

NWIFCA Quarterly Meeting
19 April 2013: 10.30 a.m.
Morecambe Town Hall, Marine Road, Morecambe

AGENDA
ITEM NO.
11a

Report to NWIFCA

Decision NOT to open the Foulnaze cockle bed, Ribble Estuary.

Decision

Following a stock assessment on 11th March 2013, the NWIFCA has carefully considered options for managing the cockle fishery on Foulnaze bed, Ribble Estuary. The NWIFCA has the remit to manage all our fisheries sustainably. Having taken our stakeholders' views into consideration we have taken the decision to leave the adult cockle until it has had the opportunity to spawn. The Science Team will re-survey the area in June and a further assessment will be made as to whether stocks are sufficient to allow a summer opening.

Work Undertaken to Open the Fishery

Initially Officers had been mindful to open the fishery on 29th April and work was undertaken to initiate a multi-agency meeting to plan this opening. As the bed lies within a European Marine Site a Habitats Regulations Assessment was carried out and submitted to Natural England. A **conservative** estimate of biomass of adult cockle gave a figure of 670 tonnes and it was proposed within the HRA to set a TAC for harvesting of 500 tonnes. The conclusions of the HRA that there would be No Likely Significant Effect from the fishery were **not** accepted by Natural England and further justifications were requested.

The rationale behind our conclusion of No Likely Significant Effect was:

- a) the area to be fished constituted 1% of the total SPA. Although not surveyed and therefore no estimated biomass available, there were known to be patches of adult cockle remaining on Lytham and Southport cockle beds (North Run, Mousehole, Penfold Channel and South Gut) as well as mussels on the training wall which would be available as prey for oystercatchers;
- b) the dense 2012 settlement on the adjacent North Penfold bed unusually had persisted through the winter and was available on a greater number of tides to these and other birds. Mean length of this cockle was 12mm which oystercatchers are known to feed on;
- c) the large number of overwintering birds, particularly oystercatchers, would have left the area by this date and therefore the required food availability for the remaining resident and non-migrating birds was low compared to September when overwintering birds are arriving (when it is recommended that TACs are set at 33% of total biomass). Requests had been made to Natural England for an estimate of numbers of oystercatchers remaining at the beginning of May and of their cockle prey requirement. This information was unfortunately not forthcoming prior to the HRA and due to time constraints the TAC was set at 75% (of estimated biomass on the Foulnaze bed and not taking into account cockles on other Ribble beds) as a pragmatic and reasoned approach;
- d) observations during the survey on Foulnaze and from local fishermen suggested that the adult cockle was dying off and therefore there would be little impact from the fishing of this stock on longer term bird feeding requirements;

- e) if the cockle was dying it would not live to spawn and therefore if the fishery was justified on these grounds there was no justification for maintaining the minimum threshold (of 20 adults per m²);
- f) fishing would be permitted on a limited number of tides – spring tides, one tide per day, 4 days a week – and therefore disturbance levels to birds would be restricted;
- g) with these conditions imposed the Foulhaze cockles remained available as food resource for the birds on the alternative tides while they persisted.

Stakeholder Views on Opening

In general discussion with cockle gatherers it became apparent that there were two views on whether the fishery should be opened in April or left till the summer. As part of our commitment to improve dialogue with our stakeholders the NWIFCA invited comments and responses from Byelaw 3 permit holders on the management of the cockle fishery at Foulhaze. The question was put, should the NWIFCA:

Open the fishery as soon as possible (ie. beginning of May) to take advantage of the stock?

Delay opening until June / July giving surviving cockle the chance to spawn and improve condition?

We received 59 responses, where 34 wanted the bed open as soon as possible, 24 wanted to keep it closed until summer, and 1 was content with either opening. Both points of view provided good reasons and interesting comments of an equal number, which have been reproduced below.

No keep closed until summer:	comments received = 19
Yes open as soon as possible:	comments received = 17
Either:	comments received = 1

All of the comments received have been posted on the website with the authors details removed. There were differing views from buyers, with some saying the cockles would not be suitable at this time of year for bottling due to the ‘black’ in them from being in spawning condition ruining the product. Others who use a different processing procedure would have taken them but were understanding of the reasoning behind leaving them to give them the chance to spawn.

Prospect for Summer Fishery

There is the chance that the adult cockle will all die off – before or after spawning – and there will be no stock left for a summer opening. However it was considered that from a sustainability view point the NWIFCA had the responsibility to allow natural processes by not allowing the stock to be harvested, and to provide the chance for them to spawn if they do survive.

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18th April 2013