

NWIFCA Technical, Science and Byelaw Committee

20th of October 2026: 10:00 a.m.

Report no.

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SURVEY AND INSPECTION REPORT **4TH OF AUGUST – 6TH OF OCTOBER 2026**

Purpose:

- a) To report on the results of the mussel surveys and inspections in the last quarter.

Recommendation: Approve the following:

- a) Receive the report and related survey and inspection notes

BACKGROUND

Every year NWIFCA officers undertake extensive surveys and inspections of the cockle and mussel beds across the NWIFCA District. The aim of the surveys is to conduct stock assessments on each bed. The aim of inspections is to gather information in areas that either; a) do not have enough stock to warrant a survey, and/or b) conditions of the bed preclude surveying – for example, large channels or short exposure times which limit the time officers can safely access. Inspections may also take place to see if a full stock assessment is needed.

This quarter, the Survey Inspection Report provides an update on the most recent mussel survey results, as cockle survey results are covered separately in Report 1. This report provides a brief overview of the current condition of the mussel beds, with further detail provided in the individual inspection reports in Annex 1. At present, no mussel beds are considered suitable for recommendation to open.

MUSSELS

Between August 4th to October 6th, NWIFCA Science officers carried out seven mussel inspections, two mussel Dutch Wand surveys, and one drone flight across NWIFCA District. Complete inspection reports are provided in Annex 1 of this report.

a) Seed mussel fisheries

Mussel beds are assessed each year to see if they can be opened as hand-gathered or seed dredge fisheries. Typically these beds are located within Morecambe Bay. The conditions which we look for to allow a seed fishery to take place are:

- loose mussel,
- a single size class of seed (<1yr old) of dense settlement, (not mixed)
- a large amount of mussel mud underneath with little exposed cobble/boulder substrate, and
- a high probability of washing away (evidence of scour or loose mussel and historical trends).

The criteria that should be met in order for a fishery to be considered for opening is detailed in the definition of ‘ephemerality’ and the ‘process for determining ephemerality’ agreed at the February 6th 2024 TSB meeting (<https://www.nw-ifca.gov.uk/app/uploads/Agenda-Item-10-Seed-mussel-definition-of-ephemerality-TSB-February-2024.pdf>). This information is gathered through inspections and presented to the Authority.

Other beds may also support stocks of size mussel and are inspected to monitor the availability of food resources for birds and to ensure that interactions between fishing activity and protected features, such as *Sabellaria*, are minimised or avoided. Dutch Wand surveys are often impractical on these beds due to site-specific conditions, and therefore, are not routinely undertaken.

During March and April inspections this year, there was very little seed mussel settlement identified. As of the Summer/Autumn inspections, some seed has been identified but still the overall area covered remains low. A summary of the main inspections across the district mussel beds is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of the district mussel inspections and suitability for fishery recommendations.

Mussel bed (and fishery type)	Date surveyed	Overview	Open recommendation
Morecambe Bay			
Heysham (Hand gathered seed fishery)	02-09-26	Mussel coverage across the bed was patchy, with an overall coverage of 30-40%. Sabellaria was present. Large portions have begun to scour.	No – not suitable for seed fishery this year
North Bare Ayre (size or seed hand-gathered mussel fishery)	11-09-26	Live size mussel was present across the site, with a dense patch in the northern section of the bed at 70-80% coverage. However, a large section of the southern portion of the site, and access route had significant Sabellaria growth. Access is not viable via the shore due to presence of a protected feature.	No – landward access currently unsuitable due to presence of Sabellaria
Perch and Black Scar (Hand-gathered or dredge seed fishery)	02-09-26	Seed mussel was present but the density across both beds was low, and very patchy. Large areas of exposed cobble with algae were present.	No – not suitable for seed fishery this year
Walney Channel (Hand gathered size fishery)	29-09-26	Typically surveyed via Dutch Wand – this bed has undergone a decline in mussel that renders the usual survey method too inaccurate to apply. Therefore it was inspected to get an overview of the bed. The bed had sparse coverage, with predominantly exposed deadshell and cobble and occasional 60mm+ mussel which was barnacled.	N/A
Duddon (Hard Acre) (Hand-gathered size fishery)	12-09-26	Mussel size across the bed was uniform and had grown on from the previous survey. Majority of the stock was 40-50mm found mainly on hard sand or firm mud. Classification is currently being sought for this bed.	N/A
Dee Estuary			
Thurstaston	01-10-26	Size mussel present was of low coverage and minimal seed settlement present.	N/A
West Kirby (Hand gathered	01-10-26	Size mussel present was of low coverage and minimal seed settlement present.	N/A

size fishery)		*inspection note not provided in Annex due to time constraints with completing the note	
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b) Size mussel fisheries - Dutch Wand survey biomass estimates

The three main mussel skears in north Morecambe Bay (Foulney, Low Bottom and Walney Channel) have been consistently monitored for biomass since 2017. This year, Foulney and Walney Channel have reduced in total mussel biomass since last spring, although Low Bottom seems to have remained relatively stable. As noted above, Walney channel was not surveyed this Autumn.

There appears to be a gradual decrease in total biomass over the past six years. Large areas of Foulney size mussel have been washed away since the previous survey, leaving bare cobble. Walney Channel has decreased below the threshold deemed accurate to survey. At the time of survey, there was little evidence of a new seed settlement. Officers note that this year, the southern parts of the Bay appear to have received seed settlements early on, which have not occurred in the north.

Table 2. Biomass (tonnes) of mussel on each mussel bed surveyed via Dutch Wand method from 2017-2026 (Autumn survey).

Total biomass	Year									
Location	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026
Foulney	7219	8746	na	na	na	9023	5497	3804	3094	2986
Walney Channel	na	4822	na	na	na	642	na	459	193	tbc
Low bottom	2935	na	na	na	na	2792	2336	1819	1435	1636
Total biomass	10154	13568	0	0	0	12457	7833	6082	4722	4622

The data is also shown in a bar graph to highlight the decrease in mussel biomass over the past 6 years.

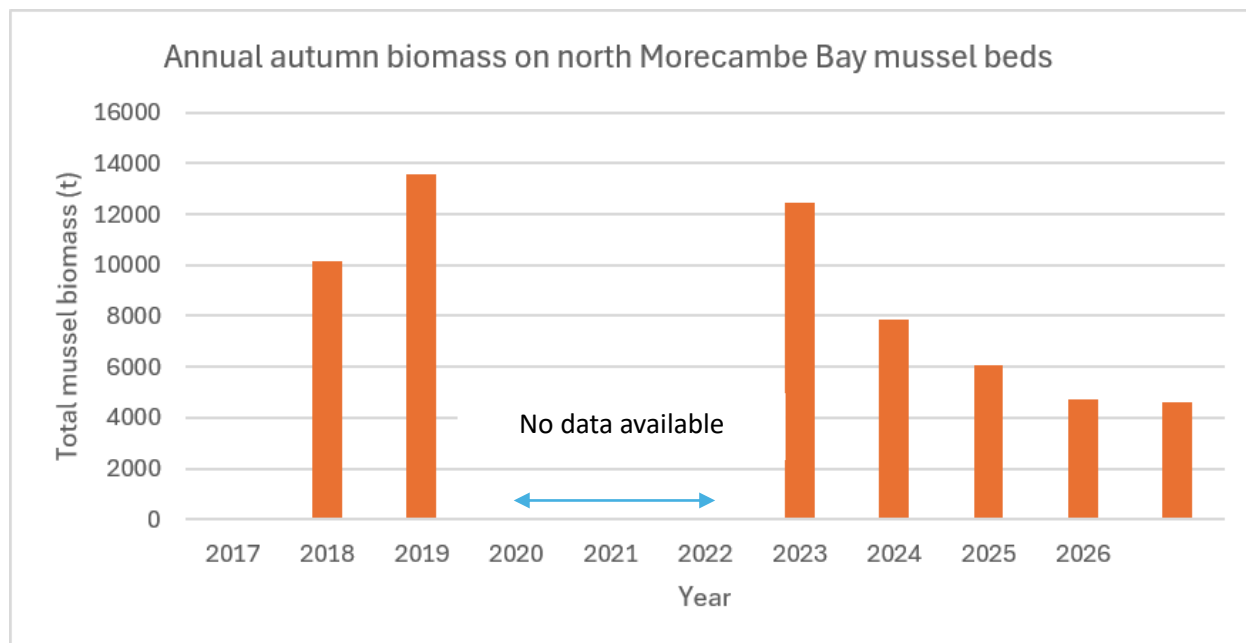


Figure 1. Annual autumn biomass of mussel in tonnes on north Morecambe Bay mussel beds (inclusive of Foulney, Walney Channel, and Low Bottom).