

To: The Wash Fishing Industry

17 August 2026

Dear All

Wash Cockle Fishery Closed Areas

I am writing to express our serious concern regarding the level of non-compliance with closed area restrictions in the 2026 Wash cockle fishery and to highlight the potential consequences for both those involved and the wider fishery.

As you will be aware, The Wash is a highly designated Marine Protected Area (MPA). The annual cockle fishery can only operate following completion of a Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA), which must demonstrate that fishery management measures are sufficient to ensure that fishing activities do not adversely affect the protected features of the MPA. A key component of this management framework is the closure of certain areas to protect juvenile cockles and support the long-term sustainability of the stock.

During the current season, we have observed numerous instances of vessels fishing immediately adjacent to closed areas and, in some cases, within closed areas themselves. At present, 11 vessels are under investigation, and enforcement action is likely in a number of cases. Any action taken will be in accordance with the Authority's Enforcement Policy. Permit holders should also note that, following prosecution and conviction, Wash Cockle Permits may be suspended in accordance with Section 11 of the Eligibility Policy.

For the annual HRA process to be successful, both the Authority and Natural England must have confidence that management measures are effective and are being complied with by the industry. Evidence of non-compliance inevitably undermines that confidence and may influence future decisions regarding the extent and nature of management measures applied to the fishery.

It is also important to recognise that investigating suspected breaches places significant demands on the Authority's resources. This reduces our capacity to undertake other essential fisheries management activities, including monitoring stock distribution and assessing whether changes to management measures, such as the opening of additional fishing areas, may be appropriate.

We appreciate that most permit holders understand the purpose and importance of these measures and comply with them accordingly. We also recognise that many will share our frustration that the actions of a small minority can have implications for the wider industry. While enforcement activity may not always be visible, please be assured that all identified incidents are being thoroughly investigated and that enforcement action will be taken where justified.

In closing, we remind all permit holders that the full details of the management measures for the 2026 Wash cockle fishery, including all closed areas, are contained within the Skippers Pack issued at the start of the fishery. We strongly encourage all operators to familiarise themselves with these requirements and ensure that they are complied with at all times.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. Gregory', with a stylized, cursive script.

J. Gregory
CEO