

North Western Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority

Quarterly Meeting: 6 December 2011

Morecambe Town Hall: 10.30 a.m.

Agenda Item: 8

SCIENCE AND ENVIRONMENT REPORT

GENERAL

1. The Ribble Estuary cockle fishery has dominated the Authority's workload this quarter and this is reflected in the time spent by the scientific staff in support of the management of that fishery. Despite this, scientific officers have progressed a number of important projects during the period.

SURVEY AND INSPECTION WORK

Mussels

2. Authorisations for the seed mussel fishery on the South America skear to the south east of Foulney Twist in Morecambe Bay expired on 30th September 2011 with final landings amounting to 7900 tonnes. Scientific staff have been unable to carry out further surveys of the stocks but reports from the operators and the cessation of fishing prior to the expiration date of the authorisations suggest that much of the remaining stock was being depleted by natural causes.
3. The mussels relaid in the area known as "Barrow 1" were inspected with the operator by the Scientific & Fishery Order Officer and found to have bedded in in places and to have put down substantial mussel mud. It will be informative to revisit and assess how much has successfully overwintered. A meeting is scheduled this month to discuss the medium to long term plans for this area.
4. Towards the end of the period officers were made aware of a pollution event in Morecambe Bay that lead to the closure of the mussel beds on public health grounds. Local Authorities around the Bay suspended all classifications and sampling after it became apparent that a large amount of raw sewage had been and continued to be released from the outfall at the Schola Green pumping station. Officers were recently informed that this has now ceased and the results from bathing waters sampling on the 17th November were well below statutory limits. At the time of writing no post event hygiene sampling results had been returned, although officers have been requested to assist with the resumption of sampling the mussel beds, and will continue to monitor the situation and assist in efforts to reopen the beds.

Cockles

5. Following the Authority's decision to extend the closure of the cockle fishery in Morecambe Bay until April next year, and in the light of the summer survey findings, officers feel the requirement for survey work in the Bay is considerably reduced. Officers will maintain a watching brief through the winter period based on reports from Fishery Officers and the industry and return to regular surveying if necessary.

6. The Ribble Estuary cockle fishery is elsewhere in the agenda. From a scientific point of view the main problem is the difficulty in getting officers on to the Foulhaze bed safely, in sufficient numbers and with sufficient time to make assessments of the stocks. This has been achieved twice in September and on 22 November but this could be the last opportunity for some time due to unfavourable timings of tides against the daylight hours available. A survey of the 'inner Ribble', Penfold and South Gut beds to the SE of Foulhaze on the Southport side found only limited patches of mature cockles in densities above the Authority's biologically "safe" threshold of 20m⁻².
7. At Leasowe, densities of cockles remain close to 20m⁻². This area will be surveyed as soon as possible to inform any future management decisions.

PROJECT WORK

MCZs

8. The Science Officer with the aid of Fishery Officers have provided information regarding the quantitative impacts the proposed MCZ's in the Southern half of the district would potentially have on any fisheries present. The Fisheries Minister confirmed that the MCZ project has been delayed by 6 months, advice to the Government will now be provided by July 2012 from Natural England and JNCC.

Western HVDC cable.

9. A consultation request was received from the MMO regarding the issuing of a Marine Licence for this cable which is proposed to come ashore at Leasowe, Wirral. The cable is part of the improvements that the National Grid is undertaking to bring electricity down from Scotland where the cable originates. The cable landing point is close to the cockle bed at Leasowe and the path of the cable will come through Liverpool Bay SPA, as well as the proposed and existing conservation designations on the Wirral foreshore area. Science Officers will provide advice as requested.

Canada to Ainsdale Emerald SubSea cable.

10. Initial consultation was established by NetWork Services Ltd, undertaking fishing liaison on behalf of the Emerald Express Cable project. The company has started to look at the potential impacts of the current proposed cable route which will come from Canada and land at Ainsdale, Southport. The Science Officer will continue to liaise with the consultation where possible.

Fisheries Liaison for Offshore Wind & Wet Renewables Group (FLOWW)

11. The Science Officer attended the latest meeting of this group. Plans were announced to formalise developers' updates into a table/matrix providing a snapshot of current activity of all renewable projects around the UK. This table will be sent quarterly to the Fisheries representatives to allow them to provide feedback, raise concerns and open up dialogue prior to future meetings.
12. FLOWW is undertaking a review of the existing 'Best Practice Guidance for Renewable Developers'. A sub group will meet to discuss the needs and concerns of the wave and tidal energy industry and potential effects and concerns to fisheries. This is prompted by the leases which have been given in Scotland by the Crown Estate for several demonstrator sites for wave and tidal energy, plus a site for underwater turbines in the Pentland Firth and Orkney Waters. The group hopes to get representatives from the Wet Renewable industry present at future meetings.

Cockle transplant experiment

13. Members will be aware from previous reports and papers that an opportunity has arisen to progress a long standing proposal to carry out a cockle transplant experiment at Lytham. A 'Method Statement' was approved at the last TSB meeting and officers have carried out preliminary surveys and equipment trials. Although the stock has been heavily predated and eroded, Officers consider there is enough left for the experiment to still be viable and are completing the necessary Habitats Regulations assessments and byelaw derogations with a view to completing the transplant work in the last week of November. A full report will be presented to the next TSB meeting.

Irish Sea Wind Farm Round Three Project.

14. The IFCA has been approached on behalf of Centrica to consult and provide feedback on the Zonal Appraisal and Planning (ZAP) project outline. The commercial fisheries part of the project will seek to assess the current level of commercial fishing activity within the area. The potential environmental impacts will be assessed both for wind farms alone and in combination with other activities in the area. Officers will continue to be involved in the consultation process. A meeting is due to be arranged to gather all fisheries related bodies to review the proposal and seek opinions on the approach of the ZAP.

Project news from the marine renewables sector.

15. A NERC/DEFRA funded project has been established to assess the benefits and risks of the renewable energies sector. It will examine a variety of issues such as migratory fish and, benthic sediment impacts. A large proportion of the work will be conducted by the Marine Biological Association at study sites including North Hoyle Wind Farm, Gwynt Y Mor Wind Farm and Cornwall Wave Energy Hub. The Science Officer will continue to monitor this project when it commences in 2012.
16. In another initiative, the National Federation of Fishermen's Organisation has funding to start a project on the effects of displacement from fishing grounds by renewables.

Razorfish dredging in Liverpool Bay.

17. Since 2006, a number of operators have been granted authorisations to trial dredging for razorfish and other clam species in several areas of Liverpool Bay. Earlier this year one operator made an application to Defra to establish a several fishery. Members will recall that Officers recommended that the Authority object to the application as it may be inappropriate for a commercial operator to be both grantee and grantor of a Several Order. The proposal was unclear as to how the operator would fulfil the Several Order requirement to enhance or improve the fishery and members raised concerns over the robustness of the supporting evidence for stock assessments and the impact of the fishery on the wider environment.
18. The Authority was not the only organisation to raise concerns and Defra have refused the application. IFCA officers have suggested to the developer that new IFCA byelaws might provide a better way to manage the fishery and he has agreed to review the application and consider working with the IFCA to develop the fishery. Unfortunately, since then, little time has been available to progress this matter any further but it is hoped that officers will be in a position to devote resources to it early in the New Year.

Sustainable Fisheries Review.

19. A report of the first meeting of the working group is attached at Annex A.

Pressall Gas Storage Proposal

20. A report of the current situation regarding this proposal is attached at Annex B.

Meetings

21. In addition to all the meetings associated with the foregoing projects and general work, Officers provided representation at the IFCA Technical Advisory Group (TAG) and the regional Shellfish Liaison Group.

Other

22. Scientific Officers continued to assist with the collection of hygiene samples within the District and provide support to the enforcement effort across the District.

Science Team
24 November 2011