

NWIFCA Authority Meeting

26th June 2025: 10:00 a.m.

**Agenda
Item
12**

SCIENCE REPORT FOR INFORMATION **MARCH 20TH – JUNE 26TH 2025**

Purpose: To provide an update on the work of the Science Team in the quarter.

Recommendation:

- a) Receive the report

UPDATE FOR THIS QUARTER

This quarter, the main priorities of the science team have been to complete an early survey of the Morecambe Bay cockle stocks following from last years consultation recommendation, finalise a HRA, and complete autumn mussel surveys. To progress with new work on the Mergin Maps project, shrimp research, finalise MCZ assessments, and complete a first draft of the cockle fisheries management plan.

Key achievements since the previous Authority meeting:

- 1) Completed five cockle surveys of Morecambe Bay cockle beds, including associated reports
- 2) Completed Morecambe Bay cockle fishery HRA
- 3) Finalised the Wyre and Lune, and Ribble MCZ assessments
- 4) Initiated a PhD with Bangor University looking into the connectivity of cockle stocks in the NW District.
- 5) Completed six mussel surveys and associated reports
- 6) Responded to seven consultation requests and three dispensation requests.

ONGOING WORK STREAM UPDATES:

1. COCKLES AND MUSSELS

a) April/July 2025 Morecambe Bay cockle surveys

Last year, in consultation with industry, it was determined that a trial early open season would be initiated subject to sufficient cockle stocks. This year, officers undertook early surveys (April/May) to determine whether a fishery in Morecambe Bay was possible for July.

At the TSB meeting on May 29th, the results of the Morecambe bay cockle surveys were presented to the Authority. There has been a decline in the total biomass, and size biomass of cockle in the Bay since July 2024. Given the early surveys, there is still the possibility for this to grow on before July, however, there is a low level of undersize left across the Bat.

Most of the beds across the Bay have also seen a decline, however, Pilling has seen a notable increase in size cockle (note the total biomass has remained roughly stable from 2024 to present) from 1,742 tonnes of size to 2447 tonnes of size. This is likely the result of the majority of undersize cockle from the eastern portion of the bed growing on to reach size.

It was therefore proposed that Pilling open on July 1st with the flexible conditions of one tide a day, five days a week. The limitation on tide times and days was based on two factors; 1) the biomass of cockle for Morecambe Bay as a whole is close to the minimum total biomass a fishery has been previously opened on and it is important we are able to monitor the removal rate of stocks under the current Byelaw 2 monthly returns system. 2) Members of industry noted in the consultation in 2024 that limited tides helped to elongate the fishery.

To determine the days of the week most suitable to industry, NWIFCA held a consultation with industry via the website. Industry voted for a Mon-Fri open days.

b) Dee cockle surveys

In April this year, Science officers joined NRW on their annual cockle surveys in the Dee in preparation for developing the joint Dee Regulating order. The purpose was to see how they undertake their surveys and determine what resourcing and equipment may be needed. In addition, understanding their methodology, conditions of the site and access all help to build a picture as to what NWIFCA may need to consider when undertaking surveys in the area. Given the conditions of the site, alternative sampling methods may be explored for their suitability.

c) Mussel surveys

Between March 20th and June 26th officers carried out six mussel surveys and inspections. Full inspection and inspection reports are provided in Annex 1 of the May 2025 TSB report.

Results from the Dutch Wand surveys demonstrate that the main mussel beds of Low Bottom and Walney channel remain consistent with previous years. The, Foulney mussel bed has suffered some loss of mussel on the lower portion between the main bed and the island, overall biomass has decreased, however there was a significant seed settlement on the upper portion of the bed.

This year, officers accessed South America on quad, and took the drone to trial survey methodology. Unfortunately, due to the timing coinciding with the oystercatcher breeding season, they were not able to use the drone to full capacity – however, an on-foot inspection showed the site had undergone significant changes since last year and was predominantly mixed size stock – not currently suitable for dredging.

2. NWIFCA RESEARCH PROJECTS

a) Mergin – maps (officer sightings data)

A new project looking into streamlining and consolidating officer stats for use in science reporting is progressing with the development of QGIS, and PostgreSQL databases.

b) Shrimp research in the North West

Following the publication of the summary report at the March TSB meeting, officers have been exploring new research partnerships and projects to progress with investigating the cause of decline in shrimps in the NW.

3. MARINE PROTECTED AREAS IN THE NWIFCA DISTRICT:

a) Marine Conservation Zone Assessments

NWIFCA are required to assess the impacts of fishing activities in each of the MPAs designated within its District. As of 2024, there were four outstanding MCZ assessments still in progress. This quarter, two of the outstanding assessments were completed and submitted to Natural England for review, these included Ribble MCZ, and Wyre and Lune MCZ assessments.

b) Marine Natural Capital

NWIFCA have been working with the Association of IFCA and Natural England to develop a project looking into the social values of stakeholders, and how this can be used in management decision making. The film which was developed as part of this project will be screened to Senior management in July, and the final report has been reviewed and will be published by Defra this year.

4. FISHERIES MANAGEMENT PLANS

a) National (excl. cockle)

No further update

b) Cockle fisheries management plan

The first draft of the NWIFCA cockle fisheries management plan has been completed and submitted internally to officers for review. The aim of the plan is to:

- a) provide information and context to the management of our fisheries,
- b) review our current management and identify knowledge gaps which hinder effective management,
- c) propose clear parameters for management and additional management measures,
- d) propose a research and review strategy to address outstanding knowledge gaps over the next 5 years, and develop a transparent, clear process for decision making which can be communicated with stakeholders, and encourage their involvement.

The plan will be made available to TSB members in due course, and eventually published to stakeholders where they will be consulted on the plan and the measures proposed within it.

5. MMO MARINE LICENCE AND OTHER CONSULTATIONS FOR THE QUARTER

a) Morecambe Bay Offshore Wind

No further update

b) Mersey Tidal Power Project

No further update

Consultations this quarter:

- Morecambe Offshore Windfarm - Floating LiDAR
- Area 457 Marine Aggregate Licence Renewal Application
- Barrow Floating Solar Array, Cavendish Dock and adjacent land
- Burbo Bank Bird Guano reduction systems
- Liverpool Docks Renewal Maintenance Dredge
- Llanfairfechan Coastal Defence
- Braystones Directional Wave Bouy

Dispensations this quarter:

- Wyre Rivers Trust Estuary fish survey programme 2025
- CEFAS Irish Sea Beam Trawl Surveys 2025
- Westinghouse Springfields Fuels Limited

6. WORKING GROUPS AND EXTERNAL PARTNERSHIP WORK

a) Technical Advisory Group

The next TAG event will be held in July 7th-9th

c) Coastal Hub

On the 16th of June, Science officers attending a meeting at Salford University, the purpose of which was to connect academics and other research institutes with each other in the area of the Mersey. Officers presented posters on their main work.

d) North West Coastal Forum

Officers will be presenting their work at the first meeting of the North West Coastal Forum in Lancaster at the end of the month. The aim of the meeting is to build connections and share data between the main policy makers, researchers, and conservation bodies regarding projects in the North West. Incorporating work from multiple fields.

17th of June 2025