



Agenda item B4

By: Assistant Chief IFCO

To: Kent and Essex Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority – 25 May 2021

Subject: **PERMITTED COCKLE FISHERY MANAGEMENT**

Classification Unrestricted

Summary: To consider management of the 2021 Permitted Cockle Fishery

Recommendation – That the Authority **APPROVE** the management measures to keep the beds in the permitted cockle fishery closed and refund the permit application fees to all applicants.

1. Permitted Cockle Fishery 2020

The 2020 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 was a priority in April 2021.

2. Cockle Fishery Flexible Permit Byelaw

The process for the management of this fishery is that anyone wishing to apply for a permit is required to apply before 31 March in that year and all stock assessment surveys are completed before the May Authority meeting. This ensures that the Authority can be presented with a complete picture of the fishery, including the amount of stock available and the number of vessels wishing to work it.

2.1 Appropriate Assessment

The Authority is required under Regulation 48(3) of the Conservation (Natural Habitats) Regulations 1994, Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 the Authority to give notice to Natural England of intention to issue permits to fish for cockles within designated SSSI, SPA and Ramsar inter-tidal sites. The Authority is also required to submit an "Appropriate Assessment". This assessment includes survey data, fishery monitoring and details of mitigation implemented to ensure that there is no adverse impact upon these sites as a result of the Authority's action. The Appropriate Assessment and formal notification have been provided to Natural England and a response is currently awaited.

2.2 Number of Permit Applications

In 2020, permits were issued for 30 fishing vessels to work the cockle fishery. For 2021, the number of permit applications is 28. Twenty seven of these applications are for Category 1 permits which would be permitted, should the fishery open, to take up to 13.6m³ per trip. One of these applications is for the smaller Category 2 permit, which permit up to 6.8m³ per trip.

2.3 Spring 2021 Cockle Stock Surveys

Stock surveys commenced at the beginning of April 2021 and were completed by the end of April. At this time of year the cockles are coming into condition for their spring spawning following the winter dormant period. These surveys took a total of 12 survey days to complete using a Day Grab deployed from FPV Tamesis and FPV Nerissa, covering a total area of 37.6 km² (14.5 miles²) with a total of 287 grab samples being taken. The areas surveyed covered the Buxey and Ray Sands, Minnis Bay and Leysdown as well as a potential new bed in Area 14, South Margate Sands. These areas include all of the current main production areas outside of the TECFO (a chart showing the production areas is attached at Appendix A).

As reported above the Authority's management of the fishery is subject to an Appropriate Assessment which has been provided to Natural England. This includes details of specified management criteria.

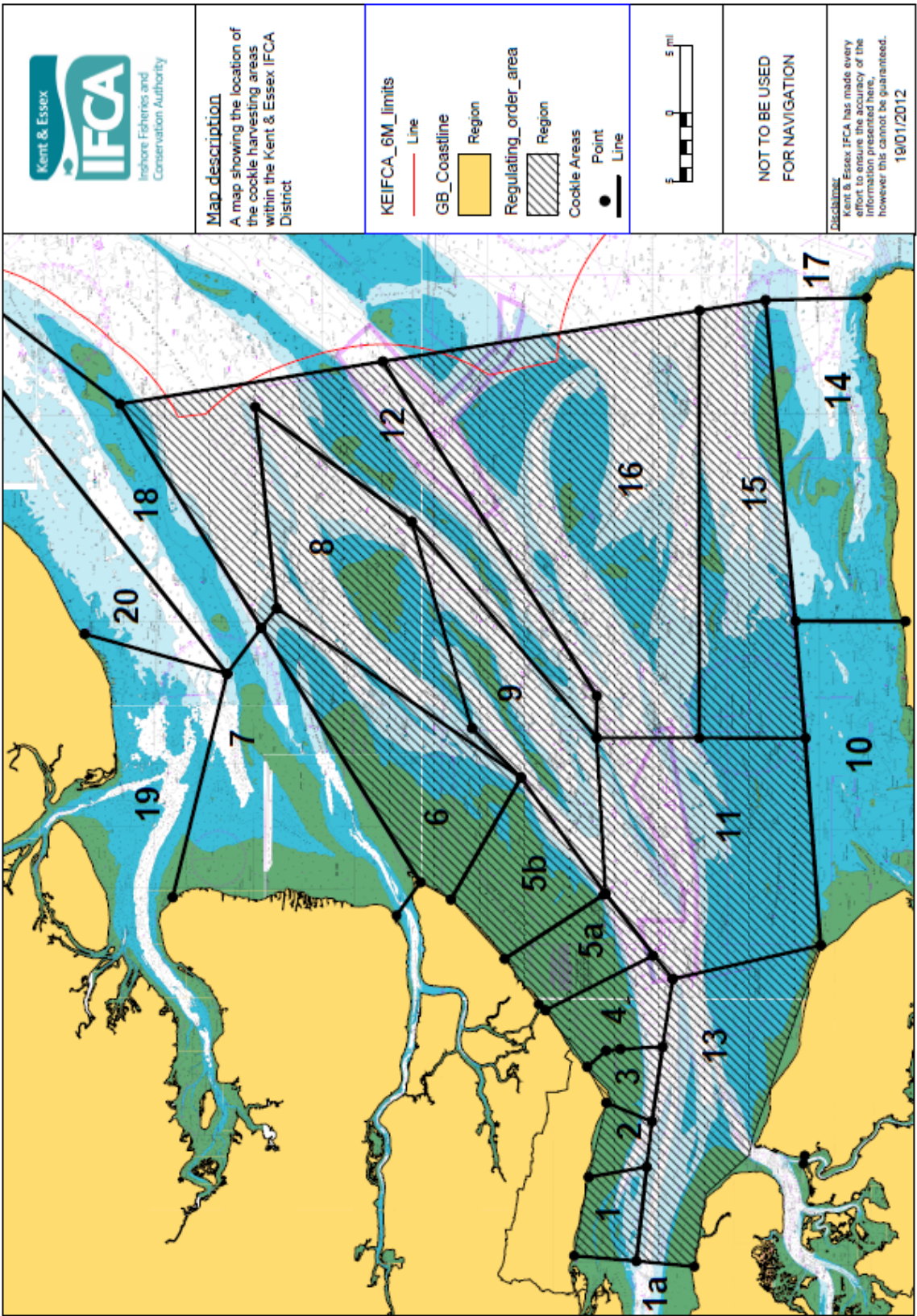
2.4 2021 Fishery Management

Analysis of this survey data has now been completed. The survey shows that, as predicted following last years aborted fishery, the Ray, Dengie and Buxey Sands contain very few cockles suitable for commercial harvesting, with less than 120 tonnes being available for a provisional TAC which is less than the amount specified in the Management Plan. Minnis Bay does contain very good densities of cockles but the site is only 1.2km² in size and requires other areas to be open at the same time to permit access by a fleet of twenty seven permit holders. The South Margate Sands was hoped to contain good numbers of cockles, in light of the extremely good catch rates which were found by the TECFO fleet on the North Margate Sands in 2020. However, very few cockles were found and only 71 tonnes of stock were found there available for harvesting which again, much like Area 7, is less than the amount specified in the Management Plan.

Given that there are very few cockles in the permitted fishery beds, with the exception of the very spatially restricted Minnis Bay site, the cockle fishery does not meet the criteria for opening specified in the Management Plan and it would seem prudent to not open the fishery this year and refund the permit fees which have been paid with each application as specified in the byelaw.

Recommendation – That the Authority APPROVE the above management measures to keep the beds in the permitted cockle fishery closed and refund the permit application fees to all applicants.

Appendix A



A chart showing the cockle production areas within the Kent and Essex IFCA District