



Agenda item B2

By: Assistant Chief IFCO

To: Kent and Essex Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority – 17 September 2021

Subject: **Cockle Fishery Update**

Classification Unrestricted

Summary:

This report provides members with an update on the 2021 Thames Estuary Cockle Fishery

Recommendations:

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

1. THAMES ESTUARY COCKLE FISHERY ORDER 1994

General overview

The TECFO hydraulic dredge cockle fishery was opened by the Authority on 20th June 2021. Prior to the opening of the fishery, yield checks from each area were carried out by a vessel and processor. These checks showed that meat yields were higher than anticipated by the industry, and whilst the main beds on areas 4, 5 and 6 contained good numbers of cockles with very good catch rates, some other areas which have been prolific in recent years, such as the East Barrow Sand, had far lower numbers of cockles. This was in broad agreement with the results of the Authority's survey in April. As a result, the industry wrote to the Authority on 17th June requesting that area 8 be added to the list of closed areas for this season. Following discussion with the Chief Officer, Chairman and Vice-Chairman, area 8 was closed prior to the start of the season, in addition to the previously recommended closure of area 15.

Catch rates during the season have been good, with good growth rates. 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 2020. Yields were about average at 13 to 14% for the first six weeks, with sizes of about 1000 meats per kilo which is also average for the Maplin Sands. After the first six weeks, sizes fluctuated quite a lot, with meats per kilo going up as far as 1350 and yields dropping to 11%.

Area 15 – North Margate Sands

At the last Authority meeting, officers were instructed to carry out further survey work on area 15, following a letter from the industry. Throughout June, officers prepared a new survey with the number of survey points doubled across the area which the fleet worked on during 2020. This survey was then undertaken in July. The initial aim from the last Authority meeting was to have a licence holder on board to observe the survey, however due to the rapidly increasing COVID infection rates at that time, this did not happen. However, the survey was carried out as planned. Area 8 was also resurveyed following the poor catch rates found by the industry when the yield check was undertaken. The results are presented in the figures below.

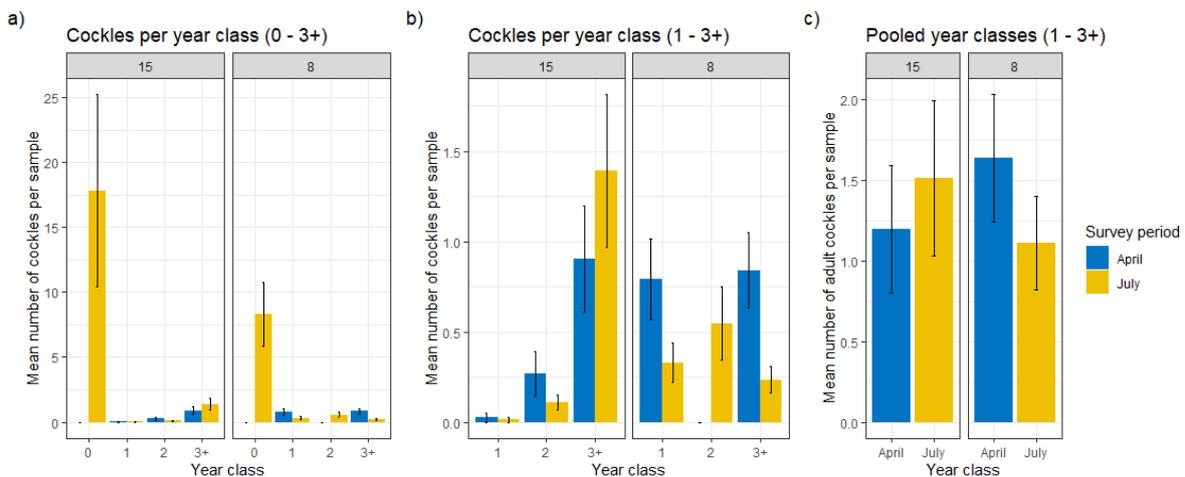


Figure 1. Densities of cockles found on Areas 8 and 15 during the April and July 2021 cockle surveys

Figure 1(a) shows that a spatfall was observed in both areas when the July survey was carried out. Figure 1 (c) shows the average number of cockles per sample found on the surveys, comparing April to July. Whilst the number of cockles found in a sample increase between April and July on area 15, it can be seen by the error bars that this increase is not conclusive. In addition, the increase was only slight, from approximately 1.2 cockles per sample up to 1.5 cockles per sample.

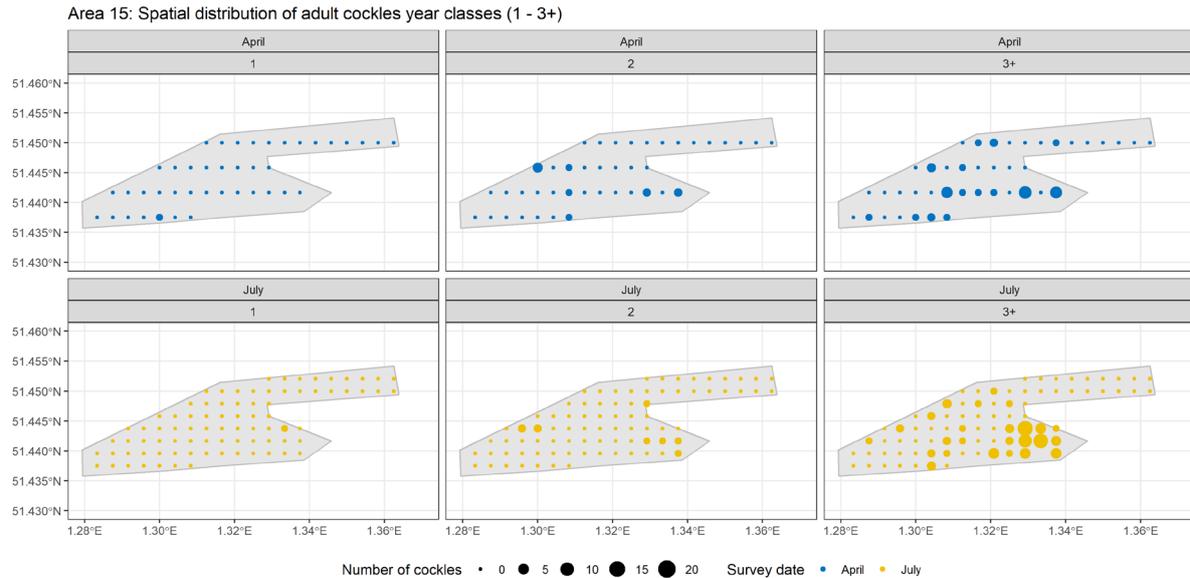


Figure 2. Spatial plot of samples taken on Area 15 during the April and July 2021 cockle surveys

Figure 2 shows a spatial plot of the surveys and where cockles were found. Whilst twice the sample points were sampled, the general pattern of density variation remained the same between the two surveys – no new patches of cockles were found.

As a result of these surveys, and following discussion with the Chief Officer, Chairman and Vice-Chairman, it was decided not to open area 15 to fishing and to remain with the previously agreed management measures of keeping area 15 closed for the duration of the season. This was communicated to the licence holders in writing on 6 August 2021. No further correspondence has been received.

September surveys and outlook

The September cockle surveys will have been carried out at the time of the Authority meeting (over the second weekend in September). Members will be updated at the meeting on the provisional findings.

Total Allowable Catch for the 2021 TECFO fishery

It was agreed at the meeting that a provisional total allowable catch (TAC) of 6160 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 main harvesting areas. Areas 1-3, 9 and 12 have provided some trips, but the majority of activity has been on the main bed areas of 4 and 5, which are, historically, the basis of the TECFO.

The scheduling of trips over the course of the season has been maintained as per the schedule agreed at the May Authority meeting.

20 June – 16 July (4 weeks)	2 specified landings per period
18 July – 10 September (8 weeks)	3 specified landings per period
12 September – 8 October (4 weeks)	2 specified landings per period

2. FLEXIBLE PERMIT BYELAW COCKLE FISHERY

As discussed at the last Authority meeting, the outside cockle fishery will remain closed this year following insufficient stocks being detected during the surveys carried out in April.

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