

NWIFCA Authority Meeting
21st of March 2024: 10:00 a.m.

**Agenda
Item
9**

SCIENCE REPORT FOR INFORMATION
7TH OF DECEMBER – 21ST OF MARCH 2024

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

Recommendation: Report for information, Receive the report

This quarter, the main priorities of the science team have been inducting a new member of the science team, undertaking the cockle open season consultation, completing the HRA and relevant consent documentation for the drone, assisting with the national Fisheries Management Plan work (FMP) and natural capital work, and developing a new whelk sampling procedure.

Key achievements since the previous TSB meeting:

- 1) Completed HRA for drone use in the NWIFCA District
- 2) Completed consultation on the NWIFCA District cockle open season.
- 3) Agreed methodology and plan for assisting Natural England with surveys of the Allonby Bay Highly Protected Marine Area.
- 4) Completed additional spot checks for cockles across the District.
- 5) Six consultation responses and one dispensation request provided.

ONGOING WORK STREAM UPDATES:

1. POTTING PERMIT BYELAW

a) Permit database

The science team have been working to set up a database for the suitable logging and analysis of returns data. It is now agreed that a new database will be introduced in April, science officers will feed into the returns section to improve recording returns and new ways of analysing the data to help management. They will also assist with setting up a trial run with the Byelaw 4 permit holders to introduce them to the system and attain feedback.

2. COCKLES AND MUSSELS

a) Spot checks

Officers have been undertaking spot checks of the district mussel beds to determine how they have fared through the winter.

b) Survey drone activity

As the survey drone will be operational in the Districts protected areas, we are required to undertake a HRA for approval prior to surveying. Officers have completed a HRA for the work and the necessary SSSI assent documentation.

c) Cockle open season consultation

Industry representation to the TSB expressing an interest in opening the District fisheries earlier in the season (July 1st) to access cockles when they are at a better yield. Officers subsequently followed up this request by undertaking a feasibility study, and a consultation with the Byelaw 3 permit holders.

The consultation was carried out from the 2nd to the 23rd February, and offered stakeholders the opportunity to respond to a questionnaire, and speak with officers either in person – at one of 3 stakeholder events, via a phone call, or online. Out of an approximate 150 stakeholders, 53 responded to the consultation. The results of the consultation were presented to the TSB at an extraordinary meeting on the 6th of March. The Authority determined to undertake a trial run of an early opening of the fishery subject to sufficient size cockle stocks. Officers will now progress with developing a longer term strategy for managing the cockle open season and associated consultation timelines.

3. NWIFCA RESEARCH PROJECTS

a) Whelk Fisheries in the North West

Last year, science officers undertook a new sampling schedule to determine the size-at-maturity for whelks in the District. Unfortunately, limited samples were obtained from industry which reduced the ability to calculate reliable size-at-maturity estimates. Officers presented this data alongside the historical data collected by the authority and proposed to undertake a further study in 2024. It is important to note that samples from the North of the District are still required, and that NWIFCA officers will be working to obtain these as they will be important for determining a representative sample of the District whelks. Officers recommended, that due to the concerns raised by industry over the proposed increase in the MCRS of whelk from 65 to 75 mm, that the MCRS be temporarily suspended at 65 mm to allow officers to gather further information regarding whelk size-at-maturity.

4. MARINE PROTECTED AREAS IN THE NWIFCA DISTRICT:

a) Highly Protected Marine Areas (HPMAs)

NWIFCA have been in discussions with Natural England regarding establishing a baseline monitoring program for assessing the changes in Allonby Bay HPMA alongside local fishers. A final draft of the methodology has been provided to natural England for approval. NWIFCA will lead in collecting data and undertaking potting surveys from North Western Protector to gain an understanding of the levels of crab and lobster in the HPMA. The project will likely last for >3 years and aims to begin May 2024.

b) Marine Natural Capital

a) Provision of data for Morecambe Bay assessment

Morecambe Bay is the focus of marine Natural Capital study through the Association of IFCA's and Natural England. NWIFCA has provided information and historical data on the Bay to provide to the Association. The evidence collated will be combined with additional evidence on associated socio-economic value data to develop local placed-based natural capital assessments of fisheries and Morecambe Bay.

b) Bird food model data

In addition, researchers from Bournemouth University have been working with us to use our historic survey data to inform a model to calculate the bird food requirement for the Bay. It is hoped this work will assist in providing a minimum baseline figure for the biomass and density of cockle required to support the designated birds in the bay, and therefore, feed into our management.

c) Oral histories project

Natural England is also liaising with us on a project looking into the Oral Histories of stakeholders in the Bay. This is a project that aims to understand the diverse ways that people view nature and their relationship with it and to explore the utility of oral history interview methods for gathering and understanding values in the context of UK marine decision-making. NWIFCA are currently involved in the early stages of this work, assisting Natural England with information where needed.

5. FISHERIES MANAGEMENT PLANS

a) National

No further update.

b) Cockle fisheries management plan

a) National fisheries CFMP

NWIFCA is working alongside the Association to contribute to the development of the national cockle management plan. The early stages have involved discussions around development and structure of a plan that must consider multiple different cockle fisheries (Thames cockle fishery, Morecambe Bay, The Wash fishery etc.) and develop clear objectives.

b) District fisheries CFMP

NWIFCA are providing data on the District's fisheries and are developing their own cockle fisheries management plan applicable to the District. Both projects will complement the other with the aim of developing a framework for future data collection and management, a decision-making framework, a research plan and management review.

6. MMO MARINE LICENCE AND OTHER CONSULTATIONS FOR THE QUARTER

a) Morecambe Bay Offshore Wind

Officers responded to the most recent consultation request on the works and discussed issues of concern with local stakeholders.

b) Mersey Tidal Power Project

No further update

c) Geological Disposal Facility (GDF)

No further update

Consultations this quarter:

- Jubilee Bridge Painting Works Variation
- Signalling Power Renewals - Acton Grange
- Blackpool Beach Management - Ground Investigation
- St Annes Seawall Coast Protection Scheme
- Shiplift sediment sampling for contaminant testing - Barrow
- West Kirby Beach Management Operations

Dispensations this quarter:

- Cefas Nephrops Catch Sampling 2024

7. WORKING GROUPS AND EXTERNAL PARTNERSHIP WORK

a) Technical Advisory Group

At the most recent TAG meeting (27th February), IFCA's discussed the possibility of a joint science training scheme for new officers, similar to that provided for the IFCO roles. Survey protocols and kit were discussed and AIFCA work was presented. Novel methods for testing lobster size at maturity using a protein test previously used for identifying scrubbed lobsters was presented, and an invitation to IFCA's to participate in a multi-area study.

Work was also presented by Jersey government on their bass netting study looking into the survivability of bass against net sizing, and relative bycatches. This work will be useful for applying to a potential Wirral netting study.

Updates provided from Defra on the need for all MPA assessments to be completed by December 2024. Further discussion was also had regarding a potential IFCA wide social science project to be undertaken by Sarah Coulthard from the University of Newcastle. NIFCA have developed 'Fishers Forums' from her work where all of the conversations are documented and can be used to generate projects or feedback to national government on key issues.

b) Whelk Working Group

NWIFCA attended the most recent whelk working group on 31st January, the group discussed the most recent work being undertaken across the IFCA's and relevant partner organizations such as cefas.

c) Solway Firth Partnership

Officers attended the recent Solway Firth partnership meeting on 6th March to provide update on our work, and hear about the recent research working being undertaken in the region.

6th March 2024