

By: Lead Scientific and Conservation Officer

To: Kent and Essex Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority –
16 September 2019

Subject: Cockle Fishery Update

Classification Unrestricted

Summary:

This report provides members with an update on the 2019 Thames Estuary Cockle Fishery and the progress made towards opening the Permitted Cockle Fishery.

Recommendations:

This report is for **NOTING** and **COMMENT** only.

1. THAMES ESTUARY COCKLE FISHERY ORDER (TECFO) 1994

The TECFO hydraulic dredge cockle fishery was opened by the Authority on 16th June 2019. 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 with good catch rates showing high numbers of cockles on the ground but with yields slightly lower than in 2018.

Catch rates during the season have been good, although growth has not been as high as expected which has led to lower yields than anticipated. Catches of the maximum of 13.6m³ or approximately 11 tonnes have been consistently landed. In general, weather has been good during the season, with less extreme hot days than were seen during the 2018 season. However, the lack of rainfall over the summer may have led to the inhibited growth that has been seen, although poor growth has been seen in cockle fisheries across the North Sea including in the Wash and in the Netherlands. The September cockle surveys were carried out over the first weekend in September, these corroborate what the industry are reporting from fishing i.e. there are large numbers of cockles but growth has not been as good as was expected. Spat fall appears to have been poor with few young cockles found during the survey, but this was not entirely unexpected given the large numbers of individuals already on the ground. The adult year classes continue to be in a good position with large numbers

available, however the 2020 fishery will need to see some significant growth in those individuals if this is to transfer into a strong fishery.

Total Allowable Catch for the 2019 TECFO fishery

It was agreed at the meeting that a provisional total allowable catch (TAC) of 8008 tonnes would be allocated and that any increases or changes would be subject to survey results and discussions with licence holders regarding available stock and growth during the season.

Effort over the course of the season has been spread across the harvesting areas. Area 1 has continued to provide a significant catch, following on from the good fishing seen there in 2018. The main beds in areas 3, 4 and 5 (A and B) continue to produce consistent stocks, while areas 8 (East Barrows) and 9/12 (Mouse Knob) are providing stock away from the main harvesting areas.

Originally the scheduling of trips over the course of the season was decided as specified below:

16 th June – 26 th July (6 weeks)	3 specified landings per period
28 th July – 23 rd August (4 weeks)	4 specified landings per period
25 th August – 4 th October (6 weeks)	3 specified landings per period

Due to poor growth the increase to 4 trips per week was postponed and the period from 28th July to 23rd August remained at 3 trips per week in line with the first 6 weeks of the season. The allocation therefore is now as follows which will maintain the TAC at 8008 tonnes:

16 th June – 30 th August (11 weeks)	3 specified landings per period
2 nd Sept – 27 th Sept (4 weeks)	4 specified landings per period
30 th Sept – 4 th October (1 week)	3 specified landings per period

Damage rate fishery observer project

For the 2019 fishery officers had proposed, following a meeting with the industry over the winter, a project which included putting a fishery observer aboard cockle vessels in order to undertake damage rate inspections. This was to try to enable the industry to improve their damage rates by looking at fishing gear and technical measures aboard the vessels. Unfortunately, due to a number of issues not least of which was a lack of suitably qualified observers being available to undertake the work within the available budget, the project has not taken place this year. After speaking to the licence holders, it has been decided to return the monies which they paid towards it for this year. This project remains an aim of the fishery management and it will be revisited next year.

2. FLEXIBLE PERMIT BYELAW COCKLE FISHERY

As approved at the last Authority meeting, the outside cockle fishery is to open this year on 8th October 2019. KEIFCA officers have been working closely with industry to ensure that it runs smoothly. Officers have been in contact with the vessels from outside the district to schedule biosecurity checks. These checks will be completed before vessels travel to the district ahead of the fishery.

Discussions with Natural England regarding the Habitat Regulations Assessment (HRA) and approval of the fishery are ongoing. There are no major concerns regarding the opening of the fishery and, following editing, the HRA will be approved.

Recommendations:

The Authority is asked to **NOTE** the actions listed above and provide **COMMENT**