

Wash mussel Fishery 2025: consultation outcome document



This document details the outcomes of the consultation about management measure proposals for the 2025 Wash mussel Fishery. The consultation was held between 20 November and 14 December and included an industry meeting held on 9 December 2024 at the Curlew Centre, Sutton Bridge.

We asked:

The views of Wash cockle fishers were sought in relation to the proposals for a harvestable and relaying mussel fishery to open in The Wash. The consultation included a questionnaire and an industry meeting to gather views and inform decisions on the management of this fishery.

You Said and Our Response:

Five responses were received to the consultation and six industry members attended the industry meeting to discuss proposals.

Consideration of proposals is divided into sections, focusing on the key measures.

[Opening a harvestable and relaying mussel fishery](#)

You said:

All respondents to the questionnaire either slightly or strongly agreed that both a harvestable and relaying mussel fishery should be open. There was also a consensus during the industry meeting that both fisheries should be opened.

Key commentary include that the potential for a harvestable mussel fishery (i.e. one that targets adult mussel) is an opportunity to 'reboot' what was, historically, an important winter fishery in The Wash. Commentary also alluded to the importance of limiting the take from relaying mussel fisheries (which take juvenile mussel for the purpose of aquaculture) to ensure that there is sufficient mussel left to grow and be recruited into a harvestable fishery.

It was also highlighted that it could take time (possibly years) to establish a market again for mussels in The Wash.

There was also consensus amongst respondents and those in attendance at the meeting that a harvestable fishery would open as soon as possible (i.e. New Year 2025) and a relaying mussel fishery would open during Spring 2025.

Our response:

The potential for a harvestable mussel fishery for the first time since circa 2007 is recognised as an opportunity for industry to reengage in what was a historically important fishery. On the basis that the Authority is committed to providing sustainable fishing opportunities within environmental parameters, and because the

stocks will support a fishery, both fisheries will be opened in 2025 pending confirmation that such will not impact the conservation objectives of the Wash Marine Protected Areas.

Given that there is consensus on the timing of the fisheries, they will open as follows:

Harvestable Fishery – as soon as possible (January 2025)

Relaying Fishery – Spring 2025 (date to be confirmed and dependant on water temperatures and dialogue with fishing industry).

Total Allowable Catch (TAC) for Mussel Fisheries

You said:

All respondents either slightly or strongly disagreed with the proposed TACs for the fisheries.

All respondents to the consultation proposed a harvestable mussel TAC of 1000 tonnes (and one respondent suggested that there should be scope for an increase to 1500 tonnes if needed). This aligned with the consensus of those in attendance at the industry meeting also. The main rationale for limiting the TAC at the meeting was to ensure that there was harvestable TAC available so that a relaying fishery wasn't hampered on 'mixed beds' where taking adult mussel was unavoidable. i.e. a relaying fishery could be curtailed because they operate over 'mixed' adult / juvenile beds, but if there is no adult (harvestable) TAC remaining, the fishery may be effectively closed.

All respondents also referred to a restricted TAC in the relaying fishery, however there was less consensus on what the preferred TAC would be. In all cases, it was 1000 tonnes or less, with some making the case that the relaying fishery should be further restricted to ensure that as many juvenile mussel remain in situ (on wild beds) as possible to increase the likelihood of another harvestable fishery in 2026. This also reflected the consensus reached at the industry meeting. Key rationale included that if the full TAC of juvenile mussel for a relaying fishery been taken in previous years, the potential for a harvestable mussel fishery would have been reduced and may not have resulted in such this year.

Our response:

The annual stock assessment has identified that the Wash mussel stocks can sustain harvestable and relaying fisheries taking a total of 5,150 tonnes and remain sustainable.

However, it is noteworthy that the TAC is determined using management policy which was developed in 2008 when the mussel stock dynamics in The Wash were significantly different and were free from abnormal die-off as has been the case since circa 2009. There is therefore a degree of uncertainty as to whether adult mussel will survive even if not fished. If the TAC is not taken and the mussel suffer again from die-off, this will represent a lost opportunity. If the full TAC is taken and mussel stocks suffer from die-off however, the likelihood of a harvestable mussel fishery in 2026 is reduced.

Historically, mussel beds were more homogenous, containing only a single year class and therefore mussel taken related primarily to a single fishery (i.e. juvenile from relaying beds and adults from harvestable beds). However, as a consequence of the decline and subsequent rejuvenation of the fishery, the majority of beds are now mixed. As a consequence, when mussel is harvested for relaying, during which catch is not riddled, it is likely that some relayed catch will include adult mussel and more so than was the case when the management policy was developed.

Given that respondents to the consultation are in consensus on a reduced TAC, and the complexity and novelty of the fishery, it is considered appropriate to provide a TAC lower than the maximum in the first instance, particularly in relation to the management different fisheries, targeting different size classes of mussel on the same beds.

Therefore, the Harvestable and relaying mussel fishery TACs will be as below but kept under review as the season progresses.

Harvestable dredge = 1000 tonnes

Harvestable hand-work = 100 tonnes

Relaying Dredge = 1000 tonnes

Relaying hand-work = 100 tonnes.

Open beds

You said:

There was some consensus that smaller mussel beds should be limited to hand-working because this would reduce the likelihood of these beds being over-exploited. Comments included a suggestion that the beds open to a relaying fishery should be the more ephemeral beds and those further from King's Lynn and Boston. The rationale being that protecting juvenile stock within harvestable beds would likely benefit future harvestable fisheries. It was also suggested that some beds should remain hand-working only to ensure that that

Others were of the view that the relaying fishery should be separated in time from the harvestable fishery, with a harvestable fishery opening immediately and a relaying fishery opening around April / May. This reflected the consensus at the industry meeting also and what is understood to be common practice (i.e. that relaying fisheries occur after water temperatures have increased).

Our response:

Noting that it is common practice that relaying fisheries do not occur until after water temperatures increase in Spring, it is considered appropriate that the harvestable fishery opens as soon as possible but that the relaying fishery remains closed for the time being. It is also considered appropriate to consider the extent of the fishing activity during the harvestable mussel fishery over winter before deciding on what beds should be open to a relaying fishery (i.e. if the TAC for a bed has been

exhausted during the harvestable cockle fishery, it may not be appropriate to open it to the relaying fishery).

It is also considered appropriate that the smaller mussel bed (Main End) is restricted to hand-working only to reduce the risk of exceeding the beds TAC (the total which can be taken is only 11 tonnes) and to provide an area for hand-working undisturbed by dredging, but also allow hand-working to take place in any other bed (open to that fishery). The open beds for the harvestable fishery are set out below.

Table 1. beds open to the harvestable fishery and by which gear type.

Bed name	Hand-working	Dredging
West Gat	✓	✓
East Gat	✓	✓
North Mare Tail	✓	✓
Shellridge	✓	✓
Tofts	✓	✓
Main End	✓	✗
Blackshore	✓	✓
Back of the Wall	✓	✓
Skate Run	✓	✓

General management measures

You said:

There was consensus from respondents that the established management measures should apply and should include in particular a requirement to riddle mussel catch (harvestable mussel fishery) over the bed it was taken from. In addition, there was agreement with the prohibition on relaying mussel seed outside of the Wash and North Norfolk Coast Special Area of Conservation.

Our response:

The established management measures have been refined over time to reflect the needs of the fishery and the environment which has included consultation with industry. These established measures are required to enable a fishery within environmental parameters and will be in effect during the 2025 fisheries.

Operating times

You said:

There was a consensus from respondents that there is no requirement for operating times (in contrast to the cockle fishery) on the basis that mussel beds are typically higher (and so there are no tide height requirements) and to avoid lost fishing opportunity, particularly during winter where weather conditions prohibit fishing more regularly.

Our response:

Mussel fisheries have not been managed with operating times in recent history and given that there are no tidal restrictions on operating in the fishery, and the consensus from industry is not to limit fishing opportunities, it is appropriate that the fishery will remain open at all times throughout its duration.

General commentary

Some respondents indicated that there are mussel beds in The Wash which were not surveyed, and one suggestion was to allow fishing on these beds during the fishery.

The Authority commits a significant resource to surveying intertidal mussel beds each year and it is not possible to visit all potential or even known beds annually. For established beds, stock biomass can be estimated to an extent and fed into the Habitat Regulation Assessment (HRA) process and stock assessments. However, where beds have never been surveyed because they have only recently established, these cannot be properly considered through an HRA which includes understanding the spatial extent of beds and the density and age composition of mussels on each. Therefore these beds cannot be opened to the fishery at this time. However, it is appropriate to consider dialogue with fishing industry prior to conducting mussel surveys each year to inform a decision on which beds to survey and it is anticipated that such dialogue will be held this year to inform the autumn mussel surveys.

Conclusions

The consultation has informed the decisions taken with regard to the 2025 Wash mussel fisheries. It is noteworthy that 2025 will be the first time a harvestable mussel fishery has opened since 2007 and as such, the Authority intends to adopt an adaptive approach to managing the fishery. For that reason, it is important that fishing industry maintain dialogue with officers to provide the information needed to inform our monitoring and particularly with regards to the opening of a relaying fishery in Spring 2025.

Pending advice from Natural England, management measures will be finalised and provided to industry members with appropriate exemptions to operate within the fishery.