

By: Assistant Chief IFCO
To: Kent and Essex Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority –
16 September 2020
Subject: Cockle Fishery Update
Classification Unrestricted

Summary:

This report provides members with an update on the 2020 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 28th June 2020. Prior to the opening of the fishery, yield checks from each area were carried out by a vessel, processor and a KEIFCA officer. These yield checks agreed with the results of the Authority survey with good catch rates showing high numbers of cockles on the ground with similar yields to 2019.

Catch rates during the season have been very good, and growth has been much better than last year resulting in some very good yields at times from certain areas. Catches of the maximum of 13.6m³ or approximately 11 tonnes have been consistently landed. In general, weather has been good during the season.

Total Allowable Catch for the 2020 TECFO fishery

It was agreed at the meeting that a provisional total allowable catch (TAC) of 7392 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. 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 and it is from these areas that the best yields have been seen.

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

Date	Number of weeks	Number of landings per week
29 th June – 24 th July	4 weeks	3 landings per week
26 th July – 4 th September	6 weeks	4 landings per week
6 th September – 2 nd October	4 weeks	3 landings per week

At the end of July, correspondence was received from the licence holders which highlighted the large numbers of stocks present on the Maplin Sands which weren't being fished sufficiently due to the high-yielding cockles found elsewhere. The fleet recognised the importance of the Maplin Sands to the long term sustainability of the fishery and asked the Authority to ensure that vessels fished these areas. As a result the allocation was modified to require trips in those areas. The allocation therefore is now as follows which maintains the TAC at 7392 tonnes:

Date	Number of weeks	Number of landings per week
29 th June – 24 th July	4 weeks	3 landings per week
26 th July – 7 th August	2 weeks	4 landings per week <u>from Areas 4, 5 and 6 only</u>
9 th August – 4 th September	4 weeks	4 landings per week <u>with at least 2 of these landings being made from Areas 4, 5 and 6</u>
6 th September – 2 nd October	4 weeks	3 landings per week

The September cockle surveys are due to be carried out over the weekend of 19th September as originally planned and have been modified taking lessons from the June 2020 surveys to be COVID secure. These surveys are expected to corroborate what the industry are reporting from fishing i.e. that there are large numbers of adult cockles and there does appear to have been a spat fall. More information will be forthcoming at the next quarterly meeting.

Cooperation between the fleet and the officers this year has been excellent. The industry has continually been in touch with officers both on the coast and behind-the-scenes and have worked together to ensure that the fishery ran as smoothly as possible. The officers and the fleet had conversations prior to the fishery regarding COVID measures on vessels for boarding's by officers, and the attitude to making this as straightforward as possible has been excellent on behalf of both officers and fishermen. Enforcement activities have been undertaken throughout the fishery by officers and overall compliance with management measures by the fleet has been very good. It is anticipated that the fishery will finish as planned on 2nd October, ahead of the permit fishery starting on 6th October.

2. FLEXIBLE PERMIT BYELAW COCKLE FISHERY

How are we making it COVID secure?

In line with the briefing provided to Members in June 2020, the outside cockle fishery is to open this year on 6th October 2020. KEIFCA officers have been working closely with industry to ensure that it runs smoothly. Officers have been in contact with the vessels which do not fish inside the TECFO to schedule biosecurity checks (TECFO vessel checks were done prior to that fishery starting). These checks will be completed before vessels travel to the district ahead of the fishery.

2.1 Number of Permit Applications

Twenty nine permit applications have been received for the 2020 fishery, comprising of vessels from both the Kent and Essex district and the Eastern IFCA district.

2.2 2020 Cockle Stock Surveys

Due to the impact of COVID-19 restrictions, the usual April surveys did not take place and it is not envisioned that they will before the fishery this year due to resource limitations in available staff and vessels. However, the main beds have been surveyed regularly for the past 20 years and the fishery has been running in its current form since 2014.

The main harvesting areas of the Permitted Fishery are in Area 7 and data from the spring 2019 survey were compared with data from the previous 10 years to analyse trends in the cockle beds in this area, this can be seen in figure 1. In 2019 the Buxey Sands contained the majority of the sizeable cockles. Other areas in the permitted cockle fishery area showed a slight increase in the number of adult cockles but contained few in excess of the 16mm minimum size.

Since 2017, the fishery has been operating with one trip per year being undertaken by the fleet of approximately 30-35 vessels. It can be seen from the level of adult stock since 2017 that this is producing a stable sizeable stock each year which is showing some signs of gradually increasing. This is recovering from the low point of 2016 when the fishery was closed due to a lack of stock from overexploitation in 2015 when 2 trips were undertaken by a fleet of 45 vessels.

The landing figures for 2019 totalled 330 tonnes being taken from a total of 1715 tonnes of sizeable stock on the Buxey Sand. As a result, based on the most recent survey data and the stability being shown by the stock, it is suggested that taking a precautionary approach this year and opening the fishery for one trip again would enable the fishery to be opened, the ground turned over and the industry to have some economic gain from the stock whilst being mindful of the lack of survey data this year and trying to continue the gradual increase in the sizeable stock.

The long-term aim for this fishery continues to be a multi-trip fishery and that seems to be where the stock is heading, however the lack of available data this year forces a precautionary approach. Therefore, undertaking one trip with the 29 vessels which have applied this year would seem to be a pragmatic and sensible approach in the current circumstances.

2.3 2020 Fishery Management

Area 7 of the permitted cockle fishery, is located within the boundary of the Essex Estuaries SAC and the Blackwater, Crouch, Roach and Colne Estuaries MCZ. It contains, as well as the cockle beds, a notable Native Oyster population which is protected by a permit byelaw. In addition, bottom trawling is prohibited in areas within the Essex Estuaries SAC immediately adjacent to these beds. As a result, making conservative decisions which are precautionary in their nature regarding this fishery would seem prudent, to try and ensure that this is a regular fishery which the industry can make informed decisions about when deciding whether to take part.

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. Ensuring that the cockle harvesting process is as efficient as possible continues to be a major factor regarding this fishery, as due to the significant MPA protection of this site and the measures applied for all other types of bottom towed gear the minimising of ground impact is essential.

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 2nd October 2020. The fishery will therefore open on Tuesday 6th October 2020 and will close on Thursday 8th October 2020. Fishing will be permitted between 0900 on the Tuesday until 1200 on the Thursday. Vessels will be permitted to undertake one trip only. For 2020 it is proposed that the permit fishery will follow the same management measures as 2017-2019 due to the precautionary approach being taken due to the unforeseen impact of COVID-19.

2.4 Habitat Regulations Assessment

Discussions with Natural England regarding the Habitat Regulations Assessment (HRA) and approval of the fishery are ongoing. This is due to the impact of COVID 19 on KEIFCA operations this spring which prevented stock surveys from going ahead. Officers have therefore based the TAC on the stock which was surveyed during the 2019 surveys and taking into account 2019 fishing mortality and natural mortality over the 19/20 winter period. A significant amount of data is held for both of the cockle fisheries and officers have taken an extremely precautionary approach, only repeating the same management measures as the Authority have agreed for the past four years. The HRA which has been sent to NE is shown in Appendix A. It is anticipated that the HRA will be approved following discussions with NE and a verbal update will be given.

Recommendations:

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