

Meeting with Foulney Mussel Fishers

Heversham & Leasgill Village Hall, 10th June 2013

Attendance

22 Fishers
5 NWIFCA Officers

1. Background

Over the first half of 2013, the seed mussel fishery at Foulney Twist has been fished on the majority of spring tides, which has required a significant enforcement effort. Many of the fishers involved have expressed opinion that using a minimum landing size is not the most effective management tool for the bed, therefore all individuals who had fished the bed this year were invited to a meeting with NWIFCA officers to discuss their ideas and suggestions for potential future management.

Upon arrival, fishers were given a copy of the Committee report 'Byelaw 13A – closure of Mussel Fishery at Foulney Twist' that will be presented at the NWIFCA Annual Meeting on 14th June, and the meeting opened with Senior Scientist Mandy Knott giving an overview of the report.

2. Key points – all comments and opinions are from fishermen at the meeting, unless otherwise specified to be Officers.

2.1. NWIFCA's advertised closure in May – there were several complaints that the NWIFCA had advertised on the website that the Foulney bed would be closed at very short notice. Officers admitted that the notice was poorly worded, but clarified that it was a proposed closure notice, inviting comments from the industry and more care would be taken in future.

2.2 Proposed Summer Closure – The main problem currently is that there are different size classes mixed in together. At the moment the mussel spat is relatively easy to wash out from the sized mussel, but if the fishery is closed for several months, it will grow on and by the time it re-opens, separating the size from undersize will be much harder. It was also pointed out that the bed hasn't been closed over the summer in the past. However, the question was raised that if fishers work the bed the whole summer and clear it, what work will they do in winter? Others raised the issue that they are full-time fishermen who need continual income. Constant opening and closing of beds makes financial planning difficult.

2.3 Change MLS to 30mm – There is a strip of mussels on the east side of the bed that don't grow over 30mm. Could the MLS be reduced to 30mm so the area can be cleared and left for spat? There would still be mussels left for the birds because the pearled mussels won't be touched.

2.4 Zoning

2.4.1 Zoning to separate year classes. A proposed solution to the mixed size class problem would be to zone the bed. If areas were allowed to be cleared of all mussels, then it would allow the space for spat to settle across an area and grow on as a single size class, which would ultimately make enforcement of a MLS much easier. In some cases clearing zones might also allow fresh stock to move in – for example, there is a patch of spat at the bottom of the channel

between the main bed and 'the island', which used to be covered by eelweed as the spat grew on and is now exposed as the weed has died. If a proportion of this is left alone, it would likely move back up the bed and repopulate the patch.

A variety of different ideas and suggestions for zoning were put forward, but Officers emphasised that all ideas would have to be considered and appropriately researched before being taken to the TSB sub-committee for review. Caution was urged by the fishers over potentially basing long-term management plans on this year's experience – the dynamics of the Bay are highly changeable.

2.4.2 Officers asked if there would be issues with increased numbers of fishers if zoning was implemented. Fishers felt that this would not occur as there wouldn't be much money in it, and in the past when the price was higher for sized mussels, it was still only locals fishing it. Officers also asked if there would be a pause in fishing once a zone was fished out whilst waiting for other areas to grow on. Again fishers felt there would be no problem as the numbers fishing the bed wouldn't be high enough.

2.4.3 Vote – an informal vote was taken asking who was in favour of a potential zoning system of management. There were 18 votes for, and 0 against, with 4 abstentions.

2.5 Resident complaints – There have been some complaints from residents over fisher behaviour recently, in particular over noise from quad bikes and using the beach for the toilet. The question was asked whether a portaloos could be rented, such as at Foulnaze. Officers replied that in that example the buyers put up a bond for the toilet – the council didn't provide it for free – and that something similar would have to happen here.

2.6 Seed mussel mitigation– There were complaints that Foulney alone was used as mitigation for bird food in the seed mussel derogations last year. Officers replied that mussel beds across the whole of Morecambe Bay were used as mitigation, and that the HRA is available for anyone who wishes to see it.

3. Other issues

3.1 'Local' fishermen – There was a question raised of how the term local fishermen is defined when referring to fishing activities in Morecambe Bay. It was remarked that it is a highly subjective term and could be used to attach emotive weight to important issues. Officers replied that it was an important question and something that merits further discussion

3.2 Seed dredgers - Officers were asked how much seed mussel dredgers were going to have to pay this year for their derogations to fish. The Senior Science Officer replied that charges would be in-line with proposals set out in the draft Morecambe Bay Hybrid Fishery Order. Several fishers considered that the dredgers should also be required to relay some of their catch, which would help with re-stocking any potential zones on Foulney. The Senior Scientist replied that this would have to be considered for inclusion in the Order and would meet with fishermen to discuss it in the near future. There was also a request that officers protect an area of the Bay from seed dredging to see how the spat grows on.