



Agenda Item No. B2

By: Assistant Chief IFCO and Cockle Officer/IFCO

To: Kent and Essex IFCA – 26 November 2024

Subject: **Cockle Fisheries Update**

Classification: Unrestricted

**Summary:**

This paper provides Members with a summary of the cockle fishery management for 2024. This includes the Thames Estuary Cockle Fishery Order (TECFO) 1994 and the Permitted Cockle Fishery (chart of fisheries attached), as well as an update on the T24 Regulating Order.

**Recommendations:**

Members **NOTE** and **APPROVE** the report

**TECFO 1994 fishery:**

*Background*

The Thames Estuary Cockle Fishery Order 1994 (TECFO) has led to one of the most sustainable cockles fisheries in Europe over the past thirty years. However, on 29<sup>th</sup> September 2024, TECFO ceased to exist as the thirty-year order expired. From 2025, a new regulating Order, the Thames Estuary Cockle Fishery Order 2024 (T24), will take over management of this valuable and prominent fishery.

The cockle fishery within the area of the Thames Estuary Cockle Fishery Order (TECFO) opened on the 16<sup>th</sup> of June and closed on the 27<sup>th</sup> of September 2024. At the May 2024 Authority meeting, members approved a Total Allowable Catch (TAC) of 4620 tonnes, 30 fishing trips per vessel. The opening and closing of areas as well as the number of trips permitted for each area were made accordingly throughout the fishery (Table 1). There was no increase in the total number of trips this year.

Catches of the maximum of 13.6m<sup>3</sup> or approximately 11 tonnes were consistently landed each trip, except one. Yields remained fairly stable with an average of 12% across the fishery this year. The yield on the Maplin Sands (areas 3-6) started in the mid-teens and decreased to around 10% part of the way through before increasing

once more by September. This was similar to that on the East and West Barrows (areas 8 and 9) which saw yields of 11-13%. Margate Sands (area 15) produced a stable yield in the mid-teens throughout the 4 weeks it was opened.

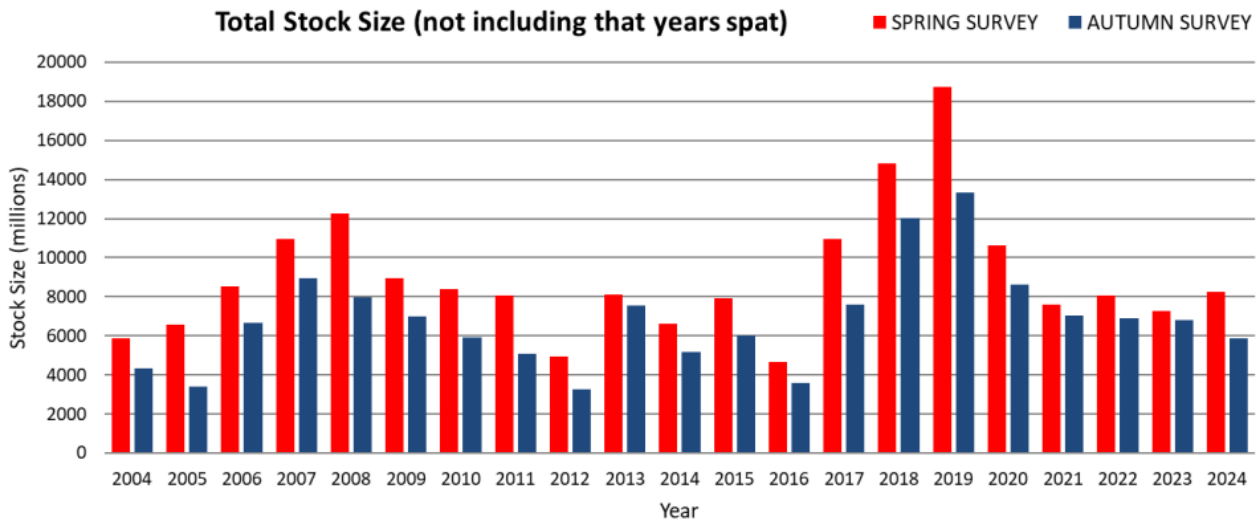
Catch rates averaged 1-1.5 hours per bag during the fishery, however, the Maplin Sands alone was slower with an average of 4 hours. Industry feedback was that the slower catch rate on the Maplin Sands was due to the lack of density in sizable cockles. The yield, count and catch rates found vessels putting more effort into harvesting the Barrows and Margate Sands whilst only occasionally working the Maplin Sands.

<b>Date</b>	<b>Number of weeks</b>	<b>Number of landings per week</b>
<b>16 June – 28 June</b>	2 weeks	2 landings per week which includes no more than 1 specified landing from Area 15. (Area 8/9 and 12 closed).
<b>30 June – 12 July</b>	2 weeks	2 landings per week which includes no more than 1 specified landing from Area 8/9/12. (Area 15 closed).
<b>14 July – 23 August</b>	6 weeks	2 landings per week with no more than 1 specified landing being from or including Area 8.
<b>25 August – 6 September</b>	2 Weeks	2 landings per week.
<b>8 September – 20 September</b>	2 weeks	2 landings per week with no more than 1 specified landing being from or including Area 8 and no more than 1 specified landing being from or including Area 15.
<b>22 September – 27 September</b>	1 Week	2 landings per week with no more than 1 specified landing being from or including Area 8. Area 15 will be closed.

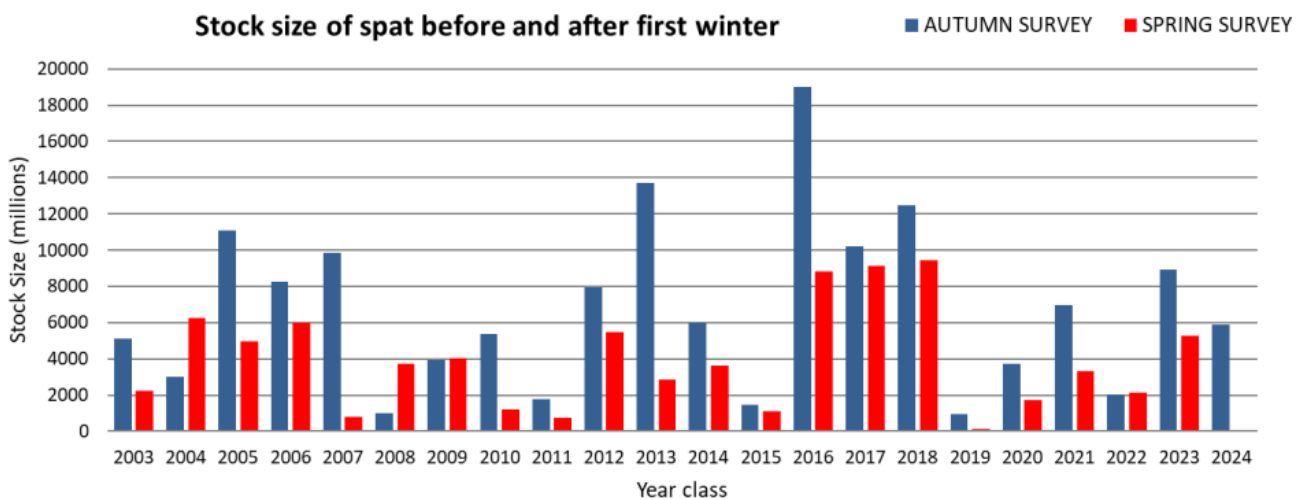
**Table 1:** The final specified landings for the TECFO 2024 fishery.

#### *Autumn Cockle Stock Surveys 2024*

The autumn survey was completed in the second half of September (20<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup>) and found the adult stock was slightly lower compared with previous years (Fig. 1). Despite the lower quantity of adults, the population appears stable, primarily due to the quantity of spat resulting in an overall improvement in comparison to the four previous years (Fig. 2).



**Figure 1:** Adult cockle stock size in Spring and Autumn from 2004 to 2024.



**Figure 2:** Quantity of cockle spat in Spring and Autumn from 2003 to 2024.

### Outlook for 2025 fishery and beyond

The 2025 fishery will be the first year of the new T24 regulating order and will see the addition of one licence bringing the total to fifteen. This year's surveys indicated a good proportion of adult cockles just under 16mm which are predicted to reach a commercially viable size ready for the 2025 harvest. This data corresponds with the feedback from the fishers that the cockles on the Maplin Sands were too small to harvest this year. The good spat fall seen this year is a promising sign, however, with winter approaching a more accurate representation of next year's stock will become apparent during the spring survey.

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

### *Background*

The cockle fishery within the area of the Cockle Flexible Permit Byelaw opened the 1<sup>st</sup> of September and closed the 27<sup>th</sup> of October 2024. At the May 2024 Authority meeting, members approved a TAC of 368 tonnes, spread over 4 fishing trips per vessel. Thirty one vessels obtained a permit for the 2024 fishery, with a maximum of twenty two participating in the fishery per week.

### *2024 fishery management*

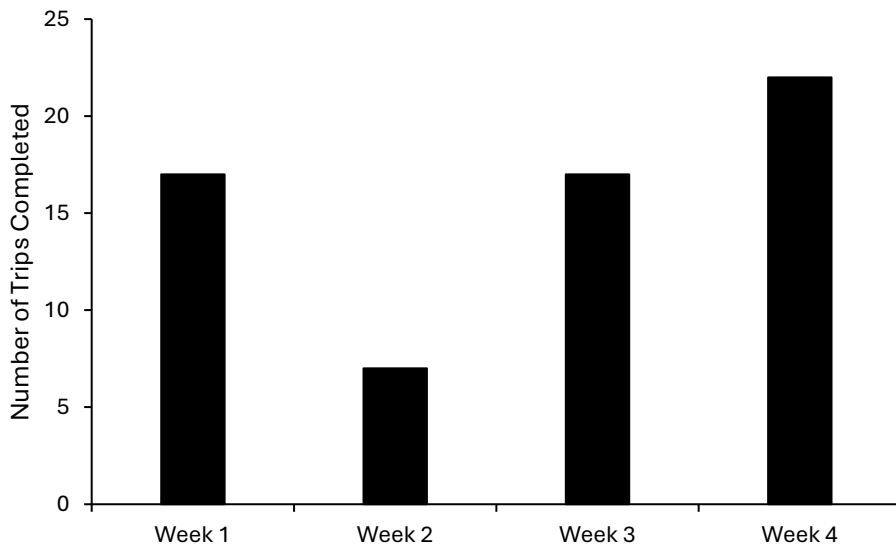
Catches of the maximum of 3.39m<sup>3</sup> or approximately 3 tonnes were consistently landed.

Following the classification of Area 14 from samples collected by KEIFCA, both Buxey Sands (area 7) and the South Margate Sands (area 14) were made available for fishing (Table 2). Catch rates on the Buxey varied but the best was around 1 tonne per hour and catch rates were lower than would be expected on a TECFO bed, however Area 14 fished extremely well with catch rates and yields comparable to those found by the TECFO fleet on Area 15.

Date	Number of weeks	Number of landings per week
<b>1 September – 13 September</b>	2 Weeks	1 landing per week of a maximum of 3.4m <sup>3</sup> / 125 baskets per fishing trip (approx. equivalent 3 tonnes) from the permitted fishing zone of Area 7 only.
<b>15 September – 20 September</b>	1 Week	1 landing per week of a maximum of 3.4m <sup>3</sup> / 125 baskets per fishing trip (approx. equivalent 3 tonnes) from the South Margate Sand permitted fishing zone of Area 14 only.
<b>22 September – 27 September</b>	1 Week	1 landing per week of a maximum of 3.4m <sup>3</sup> / 125 baskets per fishing trip (approx. equivalent 3 tonnes) from the South Margate Sand permitted fishing zones of Area 14 only.

**Table 2:** The final specified landings for the Permitted Cockle Fishery 2024.

Of the thirty-one vessels which obtained a permit, twenty-three completed their biosecurity inspections. The number of vessels completing trips varied between seven to twenty-two vessels per week over the course of the fishery (Fig. 3). seventeen vessels took part during the first week of the fishery, which reduced for the second week before increasing again for the third and fourth week of the fishery, this trend is shown below in figure 3.



**Figure 3:** Number of trips completed each week by the vessels partaking in the permit cockle fishery 2024. Week 1 saw 17 trips, week 2 only 7 were completed, week 3 another 17 trips and in week 4, 22 of the 23 vessels completed their trip.

The average yield in the permitted cockle fishery was approximately 15%, higher than on the TECFO beds, and whilst the yield was greater in area 7 than in area 14, the individual cockles and the meats which resulted were much larger in Area 14, thus resulting in a more valuable product. The average catch rates this year was 1 hour 15 minutes per bag for many of the vessels with others not as fortunate spending closer to 5 hours. Vessels were finding manila clams in area 7 which is believed to have been a main factor in the longer catch rates. Because of this some vessels landed less than the permitted amount, with a couple of vessels landing only a third of their permitted total catch when working in area 7.

### *Fishery conclusions*

Overall, the fishery was a success, the stocks maintained the number of vessels fishing for the full four weeks and the fishery was open and stable for the length of time envisioned at the start. This is a positive first step in refocussing the permit fishery as a reliable, small-scale fishery which can take place every year and the industry can rely upon.

Several of the vessels which did not take part in the fishery despite holding permits were smaller vessels who were looking to take part in the cockle fishery for the first time or those vessels which needed to travel to the district.

The opening of the permit fishery during TECFO seemed to work well, with factories able to keep up with the increase in quantity which required cooking during September. Additionally, approving the earlier start time for the permit holders allowed for a greater opportunity to complete their trips, especially during weeks which presented less favourable weather conditions.

## *Outlook for 2025*

The future of the permit fishery as a small-scale, sustainable opportunity takes a significant step forwards next year as, with the start of the new TECFO 2024, new areas will be available to the permit fishery, including the desirable beds on the North Kent coast, Area 15. The future of the permit fishery looks strong and officers are continuing to work with local authorities to establish stable classified beds along this coast. Following the completion of the spring 2025 surveys, decisions will be taken on the flexible permit fishery for next year.

### **3. Thames Estuary Cockle Fishery Order 2024**

After submitting our application for a new Thames cockle regulating order in April 2023 and running a statutory consultation from the 29 February until the 29 March, the new Thames Estuary Cockle Fishery Order 2024 (T24) will be laid before Parliament on 4 December 2024. Throughout the whole process of developing new cockle management a core objective has been to work constructively with the industry and make clear decisions as early as possible. Our intention was originally to run the application process in April and May before the start of this year's cockle fishery and then to conclude the process of issuing new licences in November 2024. This was then delayed until the 22 July until the 23 August with licence issuing taking place in January. This would give all licence holders, especially any new licence holders six months to sort out any business or vessel arrangements before the fishery starts.

However, the delays in making the regulating order have eaten into this application time. Now that the Order has been laid, it is due to come into force on 4 December 2024 and our intention is to start the written application process on 5 December 2024, closing on 8 January 2025, this would give all applicants five weeks to put in their applications. Applicants can already start the process of pulling together their applications as the questions (Annex 5, pg.26) as well as the marking scheme (Annex 4, pg.19) can be found in the management plan that was included as part of the statutory consultation.

#### *The Applications Panel*

Both the Licence Allocation Procedure (LAP) and the process of scoring licence applications are clearly laid out in detail in the management plan that accompanies the new regulating order. A vital part of this process is the creation of an Applications Panel that will score and rank the applications. The nature and structure of the panel was discussed as part of Consultation 3 and amendments were made based on feedback from the industry. The management plan outlines an application panel that consists of five KEIFCA members and two independent experts.

At the May 2024 Authority meeting, Members agreed on a panel comprised of five KEIFCA members, plus two independent panellists – from the AIFCA and CEFAS. However, the panellist from CEFAS is due to be on paternity leave when the process is undertaken, therefore officers are working with both CEFAS and the AIFCA to source a replacement panellist.

*Proposed timeline for the Licence Allocation Procedure*

Date	Activity
<b>5 Dec- 8 January</b>	Application window to apply for licence
<b>25 February</b>	Panel meeting to review scores and rank applications. Applicants close to cut-off point invited to oral evidence meeting.
<b>12 March</b>	Oral evidence meeting
<b>13 March</b>	Application Panels ranking of the applications brought to the full Authority. The Authority agree the final ranking order and the new licence holders.
<b>27 March</b>	New T24 licences for 2025-2021 are awarded
<b>June 2025</b>	Start of T24 cockle fishery

**Recommendations:**

Members **NOTE** and **APPROVE** the report



