

By: KEIFCA Chief Fishery Officer

To: Kent & Essex Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority
– 7 March 2023

Subject: **Agreeing the number of licences to issue in the first 7-year cycle**

Classification Unrestricted

Summary:

2022 surveys of the cockle stocks in conjunction with industry reports of low yields, little or no growth and concerningly low observations of spawn or spat paint a concerning outlook for cockle stocks in the short term. This paper outlines a process whereby the agreed number of licences issued in the first 7-year cycle (15) can be reviewed taking into consideration the 2024 cockle stock surveys.

Recommendations:

Members are asked to **APPROVE** that issuing 15 licences would be the default number of licences issued in the first 7-year cycle. However, the number of licences would only be confirmed by the Authority following the September 2024 surveys after considering stock levels (*this would follow the same process that will be used in the 7-year review cycle*).

Introduction

As part of the pre-consultation phase for Consultation 3 there was an industry request to decide on the final number of licences to issue by using the same process as outlined in Consultation 2, Appendix 1 i.e. after a number of licences for the coming 7-year cycle is decided upon (as it has already for the first 7-year cycle at 15 licences), to then confirm the number of licences taking into account the most recent stock assessments in the September prior to licences being issued (September 2024 for the first 7-year cycle). The Authority discussed this proposal and, taking into account paper B4 from the November 2022 quarterly KEIFCA

meeting, decided to include this suggestion in this consultation (<https://www.kentandessex-ifca.gov.uk/about-us/committee/committee-meetings>).

At the November 2022 meeting, the ACIFCO reported that the 2022 TECFO fishery had been poorer than expected due to a combination of factors including periods of extreme heat, little or no rainfall resulting in reduced runoff from land and consequently minimal nutrient release into the sea. These factors coincided with low tides over the key fishing beds in areas 4, 5 and 6 and as a result cockles were repeatedly exposed to very high temperatures. Industry had reported very low yield, no growth and very little spawn or spat this year.

The scheduled number of trips had been reduced from 38 to 35 with the TAC dropping from 5,852 tonnes to 5,390 tonnes. Further surveys had been completed in Area 15, Margate Sands, which resulted in an additional 3 trips per vessel in this area, where both the yield and the size of cockles were better than in other beds.

The ACIFCO advised Members that the outlook for the 2023 fishery was not clear and that spatfall would be critical for next year and the longer term. The concerns about low stock numbers, a possible harsh winter and low 2022 spatfall were not just felt in the Thames but also in The Wash and elsewhere.

Option under consideration

Reviewing the feedback from the Listening Phase and from the Consultation 3 pre-consultation replies the members agreed to consult on the following option:

Issuing 15 licences would be the default but the number of licences would only be confirmed after the September survey the year before the start of the first 7-year cycle after taking into consideration the stock levels, following the same process that will be used in the 7-year review cycle.

Feedback from Consultation 3

Below are illustrative examples of replies received from the consultation - For a compilation of all the replies please read the Consultation Summary document pages 35-37.

Comments from current TECFO licence holders

“agreeing the number of licences to be issued in the first seven-year cycle as all of our members have agreed since 2010 we have seen a decline in the fishery yet have still continued to invest in the future of the fishery and of our businesses we understand the assurances given by the officers that the survey from the 2023 and 2024 season will be taken into account however we really must insist that the survey data is viewed over the past 14 years including up to and including the 2024 autumn survey before any decision are reached in a agreeing increases in the amount of licences the current industry has been in a decline for many of years we would not wish to see this decline any further”

"An increase to 15 licences seems very difficult to justify. I think it's important to emphasise that since 2010 the fishery has only sustained an average of 40 days work. This is the most depressed period that the industry has had to endure since the 1960's. The proposed new regulated area further restricts the amount of fish-ing ground. Which can potentially only make matters worse. Licence numbers should only be increased if stocks allow, but consideration must also be given to those businesses and their employees who are suffering through this depressed time. If it really is the aim of the KEIFCA to "support a viable local cockle industry" then any moves that are likely to further reduce the number of trips should be avoided. In order for the industry to survive and for jobs to be secured the number of trips each vessel makes needs to increase, otherwise there will be no long term in-vestment and we will not be able to attract new employees or keep the ones we have. Deciding on the number of licences to issue after the September survey seems foolhardy as the TAC cannot be decided until after winter mortality has been tak-en into account. It could be argued that this would not give new licence holders long to get ready for the season but it is possible. Better to know for certain that there are cockles to catch than going to the expense of fitting out and then finding out that you won't cover your costs."

"Taking into consideration stock levels in September'24, does not take into account the mortality rates over the winter. This is a variable thing from year to year. You still need a spring survey to see what stock levels have survived. I believe any company/fisherman hoping to get a licence for the start of the 2025 season would have everything in place by April/May of that year, so the time constraints would not be an issue."

"It would more accurate to make a comparison of the previous 7 year surveys of stocks to see the true trend of the state of the fishery rather than just 1 year previous, but always with a a minimum of 14 licences granted in any of the 7 year cycles."

Comments from current Permit Fishery holders

"The current 14 licence holders will always say that there is not enough stock to have an extra licence. They will say that they cannot survive on less than 40 days. It should not matter if it would mean a handful less days for the other vessels. The current cockle fleet only fishes for the cockles through the summer and does not fish for anything else for the rest of the year so even on a year with less TAC I am sure there is room for another vessel and for everyone to still make enough money. If a 15th licence is not issued on the first year of the 7 year cycle then it will probably never be issued. If you are the 15th you need to know that a decision is not made last minute to cancel your licence as investment to fish for the cockles has probably already been made."

"In the 7 year review the initial 15 licences should be reviewed and increased to 17. Natural England act mainly on the 'precautionary approach' and they only have trouble if the number of licences are 18 or above. This fishery could easily fit 17 licences as the TAC is greater most years than other areas which have over triple the active working licences and are still classed as successful. In the past years, the TECFO fisherman have been awarded additional trips many times where an additional licence in the past could have been granted, so in my opinion there must be at least the initial 15 licences proposed with no amendment if the TAC is deemed low."

Officer comment

Overall, the feedback received focused less on the option under consideration and more on making general points about the advantages, disadvantages, and impact of issuing more licences and the need to consider a long-term cockle stock data in arriving at a decision. Some comments did focus on the timing of the decision with several replies suggesting that the decision be pushed back even further until after the spring survey results in May. As outlined in previous consultations, and reflected by stakeholders in this consultation, the logistics of making a decision only one month prior to the fishery starting would not be practical either for the industry or the Authority.

As outlined at the November 2022 meeting in paper B4, the survey results and the feedback from the industry suggest that recruitment into the cockle fishery might be poor in the 2023 season, which could then have a knock on impact for the 2024 season as the adult cockle stocks would be based primarily on 1 or 2 weak year classes rather than 2 or 3 strong year classes. It is a sensible and proportional step to make a decision at the last practical opportunity based on as much data as possible.

Recommendation

Members are asked to **APPROVE** that issuing 15 licences would be the default number of licences issued in the first 7-year cycle. However, the number of licences would only be confirmed by the Authority following the September 2024 surveys after considering stock levels (*this would follow the same process that will be used in the 7-year review cycle*).