

NWIFCA TSB members: For immediate consideration

AGENDA
ITEM NO.
9

Annex A: Urgent industry request for limited cockle fishery in Morecambe Bay

Purpose of Report: To consider industry request for limited cockle fishery

Recommendation:

1. The request is considered by correspondence in advance of the March meeting because a decision is urgent.
2. A limited, tightly regulated fishery as set out below is approved. Please send an email indicating whether you agree to the recommendation or not by 9am Monday 29th February. Send to m.knott@nw-ifca.gov.uk
3. A report on the outcome of the proposal will be on the agenda of the 11 March meeting for discussion and confirmation of any decision taken.

Background

1. There has been no significant cockle fishery in Morecambe Bay since 2008 with very low stocks and little recruitment to the population until 2015.
2. Last year a cockle spatfall was noted in some of the traditional cockle beds in Morecambe Bay. At least some stock has survived the winter and grown on but a commercial fishery was not expected before the new season starting September 2016.

Survey 11 February 2016

3. This survey was the first opportunity of the year for science officers to access the sands in daylight and reasonable weather. Based on sampling from 2015, industry advice and local IFCO knowledge, a full survey was carried out. The approximate boundaries of an area with significant stocks on the Leven Sands in north Morecambe Bay were identified.
4. The survey showed patchy stocks, large enough in places to support a limited fishery. The area surveyed is about 4 km². Cockles outside the survey area were few.
5. The cockle minimum landing size (MLS) is defined in byelaw 3 as cockles which will not pass through a 20mm square test gauge. The stock found was mixed size with abundant undersize (5-15mm length) aged less than 1 year from the 2015 recruitment and fewer much larger sized cockles aged 3 years or more.
6. Fig 1 shows numbers of sized (up to 38; mean 10 per m²) and undersized (up to 458; mean 79 per m²) cockles in the surveyed area.

Industry request to fish cockles

7. North Morecambe Bay fishermen did their own survey, also identifying the Leven Sands bed. They requested IFCA authorisation to fish with a cram.
8. A cram is a local fishing tool used for taking large cockles without causing damage to juveniles. A cram is a short handled 3 pronged rake (fig 2) used for lifting cockles after they have been raised to the sand surface using a jumbo to fluidize the sand in the usual way.
9. The reasons for requesting a cram fishery are:
 - I. there is a clear distinction between sized and undersized stock and the sized cockles are sparse,

- II. any fishing now needs to avoid damage to spat,
- III. There is not enough stock to warrant a full scale rake fishery,
- IV. Large cockles are valuable, worth £2 -£4 kg providing an income in an otherwise slack period.

Officer's comments

- 10. The large cockles may well not survive beyond 2016, dying off through old age. It is not clear if they will spawn in 2016.
- 11. Any fishery should be tightly regulated to avoid excess damage to juveniles
- 12. Use of a cram is a traditional type of cockle fishing in Morecambe Bay currently prohibited as is all cockle fishing because of the low stocks.
- 13. Cram fishing is low impact causing much less disturbance to surface sediment layers than a full sized rake. A cram fishery would be Habitats Regulations compliant subject to effective enforced mitigation measures.
- 14. Sampling for hygiene classification has commenced. A classification should be available in early March. Past evidence would lead to an expectation of a B classification.
- 15. Depending on the price offered and the catch which could be achieved, the fishery is expected to be small scale. It is unlikely that fishermen would travel long distances to participate in a restricted cram fishery. Stocks may decline quickly so the fishery could be short lived.
- 16. There are currently 75 permit holders with the potential for a further 85 to apply. A considerable number of applications might be expected if a cockle fishery is opened but the maximum possible number of permit holders entitled to fish is 160.

Regulations if a fishery is approved

- 17. If members are content to authorize a fishery, it could start on 14 March. It could then continue to the closed season starting 1 May. It is unlikely the fishery would last beyond that time as reduced stock would be expected after 6 weeks fishing.
- 18. An authorisation would be issued under Byelaw 3 paragraph 10. The fishery would fall within the Morecambe Bay commercial area designated under Byelaw 3 so there would be no right to gather without a byelaw 3 permit. In addition, the following regulations would apply
 - I. The fishery permitted for a defined area with removal of cockle prohibited elsewhere;
 - II. Removal of size cockle only using a restricted size jumbo and cram; prohibition on rakes and riddles;
 - III. Weekly landing returns;
 - IV. Possible restrictions on days or tides to reduce bird disturbance;
 - V. Access to the sands from a single point at West Plain (Moor Lane) to facilitate permit checking.
 - VI. Only ATVs and tractors to be taken through the gate and on to the track leading to the sands. No vehicles to be driven or parked on the saltmarsh - damage to salt marsh would lead to closure of the fishery. This would require identification of another area for trading and transport. Possibility of using Cark airfield as in the past;
 - VII. Restriction on size of jumbo to say 6 foot length, 14 inches wide.

Further planning and consultation

19. The Authority will seek views of byelaw 3 permit holders by text message, website and at three consultation meetings (Whitehaven, Liverpool, Milnethorpe) before 11 March meeting. Outcomes to be reported to that meeting for final decision.
20. Natural England have been informed of the proposal and have noted the HRA. The main concern is damage to the saltmarsh and disturbance to birds.
21. Pending a decision on opening the fishery, a multi-agency committee of regulators will be convened to consider management arrangements needed. Members invited would include the Council, EHS, police, EA, Coastguard, Natural England, GLA and any others needed.

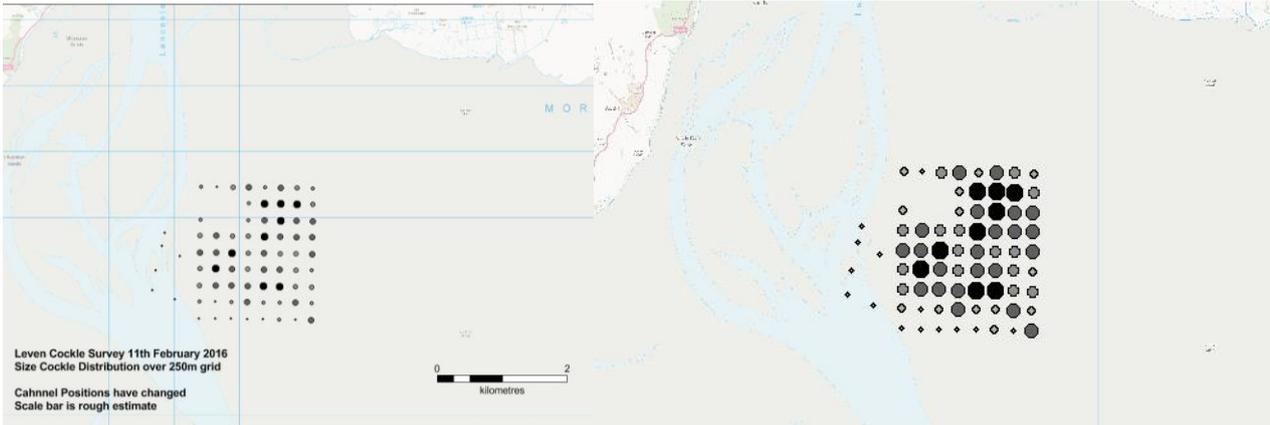


Fig. 1. Leven cockle survey 11 Feb 2016. Left: Sized cockles, Right undersized cockles. Stations are 250m apart in both directions. Dot size represents cockle abundance. Ranges: zero to 40 per m² size and zero to 460 per m² undersize.



Fig 2 A. typical cram, length about 40cm; B. Cram and basket fishing for cockles. Note jumbo behind.

Mandy Knott
Senior Scientist.
25th February 2016