

# NWIFCA Technical Science and Byelaw Meeting

6<sup>th</sup> of February 2024: 10:00 a.m.

Agenda Item

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## NWIFCA COCKLE FISHERIES OPEN DATES

### **Purpose:**

To provide an update on the strategy for a potential change to the cockle open season from the 1<sup>st</sup> of September to the 1<sup>st</sup> of July 2024.

### **Recommendation:**

- a) Receive the report.

### **1. Background**

At the TSB meeting on the 7<sup>th</sup> of November, NWIFCA officers presented important considerations and implications for a change in the cockle fishery open season. The investigation into facilitating an early fishery was the result of several industry members expressing interest in changing the open season in order for them to access stocks when meat yields are highest.

The main practical considerations to an early open season relate to changing of survey timings (currently July) to earlier in the season (April/May) to provide estimates of cockle stocks for opening. The main concern surrounding this consideration was that earlier surveys could provide lower biomass estimates.

Following this discussion, officers assessed the historical survey data for each of the District's cockle beds and the likelihood of it reaching sufficient size cockle biomass by July 1<sup>st</sup>. At this stage, only beds within Morecambe have the potential to meet this target, with penfold looking highly unlikely, and Leasowe predicted (based on historical evidence) to reach size by September.

Taking into consideration these factors, officers have developed a plan for 2024/25 cockle open season which balances the potential risks associated with early surveying (required to accommodate an early opening) and offers a fair and proportionate approach for both officers and industry.

The purpose of this report is to provide an update on progress, and Members will be asked to make a formal vote on the 2024 open season approach post-consultation with industry.

Please note, this is a trial change to the open season for 2024/25 and is not proposed as permanent.

### **2. Stakeholder engagement and consultation**

It is, important that the views of the wider stakeholder group be gained, to identify whether a change in the open season is suitable, and/or desirable by the majority of stakeholders.

To gather stakeholder views, NWIFCA officers will be initiating a consultation event. Officers will hold two separate in-person events at two different locations across the District. One at Carnforth Office pencilled in for the 13th of February between 9:30 am and 8 pm and one in the Southern portion of the District, location TBC.

Once the dates and times of both event have been confirmed, the information will be officially disseminated to stakeholders via the website, NWIFCA's text messaging service and letters to permit holders.

The event will comprise of stakeholders booking a timeslot to speak with officers and will offer them the opportunity to speak confidentially about their perspectives on the proposed changes to the cockle open season. All participants will be asked to answer a questionnaire, the results of which will be presented to the Authority, alongside any other considerations raised.

If stakeholders cannot make either of the in-person events, they will be invited to arrange a call with officers.

In addition, if there is the situation arises in which a stakeholder does not wish to make representation either in-person or over the phone. The questionnaire will be made available to them so they can contribute to the consultation in this manner.

Once stakeholder feedback has been collated and analysed, officers will present the information to the Authority at the earliest opportunity (provisionally looking to be early March) in order to progress with a recommendation regarding the 2024 cockle open season timing.

### **3. NWIFCA cockle open season plan and justification**

In the case where stakeholder consultation concludes the majority of stakeholders are in favour of changing the open season in 2024 to the 1<sup>st</sup> of July, officers have developed a plan to implement this potential change.

The plan aims to balance the potential risks of survey and resource requirements, with providing for an early fishery.

#### **The following explains the proposed approach and reasoning for this:**

Opening the cockle fishery earlier than the 1<sup>st</sup> of September (Byelaw 3 para 13) requires a change to the survey timings.

For the fishery to be opened by July, surveys need to be carried out April to May to allow for analysis and HRA submission before the 1<sup>st</sup> of July.

Cockles typically grow fastest during the summer months, the earlier in the season they are surveyed, the less time they have to reach size. A sufficient biomass of size cockle must be reached for the fishery to be opened (currently determined as equivalent to previous years the fishery has been opened).

The concern is that if surveys are undertaken in April/May determine that size cockle biomass is not of sufficient quantities then the fishery will be recommended to be closed. Under these circumstances, it is likely a second survey will be required to determine if the fishery could be opened by September 1st.

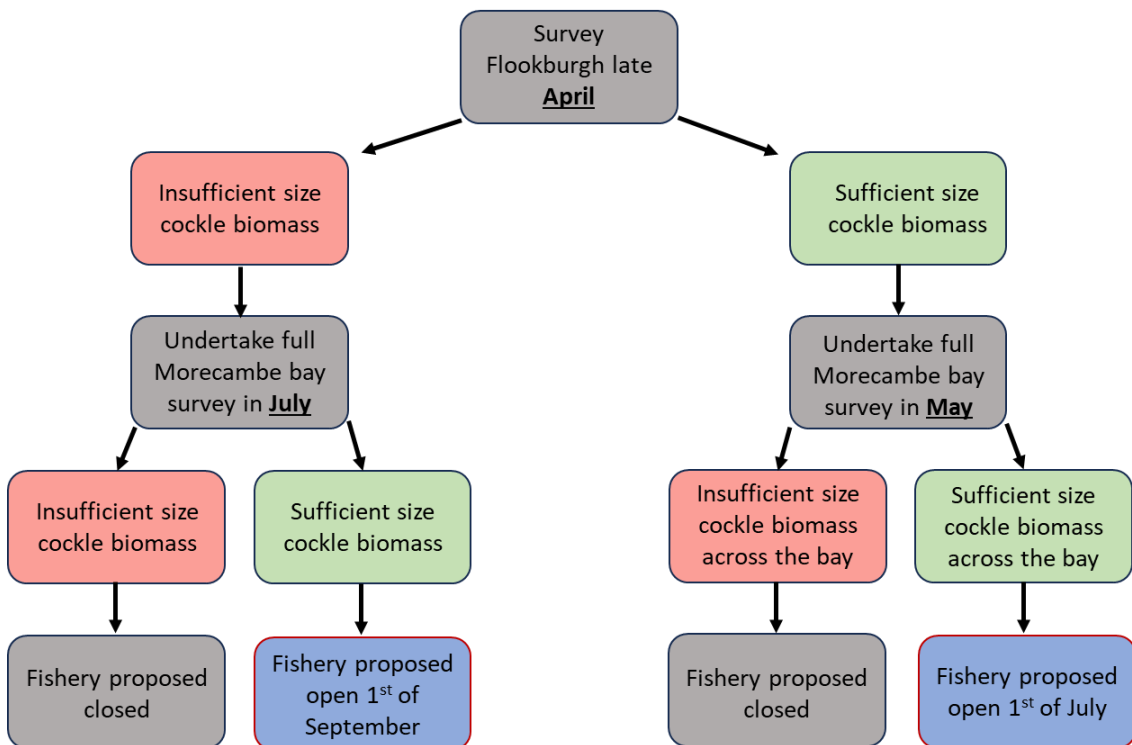
Given that Leasowe and Southport look highly unlikely to reach size by July 1<sup>st</sup>, these beds are proposed to retain their main survey in July for assessment in September.

Surveying the entirety of Morecambe Bay requires significant officer time and resource for sampling over 500 sample points across 7,700 ha.

To reduce the risk of undertaking two full surveys, officers propose the following:

- 1) to undertake a full survey of only Flookburgh cockle bed in April. Flookburgh is the largest cockle bed, with 2023 results showing large proportions of 15-20 mm cockle which is likely to grow to size during the summer of 2024. Officers will analyse the results, and if this bed has reached sufficient size biomass by April, officers will then conduct a full Morecambe Bay survey (Leven, Pilling, Aldingham and Newbigging, Warton, and Middleton). A recommendation for the fishery will be made in June, for a July 1<sup>st</sup> open date.
- 2) If, however, the stocks do not look to have grown to size on Flookburgh, further surveys will be postponed until July. Officers will survey all Morecambe Bay cockle beds (including Flookburgh for the second time), with the aim of bringing a proposal to TSB in August, for opening on 1<sup>st</sup> September.
- 3) If the fishery is opened in July, it will be closed 2 months earlier - February.

**Summary of the decision matrix:**



Deviating from the standard approach to opening the fishery poses certain risks which the Authority and members of industry must consider e.g. surveying earlier in the season risks lower biomass estimates.

The proposed plan balances these risks (e.g. officer time lost to extensive repeated surveys vs closure of a fishery which would otherwise be opened in September), but there are still scenarios which may cause difficulties. For example, survey results in April may be borderline, and subsequent early surveying of Morecambe Bay may still determine insufficient size biomass.

**4. Next steps**

Once the consultation event is complete and feedback from industry is received, officers will present the feedback from the event to TSB Members.

Officers will bring a recommendation as to whether to remain with working to the original 1<sup>st</sup> of September opening, or to execute the above proposed plan to aim to open the fishery on the 1<sup>st</sup> of July.

Officers need to have a decision made before the end of March to enable sufficient time for survey planning, therefore, a meeting with TSB Members will be required in March 2024.