

**NWIFCA Quarterly Meeting:
8th December 2017: 11.00 a.m.**

**AGENDA
ITEM
10**

SCIENCE AND SURVEY UPDATE:

1st August – 31st October 2017

Purpose: To provide an update on science and related work

1. COCKLE AND MUSSEL FISHERIES

Science Officers have had a busy quarter with cockle and mussel surveys, as well as providing IFCOs with assistance in enforcement and sample runs (for shellfish hygiene testing). Due to the nature of the fisheries the Bivalve Mollusc Working Group has not been convened: any correspondence necessary has been carried out via email. Full survey results can be found in the report to October TSB.

i. Wirral - Leasowe Cockle Fishery

Stock assessments showed that the abundance and density of the 2017 cockles had persisted to a level that a commercial fishery could proceed providing management could be arranged to ensure the fishery was HRA compliant, mainly in relation to bird disturbance and bird prey resource. Science Officers attended and contributed to multi-agency meetings in the planning of the fishery and had close dialogue with Natural England colleagues to agree the HRA. In order to ensure sufficient cockle prey food resource remained on the bed through the winter for the SPA birds, a TAC was set. Officers built in a buffer to ensure the TAC was not surpassed, using daily IFCO reports, dialogue with merchants and scrutiny of landings to trigger a re-survey once 80% of the TAC had been taken.

Science Officers assisted in the first days of the fishery with enforcement on the bed, and also engaged in PR on the prom. Officers also carried out engagement with 'recreational' gatherers on the bed, ensuring they were aware of the MLS and the Byelaw. The Senior Scientist also responded to emails when members of the public raised concerns around the fishery. The main issue was littering, including cockle bags and drinks bottles being left out on the bed. These wash up on to the foreshore when the tide comes in. It is one aspect of this kind of fishery that must be addressed. The Senior Scientist spent some time on the bed amongst the fishermen reminding them to take all their rubbish off the beach. One buyer did take responsibility when asked and immediately sent one of his support workers out to collect the rubbish. However it should not be necessary to ask and Officers should not have to be spending time sorting this out.

A further stock survey was carried out on 18th October showing that following fishing and considerable high winds since the fishery opened, much of the cockle from the dense area had spread out towards the north-east. There was less remaining than predicted when taking landings returns (~ 1000 tonnes) into consideration and therefore the original TAC was reconsidered. A recommendation to close the fishery based on activity levels at the time was made to TSB. This was subsequently changed as fishery levels dramatically dropped. Only around three fishermen are now gathering there. Close monitoring continues and a revised recommendation will be made to TSB if necessary.

ii. Ribble Estuary - Penfold North

Although the soft muddy ground at this fishery makes survey difficult, officers have worked to cover as much of it as possible to provide stock assessments. These cockles are very slow growing but abundance and density have persisted. However only around 10% is size and the ground is so muddy and water is lacking that riddling out the undersize would be highly problematic, and there would be a risk of damage to the undersize stock.

iii. Morecambe Bay – Pilling Sands & Flookburgh / Leven Sands

Survey and stock assessments were carried out on these three beds, and an HRA completed for Morecambe Bay (rather than individual beds). No TAC was set as there are sufficient alternative cockle beds that are not open to fishing, and mussel stocks for bird feeding. These are being monitored, and should stock be dramatically lost Officers will seek to take action.

Activity at Pilling as expected has been low level as in previous fisheries.

iv. All other cockle beds

There are no other commercial stocks at present, but Officers and IFCOs will monitor for spat settlement.

v. Dee Estuary – size mussel

Officers worked with industry to carry out an inspection of dense mussel stock in the Dee Estuary. Mussel is recruited to the hard substrate provided by cockle shell and dying cockle and is situated within the cockle bed areas of the Dee Cockle Regulating Order, managed by NRW. The ground is too soft with deep mud to be able to walk all round it, so estimates were made of the area and the biomass. Close discussion with NRW around inherited EA byelaws particularly around access was undertaken. All vehicular access is prohibited under the EA byelaws. Gatherers, which could include both B3 permit holders and those with Dee Transitional Permits, will take small boats out and dry out on the beds, fish around the boat and then return with the mussels on the flooding tide, in the same way the Dee Cockle Order licence holders fish. An HRA was carried out and activity levels are anticipated to be low. The presence of a non-native invasive species in the Estuary requires attention if the mussel is to go for relaying. A Code of Good Practice and Advice notice has been issued to buyers and gatherers.

vi. Morecambe Bay - Heysham Flat seed mussel

Following completion of the HRA which included an exclusion zone around the periphery of the skear to protect what little *Sabellaria alveolata* was there this year, an authorisation to fish was issued to B3 permit holders. Fishing began in August with a low level of activity (average 10 per day). Once the cockle fisheries were open on 1st September activity ceased.

The Senior Scientist witnessed fishermen in the exclusion zone during a heliflight in August. Legal action is being taken.

vii. Morecambe Bay – South America / Falklands seed mussel

No stock – no fishery this year.

viii. Morecambe Bay – Foulney and Low Bottom

Officers are monitoring stock which on the last survey was very mixed in sizes, and IFCOs are reporting on activity. It is possible that a low level of fishing for size mussel may occur during the winter. If fishing starts an HRA will be completed.

iv. All other mussel beds

There are no other commercial stocks at present, but Officers and IFCOs will monitor for spat settlement in spring.

2. MARINE PROTECTED AREAS IN THE NWIFCA DISTRICT

The Senior Scientist continues to participate in the monthly national “Marine Protected Areas Management Working Group” conference calls, with colleagues from Defra, Natural England, IFCA, MMO and EA.

a) Marine Conservation Zones

Tranche 2 - West of Walney MCZ – Recover Objective. Cross-boundary site from 4.3nm to beyond 12nm. Potential for management of nephrops and other bottom towed trawling.

MMO have been in touch and confirm that they consider it appropriate for the MMO to carry out the full MPA assessment for the 0-12nm area of the site. Defra colleagues have stated that they feel management in the offshore section of the site (beyond 12nm) does not need to be addressed at this moment in time and with the wind farm extension taking place, it makes more sense to focus on one measure for the 0-12nm area of the site. They asked NWIFCA if there is agreement for MMO to lead this assessment and that NWIFCA understand and agree that any MMO byelaw implemented for this site would need NWIFCA to enforce in the 0-6nm area. CEO confirmed agreement to this approach. Officers asked to be fully included in any discussions regarding management measures and dialogue with the industry.

Tranche 3 – three estuarine sites Ribble MCZ, the Wyre / Lune MCZ, and the Solway MCZ. No further developments. Full public consultation is expected at some point in 2018 when the list of sites to be designated will be announced.

b) Assessment of Fishing Activities in Marine Protected Areas

Three assessments remain to be completed from the EMS Review. Progress on these have been held-up by the necessity to complete individual HRAs for on-going cockle and mussel fisheries – Morecambe Bay cockles, Leasowe cockles and Dee Estuary size mussels. Work will soon begin on MCZ assessments for Cumbria Coast MCZ and Allonby Bay MCZ. Fylde MCZ and West of Walney MCZ assessments are to be completed by MMO with IFCA data (cross boundary sites). NWIFCA MPA Monitoring and Control Plan first draft is nearly complete and will be tabled at the first TSB meeting in 2018 for approval.

c) Bait Collection Habitats Regulations Assessments

As previously reported there is confusion as to what is being required by Defra of IFCA for bait collection assessments – ie. what kind of bait collection is to be included and the rationale for singling these activities out. TAG Chair and Ms Knott drafted a letter sent to Natural England lead Mike Quigley as an initial attempt to reach clarity. After a lengthy wait an email response has been received from Defra which states that Defra’s expectations are that regulators must manage activities within protected sites (whether SSSI, MCZ or EMS) to deliver the conservation objectives. However further

discussions at this stage have been parked until the outputs of the MMO report on bait collection/ digging due later this year have been assimilated and the extent of the problem are better understood.

In the meantime, NWIFCA continues to collect and collate activity data which provide evidence of the low levels of bait collection in the District.

d) St Bees Head SSSI – Netting and Bird Entanglement and Disturbance

Following approval at TSB of the revised wording of the Voluntary Code of Practice for netting (both from licensed and unlicensed vessels) the Code will be implemented in spring of 2018. Its effectiveness will be monitored closely and compliance reported back to the Authority.

3. NORTH WEST MARINE PLAN – cause and effect working group meetings

Science Officers attended three 'cause and effect working group' meetings with MMO over the Northwest Marine Plan. It was deemed important to have close involvement in this stage of development of the next iteration of the NW Marine Plan, to ensure NWIFCA expertise and knowledge influenced its contents and direction.

4. BASS MEASURES

The 2017 EU Bass measures are being enforced by Officers. ICES Advice on bass stock management for 2018 was published on 24th October and states: "ICES advises that when the precautionary approach is applied, commercial catches should be no more than 2440 tonnes in 2018. If discard rates do not change from last year (2016), this implies commercial landings of no more than 2375 tonnes. Recreational catches cannot be quantified; therefore, total catches cannot be calculated".

Information has been circulating on the internet and the following points have been reported to Officers, although none of this has come through official channels as yet and the understanding is that no decisions have been made pending the December Fisheries Council.

The draft proposal to the EU Council of Ministers as reported is a total prohibition on recreational fishing for bass from January 1st until the end of June. Thereafter, the fishery will operate solely on the basis of catch and release. Reductions for the commercial fleet are suggested at 60% (reduction from 10 tonnes per annum per vessel to 4 tonnes) for hook and line fishery only. The by-catch exemption should be removed.

5. RECREATIONAL ANGLING STRATEGY – PROGRESS REPORT

The NWIFCA Recreational Sea Angling Strategy (V.1) was tabled at February's TSB meeting. The Strategy is intended to be a working document that will develop over time. Other work priorities have limited the amount of engagement with sea anglers. However progress has still been made and feedback documented to be incorporated into V.2 in due course.

6. RESEARCH PROJECTS - Bangor University PhD

Mr. Feather has been sampling and surveying Morecambe Bay mussel beds, focusing on Foulney throughout the summer and intends to continue through the winter. He will also incorporate some bird

feeding observations on the mussel beds during this time. Officers are assisting him whenever possible.

7. NWIFCA NEW VESSEL

Science Officers have made two visits to ensure science input into the refit of the new NWIFCA vessel. Officers have found the meetings with the Holyhead Marine team, and our Master and engineer, very promising. The refit will include provision for outdoor wet lab, as well as indoor dry computer and tech work areas. The facility to take quads out, dry out on the beds and effectively double tide through use of the berths on-board, along with increased capacity for using sub-tidal grab, scientific dredge and trawls, and side scan sonar will massively improve the capabilities of the scientific work carried out by NWIFCA.

8. MMO Marine Licence and other consultations this quarter:

MMO Marine Licence consultations

Silloth Dredge Disposal Licence Renewal
Devonshire Dock Quay Improvement - BAE systems Barrow
Dredge Disposal from Canning Half Tide Dock- River Mersey
Scoping for potential Marine Aggregate Extraction - Area 518
Liverpool Cruise Liner Terminal Ground Investigation
Ilse of Man Ferry Terminal Ground Investigation – Mersey Docks
Jubilee Bridge waterproofing - Barrow

Byelaw 1 dispensations

Halite - Preesall Gas Storage baseline surveys
EA WFD annual fish surveys
Tarmac - Marine aggregate surveys

Meetings and Training attended this quarter

Mersey Sediment Management Group – Peel Ports
North West Marine Plan – MMO
Solway Firth Partnership
Monitoring and Assessment Workshop – EA and Defra partner agencies

Science Officers
29th November 2017