



Agenda Item No. B3

By: Assistant Chief Officer  
To: Kent and Essex IFCA – 30 November 2020  
Subject: **2020 Cockle Fishery Management**  
Classification: Unrestricted

**Summary:**

This paper will provide Members with a summary of the cockle fishery management for 2020 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 and to **AGREE** to the refund of all permit fees related to the 2020 Permit Fishery

**Background:**

**1. Thames Estuary Cockle Fishery Order**

The cockle fishery within the area of the Thames Estuary Cockle Fishery Order opened between 29 June 2020 and 2 October 2020. Originally the scheduling of trips over the course of the season was decided as specified below with a total TAC of 7392 tonnes:

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

Catches of the maximum of 13.6 m<sup>3</sup> were consistently made throughout the season with excellent catch rates and good yields from most areas with excellent yields being found in some areas. In general, weather conditions were good during the season. The total allowable catch (TAC) of 7392 tonnes was maintained for the season.

### **1(a) Autumn Cockle Stock Surveys 2020**

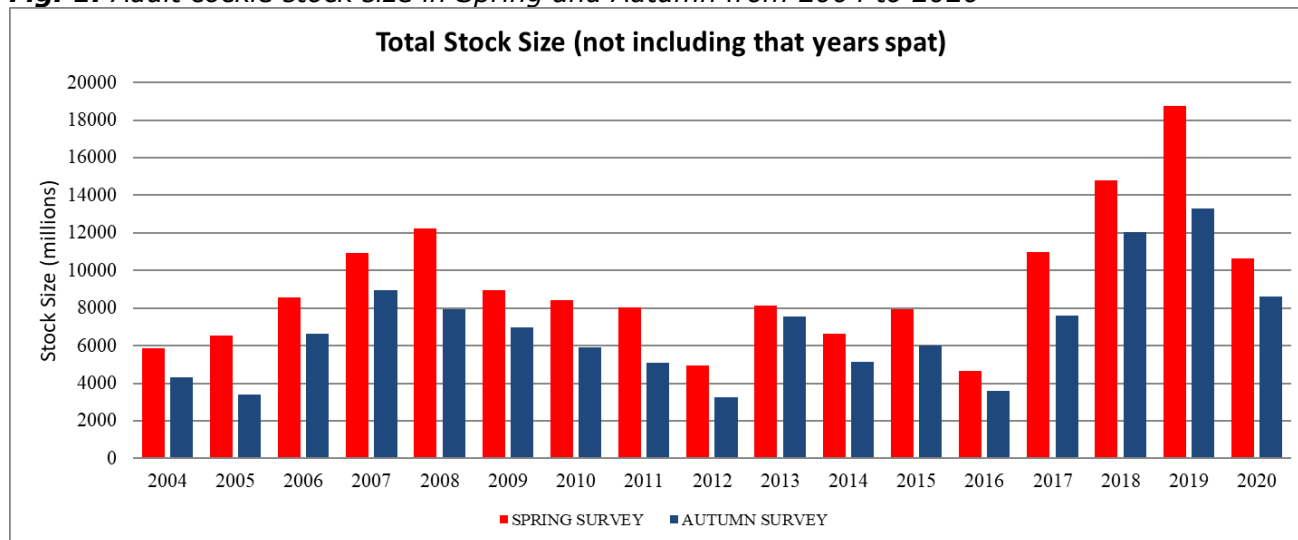
Cockle stock surveys were completed between 17 and 20 September 2020 for the main cockle harvesting areas within the TECFO on the Maplin.

2020 does not appear to have been an especially good year for spatfall with only a moderate number of juvenile cockles being found on the sands. This is not entirely unexpected given the relatively large population of adult cockles which remain on the grounds, however it does appear that we are on a downward slope in terms of the size of the adult population. Again, this is not unexpected and represents the regular fluctuation in terms of population size which has been seen since surveys started in the early 1990's.

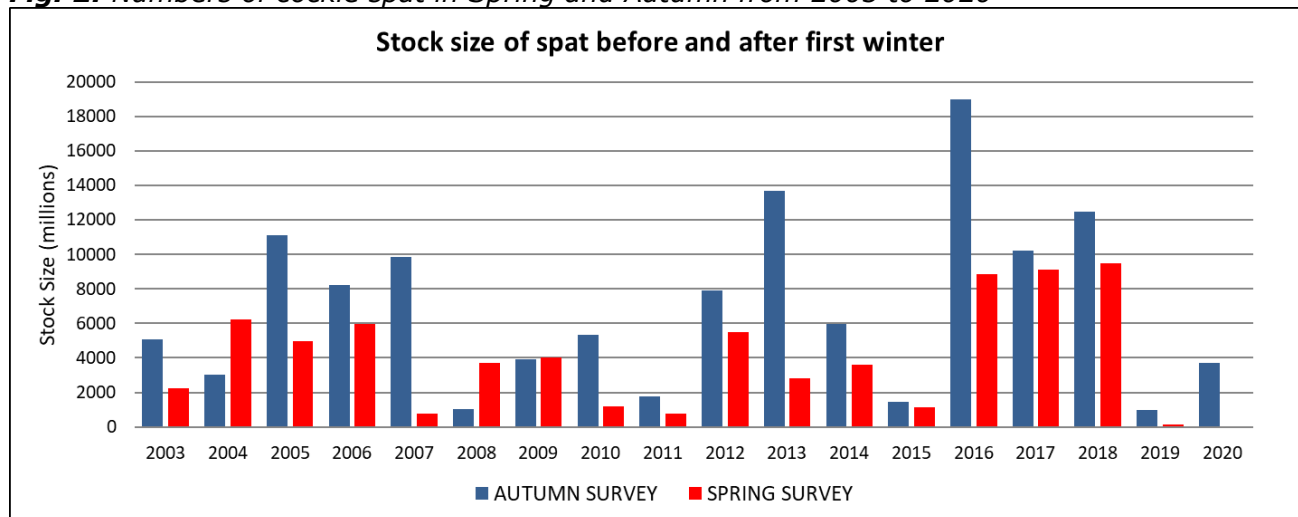
Numbers of adult cockle on the ground remain high, but for this to translate into a strong 2021 fishery significant growth will be required. However, much will depend upon the severity of the winter weather and how the cockle stocks, especially the small 2020 year class, survive.

The following graphs show population numbers of adult cockles and spat for 2020 compared to earlier years.

**Fig. 1:** Adult cockle stock size in Spring and Autumn from 2004 to 2020



**Fig. 2:** Numbers of cockle spat in Spring and Autumn from 2003 to 2020



### 1 (b). Outlook for 2021 fishery and beyond

Outlook for the 2021 fishery is good. Adult stock numbers on the ground are high, and growth rates appear to have recovered from those seen during the preceding two seasons.

Winter survival rates will provide a better understanding of how the stock may perform in 2021. A harsh winter could thin out the adult stock and allow a better growth rate in the stronger, surviving cockles, while a mild winter may leave a larger stock into next season.

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

Following the agreed management measures and procedures as set out in the 16 September 2020 Authority paper the cockle permit fishery opened as usual at 0900 on the 6th October. Within hours of the fishery opening it became apparent that the cockle stocks that we had projected based on historic data (2020 spring surveys were suspended due to spring COVID-19 lockdown) were not accurate and there were actually very limited cockle stocks on the ground. Conversations were held between KEIFCA officers and skippers as the picture unfolded. The catches being made by the cockle boats were not sufficient to make fishing economically viable, and vessels started to return to port with no or minimal catch. KEIFCA officers inspected most vessels upon landing and confirmed the landings made by the permit holders.

The major takeaway from the permit cockle fishery was the vital importance of undertaking the spring survey of the key cockle grounds before management is discussed and the fishery is open. In any normal year this would have happened but with the COVID-19 pandemic we had very little option but to suspend the annual grab survey and use historic data instead. Undertaking this survey will be a priority in 2021.

Throughout the whole fishery, communication with the cockle industry was good and when the lack of stock on the ground became apparent the industry quickly stopped their activity and returned to port; leaving stock on the ground for future fisheries and reducing impact on the ground when not required. We have received a letter from the industry outlining the fishery from their perspective and requesting a refund of the permit fees (appendix 1).

Given the low levels of stock on the ground found by the fishing industry KEIFCA officers are confident that if we could have surveyed we would have been able to highlight this at a much earlier stage and would have recommended that the fishery not be opened in the first place. If this was the case the permit fee would have been refunded to the permit holders. As a result, it is recommended that permit fees are refunded to all 2020 permit holders.

#### *Investigating an increase in clam stocks*

Whilst the cockle stocks were significantly reduced, there was a large quantity of clams found on the ground instead. Reports of significant catches of clams were made by a number of boats and there was an industry request for KEIFCA to investigate further. Using historic cockle survey site locations and industry fishing marks, officers are in the process of surveying the site to assess the distribution, number and biomass of the clams. Officers have contacted Southern IFCA who have a clam fishery in their district for advice and if possible, we will try and age and sex the clams.

### **3. Management of Cockle Beds 2020 – Permitted Cockle Fishery**

Following the completion of the spring 2021 surveys, a decision will be taken on the flexible permit fishery for next year. The flexible permit fishery was open for three consecutive years between 2017 and 2019, providing a single trip per permit holder each year. The outcome of this year's permit fishery was completely unexpected

and reinforces the need for annual stock assessment surveys on all of the proposed cockle beds prior to a fishery taking place.

**Recommendations:**

Members are asked to **NOTE** this report and to **AGREE** to the refund of all permit fees related to the 2020 Permit Fishery

