

From: Chief IFCO

To: Kent and Essex Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority –
26 November 2024

Subject: Small scale manila clam trial October 2024

Classification: **Unrestricted**

Summary:

The paper provides an overview, as well as initial feedback from the 4-week manila clam trial that took place in October.

Recommendation:

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

Introduction

The Manila clam is a high-value seafood indigenous to the sub-tropical and temperate coasts of the western Pacific. Since the early 20th century, it has been spread by human activities and is now widely established in the northeastern Pacific, the Indian Ocean, the Mediterranean Sea. Manila clams were first introduced to the UK as an aquaculture species in the late 1980s and early 1990s. A combination of the species being more robust than first thought and water temperatures increasing significantly with global warming has led to the establishment of significant local populations in places like Poole Harbour and emerging populations along the South and Southeast coast.

Over the last few years Manila clams (*Ruditapes philippinarum*) have become ever more abundant in the Thames and have the potential to become a viable future fishery. KEIFCA have been collecting abundance and spatial distribution data for manila clams collected for six years (2018 – 2023) as part of our cockle bed surveys, and this initial research shows that the key beds are currently found within Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), so any potential future fishery would have to be compatible with Natural England’s advice.

At the March 2024 KEIFCA meeting, the Authority agreed to run a trial to understand the impact and economic potential of different types of manila clam harvesting gear and operations before any legislation is developed. The bullet points below outline the steps taken to engage with the local fishing industry and setup the manila clam trial.

- Following the March Authority meeting, officers engaged with the local industry and asked for expressions of interest from fishers who would like to take part in the trial. Nearly 40 fishers (38) expressed an interest to fill the 4-5 spaces that had been agreed with Natural England.
- At the May KEIFCA meeting, the Authority agreed to an application process to narrow down the list of interested parties to 4-5 trialists. Fishers wishing to take part in the trial were asked to send in a photo of the boat and gear they intended to use (or drawings of the gear if it has not been made) and how they intended to set it up, how they intended to sort both clams and cockles and what markets they intended to sell their catch into or how are they going to process the clams. Finally, we then asked prospective trialists to provide an outline of how they planned to test and develop their gear during the trial.
- All the fishers that had expressed an interest were invited to apply, and from these, fifteen fishers submitted a formal application to participate in the trial. The applications were assessed and ranked by a panel of KEIFCA members (including Rob Clark from the AIFCA). Overall, the standard of applications was very high, and it was clear that several applicants had spent a lot of time thinking about and planning their gear construction and potential markets.
- After discussions with Natural England, KEIFCA managed to increase the number of trialists to eight. Following the process agreed by the Authority (that the number of trialists planning to use hydraulic suction dredges was limited to two), six vessels planning to use batch dredges were awarded a place on the trial as well as two vessels planning to use hydraulic suction dredges. Increasing the number of trialists allows us to test a diverse and wide range of business models and fishing gears.
- After phoning up and informing all the successful and unsuccessful candidates, our lead officer on this project Katherine Stuart, visited each successful trialist to discuss the specifics of the trial and answer any questions.
- On the 28 September KEIFCA held a face-to-face meeting with the trialists in Whitstable to run through the detail of the trial and discuss how the trial will collect evidence required by Natural England (NE).
- To keep those fishers interested, but not actively involved in the trial, up to date with the progress of the project, officers developed a newsletter that has been updated at key points.
- At the September KEIFCA meeting the Authority agreed to an outline of the trial and detailed set of measures for the trialists to follow; fishing areas, fishing times, numbers of trips per week and amounts per trip.

- The trial started on the 1st October with the first week set aside for trialists to setting up and test their gear and no landings were permitted. For the remaining three weeks of the trial, each trialist was allowed two trips per week with a maximum of 300kg allowed per trip in weeks 2 and 3 and a maximum of 500kg per trip in the final week.
- On the 7th November trialists attended an meeting, which provided the participants with an opportunity to provide initial feedback what worked or did not work on the trial. Trialists and officers also discussed the process for writing up the trial and how to strike the right balance between information that should be in the public domain to help inform decision making and information that trialists regarded as commercially sensitive.

Running the trial

Setting up and running the trial has been a significant workstream for all of our staff throughout October. Using Nerissa and Vigilant in tandem officers worked with the trialists to develop and perfect sampling techniques that worked on the wide range of vessel sizes and set-ups. Officers took detailed samples of retained and discarded catch to understand how different fishing gears worked, how efficient they were at selecting clams above the minimum size and at discarding undamaged cockles. In total officers conducted 28 boardings and 4 landings, measured 8 sets of fishing gear and processed 165 samples including over 18,500 clams.

Of the eight trialists, two trialists used a batch dredge without any water injection mechanism (dry dredge), four trialists used batch dredges with water injection and two trialists used suction dredges (used in the cockle fishery). Although the trialists with a 'dry dredge' had several attempts, at different stages of the trial, to get this type of gear to catch well the results were generally poor. There was general agreement that although this type of gear could work well on softer ground it was not suited to the ground in the trial area.

Of the remaining gears trialled, the water injection batch dredge setups worked well, sorted clams and cockles efficiently and had low damage rates. This is a really encouraging initial outcome of trial and could hopefully provide a pathway for future trials, however officers have a lot of data to process before firm conclusions can be reached.

What happens next

Officers are currently about to start the process of conducting one-to-one interviews with all the trialists that will help capture more detailed opinions on the trial and their specific gear set-up, the processing of the catch after it had been landed, the prices achieved and markets the catch was sold into. Following this there is a 'number crunching' phase where officers will go through all the data collected and start to answer more detailed questions.

Officers will work closely with Natural England, and make sure the project answers any questions they have and provides enough evidence to allow future trials. Further meetings with the trialists are planned before the end of the year to share the detailed outcomes from the trial and scope out how a 2025 trial

could work. Officers will continue to update the Authority at the next Quarterly meeting in January.

Recommendation:

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