

Eastern IFCA Enforcement Policy – Regulation 2 (daily catch restriction)

Wash Fishery Order (1992) Cockle Fishery 2017

Special circumstances – 2017 cockle fishery

Eastern IFCA conduct an annual cockle stock survey to determine the size of the cockle stock and inform the management measures for the annual cockle fishery. The management measures for the fishery include a combination of Regulations made under the Wash Fishery Order 1992 (WFO) and licence conditions.

Each year Eastern IFCA varies certain management measures to reflect the need of the fishery. For example; the Total Allowable Catch (TAC) is set according to the size of the cockle stock and different areas of The Wash are opened or closed to the fishery to reflect environmental sensitivities.

The 2017 cockle stock survey has concluded an available Total Allowable Catch (TAC) of 7,016 tonnes. This is a significant increase on what is considered a 'normal' TAC and the current daily catch restriction (of 2 tonnes per day) would be unlikely to enable a fishery to take the entire 7,016 tonnes during the normal open period.

Policy regarding Regulation 2 – daily catch allowance

Regulation 2 (of the Wash Fishery Order 1992) sets the daily catch restriction for each licenced fisher. It currently states each vessel must not take more than 2 tonnes per calendar day. A cockle fishery operating under this limitation would be unlikely to remove sufficient amounts of cockles to reduce the risk of cockle loss as a result of the special circumstances detailed above.

As such, Eastern IFCA will enforce Regulation 2 (daily quota) as per the policy set out below for the duration of the 2017 Wash Fishery order cockle fishery.

Eastern IFCA Policy – Wash Fishery Order 1992: Regulation 2 (daily catch restrictions)

Regulation 2 (daily catch restrictions) currently prohibits the removal of more than 2 tonnes of cockles from the WFO cockle fishery, per vessel in one calendar day. Due to the special circumstances regarding the 2017 WFO cockle fishery Eastern IFCA will not pursue enforcement action relating to Regulation 2 (daily catch restrictions) unless a contravention occurs where more than 3 tonnes of cockles have been taken in one calendar day. It should be noted that for the purpose of calculating the 3 tonnes no allowance will be made for the weight of any bags, boxes or bins or any sand or other material.

Enforcement Policy – Rationale

Background

The 2017 cockle stock survey has indicated that exceptional quantities of cockles are available to the fishery this year. This has resulted in a very high Total Allowable Catch (TAC) recommendation for the 2017 Wash Fishery Order 1992 (WFO) cockle fishery of 7,016 tonnes.

The fishery is managed through a combination of licence conditions (which vary annually) and Regulations (which do not vary). A limited number of individuals are licenced to fish cockles in The WFO cockle fishery. To enable the fishery to take the entire TAC it is necessary to increase the amount of cockle which can be taken each day. By increasing the daily catch restriction (which is currently set at 2 tonnes per calendar day, per vessel in Regulation 2), the entire TAC can be taken during the course of a 'normal' fishery (fig.1).

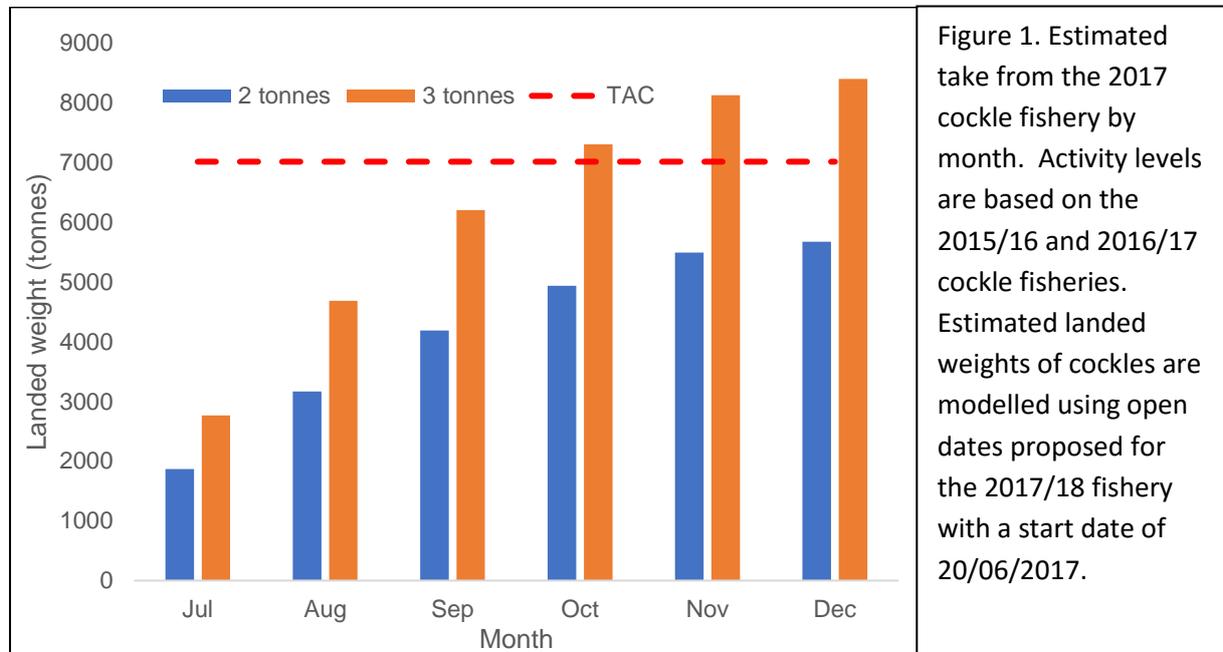


Figure 1. Estimated take from the 2017 cockle fishery by month. Activity levels are based on the 2015/16 and 2016/17 cockle fisheries. Estimated landed weights of cockles are modelled using open dates proposed for the 2017/18 fishery with a start date of 20/06/2017.

With the daily catch restriction set at 2 tonnes per vessel, per calendar day, the fishery will not be able to take the TAC during 2017. It is not uncommon for the fishery to have remaining TAC available in the year following its opening and (as in 2015) an additional fishery can be opened prior to the next fishery to enable fishers to take more of the remaining TAC. In this case, more than 1300 tonnes of the TAC will remain to be taken (almost 20% of the TAC).

Restricting the TAC from being taken within the 'usual' season (June to October) would however increase the risk of cockles being lost from the fishery during storms. Where cockle stocks and growth rates are high, a phenomenon called 'ridging out' can occur. This is where cockles are so densely packed into the sediment that growth during the summer months causes them to push each other out of the ground. Cockles exposed in this way often die from smothering and entire beds can be lost during storm events.

Since 2008 large scale cockle die-offs have also occurred annually in the Wash during the warmer summer months due to what has been termed 'atypical mortality'. Thought to be caused by a disease, atypical mortality has been observed to primarily affect harvestable sized cockles during warm weather.

Increased daily catch restriction

An increased daily catch restriction of 3 tonnes per vessel, per calendar day would reduce the period of the fishery – the TAC is estimated to expire in late October. The

benefit of increasing the daily quota to this amount would be that the majority of the TAC would be used up during the higher risk summer months when mass mortality events are most likely.

Environmental impact

The WFO cockle fishery has operated as a 'hand-work' only fishery since 2009 as conditions have not been deemed suitable to support a dredge fishery. The hand-work fishery involves fishers removing cockles by hand usually using rakes and shovels. A technique referred to as 'prop-washing' is commonly employed to assist fishers in collecting cockles.

Prop-washing involves fishers turning their vessel in tight circles around a single point. The 'prop' (the propeller) washes cockles out of the sediment and into a pile that is more easily fishable than cockles lying under the surface of the sediment.

This method, when applied in accordance with best practice, has a negligible effect on the habitat. If done incorrectly, it can result in deep troughs and/or large piles of cockles left out of the sediment which die quickly from exposure. Eastern IFCA closely monitors prop washing impacts and if bad practice occurs, has the ability to close the fishery to minimise environmental impacts.

Increasing the daily catch restriction is likely to reduce the number of prop-washing events occurring in any one area, because it will result in fewer fishing events during the season. However, it also has the potential to promote poor practice with larger, deeper troughs being created if fishers attempted to release more cockles from a given area by more vigorous prop-washing and thus causing more damage.

Whilst cockle densities on the Thief and Roger sands are not the same as they were in 2016, cockles are individually of a larger size. Elsewhere, on the Dills, Mare Tail and parts of the Breast there are localised patches of cockles that are of comparable densities to those fished last year. Provided fishing activities are conducted in a responsible manner, it is judged that increasing the daily quota to 3 tonnes will not result in excessive disturbance to the site's conservation features.

Furthermore, Eastern IFCA has provision to vary the daily quota or to close the fishery (or parts thereof) if damage occurs through this practice and monitors impacts of prop-washing during the fishery.

Economic Impact

Two main business models occur within the WFO cockle fishery. Around a third of licences belong to larger, company owned vessels. These vessels have higher overheads and as such, increasing the daily catch restriction will be of benefit to their business model. In addition, the three processing factories (two in King's Lynn and one in Boston) will reduce costs associated with processing cockle catches.

The majority of licences within the WFO cockle fishery belong to independent fishers who often have smaller vessels. Some of these vessels may be limited in the weight of cockles they can fish by vessel size or the number of crew they employ. Most of these vessels would still be able to take 3 tonnes of cockles on board (noting that the daily catch restriction for a dredge fishery is 4 tonnes per vessel).