the fishery in 2018 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 2018

Cockle stock surveys were completed between 10 and 13 September 2018 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 seen in the last 16 years.

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 2018 the growth rates of cockles was poor once again. 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 2018 compared to earlier years.

Fig. 1: Adult cockle stock size in Spring and Autumn from 2002 to 2018

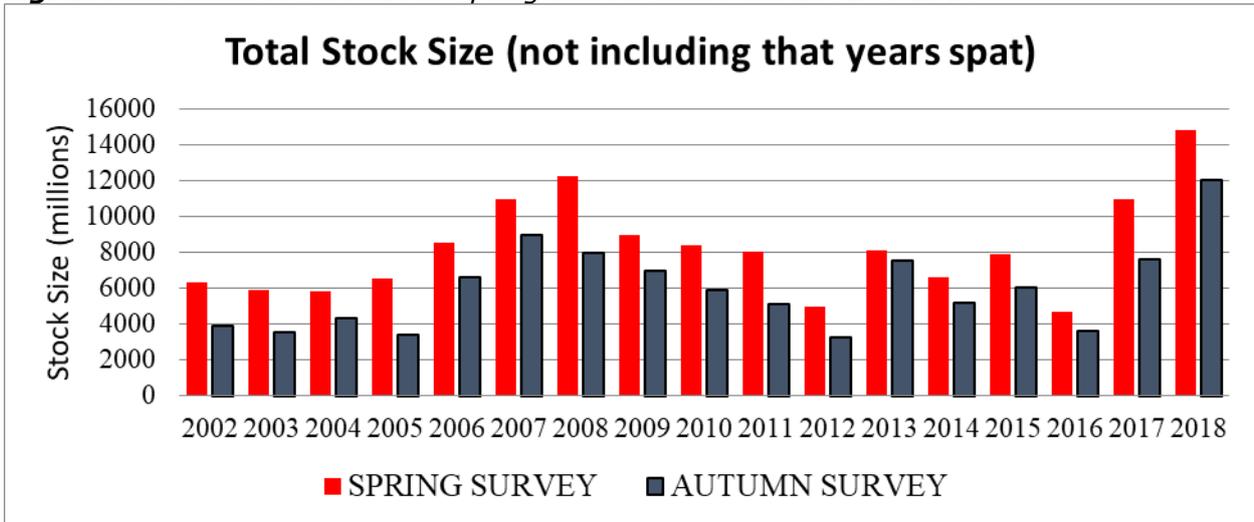
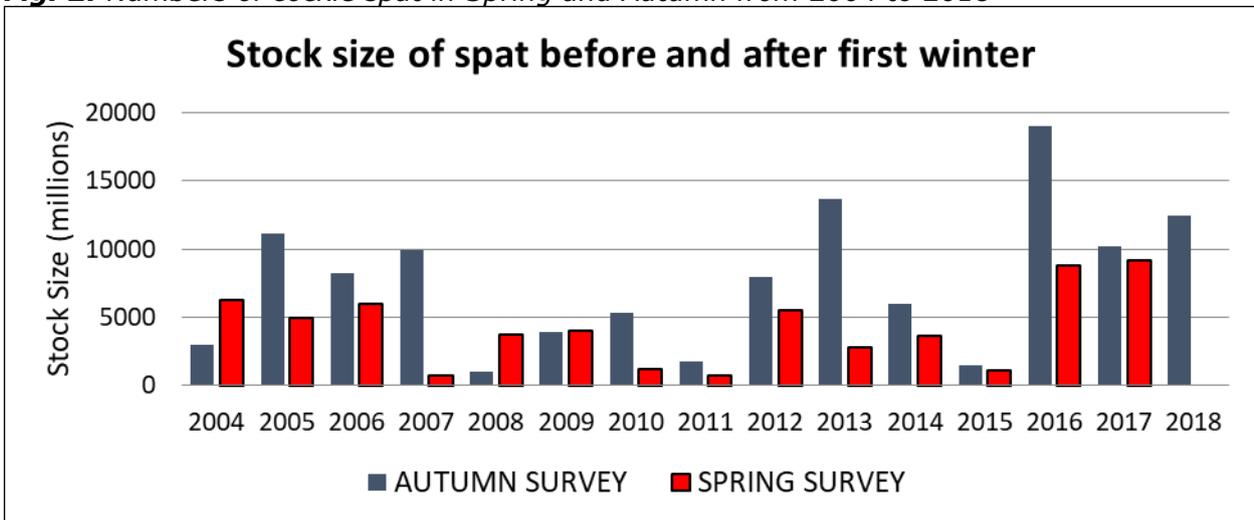


Fig. 2: Numbers of cockle spat in Spring and Autumn from 2004 to 2018



1 (b). Outlook for 2019 fishery and beyond

There is a good outlook for the fishery in the next two years. Good stock numbers of adult cockles were left on the grounds and there were significant numbers of spat although these were relatively small in size which could impact upon survival over the winter months. 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 2019 fishery.

Towards the end of the fishery this year, licence holders reported additional populations of cockles being found in other areas of the Thames Estuary. A meeting is planned to be held with the licence holders in the new year in order to discuss the management of the fishery in the modern environmental landscape and the management measures which are necessary for the fishery to take place within the many MPAs found within the KEIFCA district and how that could change over the coming years.

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. As a result of the successful surveys, the fishery was opened on 2 October 2018.

Prior to the fishery opening 35 permits had been applied for by the 31 March 2018 deadline as specified in the byelaw and as approved at the May 2018 meeting a total TAC of 535 tonnes was set, resulting in one trip per permit.

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 24 September to 28 September vessels both in the KEIFCA district and up in the Wash were visited in order for biosecurity inspections to be carried out. During this period all vessels which requested an inspection had one carried out by KEIFCA officers following the procedures laid down in the byelaw and approved by the Authority.

All 22 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 weekend 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, 22 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 2 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 264 tonnes of cockles were landed during this week with the majority of vessels taking their full allocation of 13.6m³.

Following the fishery

At the September meeting a letter was laid around the table from Mr Roy Brewster, one of the permit holders. After being discussed with the Authority, officers had several discussions with Mr Brewster during the fishery regarding those issues which he raised. Following the end of the fishery, a second letter was received from Mr Brewster which, as it was written as a complaint, was responded to by the Chairman following discussions with the Chief and Assistant Chief Officers. Both of Mr Brewster's letters and the Chairman's response are attached at Appendix 1.

The concerns raised by Mr Brewster, some of which were also raised verbally by other permit holders directly to officers, have resulted in a significant number of discussions between officers and the Chairman after the fishery closed. Two primary actions have been recommended. Firstly, that all permit holders be invited to the May Authority meeting each year where that year's management is discussed and decided upon. Secondly, the issue of the initial assignment of TAC and how to reallocate TAC which is assigned to other permit holders if some vessels do not take part, has been raised in both of the previous two seasons. It is suggested that legal advice is sought on the reallocation of TAC so that the Authority can be best informed on how to proceed in future years.

3. Management of Cockle Beds 2019 – Permitted Cockle Fishery

It is proposed that a decision on the detailed opening of beds for 2019 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 2018 indicated modest stocks of adult cockles and some good recruitment in certain areas including in areas other than that fished this year, especially along the Kent coast.

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.

Recommendations:

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