

Special WASH MANAGEMENT SUB-COMMITTEE

Minutes of the Special Wash Management Sub-Committee meeting held on **Wednesday 17th September 2008** at 1030 hours.

PRESENT

Councillor A Turner	Chairman - Lincolnshire County Council	
Councillor S Williams	Lincolnshire County Council	
Councillor Baxter	Norfolk County Council	
Councillor D Rye	Norfolk County Council	
Councillor R Ward	Suffolk County Council	
N A Lake	DEFRA Appointee	
C Southerland	DEFRA Appointee	
M R Mander	Clerk & Chief Fishery Officer	
Judith Stoutt	Marine Environment Officer)
Ron Jessop	Senior Research Officer – ESFJC)
Duncan Vaughan	Deputy Clerk & Fishery Officer - ESFJC)	Present by invitation
Ian Dye	Fishery Officer)

APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Bakewell (LCC) and Messrs Garnet, Williamson and Yates (Defra Appointees).

DECLARATIONS OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS

Messrs Lake, and Southerland declared interests in the item on the agenda as they were Wash fishermen.

WM08/06 CLERKS REPORT ON THE PROPOSAL TO CLOSE THE 2008 WASH SUCTION DREDGE COCKLE FISHERY

The Clerk advised members the fishery had commenced on 3rd August, and was nearing the end of its 7th week. It was the Officers belief that the fishery should be closed as the achievable returns were low and compliance with the management measures was reducing. There was evidence that illegal fishing had taken place in the closed areas.

An industry meeting had been convened at which the stock remaining on Friskney was discussed. This discussion included opening the bed further south but those industry representatives present did not feel it was a good idea to open this area. Subsequently the Clerk wrote to the four local associations with the proposal that the fishery should be closed from 2359 hrs on 18th September 2008. Two responses had been received by the deadline and one further response had been received once the deadline had passed.

As one of the responses had been an objection to the proposal the Clerk could not close the fishery without convening the sub-committee in order for them to consider the information. The Clerk pointed out to members that he was very disappointed that the letter of objection stated that the "survey was once again massively inaccurate", and felt the Senior Research Officer should be given the opportunity to defend his survey techniques.

Councillor Turner felt that these allegations should have been substantiated in the letter and was very concerned that the comment had been included in the letter.

Councillor Rye noted the letter of objection was from the King's Lynn Fishing Vessels Owners & Skippers Association and questioned who the associations represented. The Clerk advised that there were four recognised associations two which represented industry members in King's Lynn, one based at Brancaster Staithe and one at Boston. He was not aware of the membership but acknowledged the associations as representative of the local industry. In order to ensure independent fishermen's views were considered consultation letters were sent to all Entitlement Holder when it was considered appropriate.

The Research Officer explained to members that he was aware the survey data produced stock levels which were generally accurate to within +/- 25%, it had never been implied that the surveys were 100% accurate. He could accept there was some inaccuracy, however following complaints about the survey technique in 2004 the surveys had been extended to take in cockles up to the green marsh areas, which are inaccessible to fishing vessels, but meant the overall stock levels were higher and consequently the TAC was greater. In addition to this cockles with densities as low as 10/m² were also surveyed again resulting in additional total stock. Members were also advised that in order to check the accuracy of the spring surveys additional winter surveys were carried out to compare remaining stocks with the level of fishing which had taken place.

Referring to Friskney the Research Officer believed that whilst the more dense cockles had been dredged there were sufficient stocks still remaining to equate to the TAC but they were in much lower densities, and probably not considered to be financially viable for dredging.

Councillor Williams suggested that the surveys should revert to surveying denser areas which were commercially viable for fishing. The Research Officer accepted this could be done, however in line with the policies agreed by Natural England it was necessary for the surveys to be carried out to the extremes which was being undertaken. However, the more dense areas of cockles could be used to determine the TAC and the sites from which it should be taken. The Clerk advised that on that basis there may be stock available but could be restricted to areas of cockle beds that had minimum densities of 50/m². The Clerk also advised that accuracy of surveys would always be impeded by growth of the stock which took place after the survey was completed and prior to the fishery starting.

Mr Lake was still dissatisfied with the survey results and felt the industry could not be blamed for having little confidence in the survey results when he believed that the inaccuracy during the previous 3 years had cost the industry a lot of money.

Members were advised by Mr Lake that during 2006 the surveys were so inaccurate that stocks had to be resurveyed resulting in additional TAC being given to the fishery. The Research Officer advised that this was due to exceptional growth of the cockles. The number of cockles on the ground had not increased but they had grown on average from 3.28 grams to 5.63 grams which almost doubled the available stock weight resulting in additional TAC being available. The Clerk felt that rather than criticising the Officers the industry should see this as an indication of the Committee's flexible approach to the fishery in allowing the additional surveys to take place resulting in additional TAC for the industry. Having questioned the length of time taken to complete a survey and how long prior to the opening of the fishing the surveys took place, Councillor Rye was advised that surveys took between 5-6 weeks to complete followed by 2 weeks for the data to be analysed. For the 2008 fishery the data had been completed analysed and written up two days prior to the meeting to discuss the opening dates for the fishery. The actual opening date being determined through discussions with the industry and the sub-committee members. For 2008 the decision had been made to open the fishery later than in previous years.

Mr Lake informed members that the 2007 survey was inaccurate as the area they had been

given to fish from did not contain sufficient stock to meet the TAC allocated to the fishery. The Clerk disputed this and recalled that it was to the credit of the industry that the fishery had been closed when it was realised that to continue fishing would have meant disturbing the smaller cockles which would provide the mainstay of the fishery in the following years. It was also not considered to be economically viable to continue fishing the smaller cockles.

Considering the request that the suction dredge fishery be opened to an area further south members were advised that the fishery was in its seventh week and the level of effort being put into it had dropped considerably as the available stock had diminished. The Clerk did not feel the Committee could justify continuing the level of labour intensive enforcement which went in to policing the fishery for a very small number of vessels. He also felt that there was too much temptation to fish in closed areas now that the stock levels had diminished in the open area and a huge amount of damage could be caused by suction dredging in the closed area.

Mr Southerland acknowledged that initially there had been concerns that the area open to fishing might not prove beneficial to the industry however, his understanding was that the season had been better than anticipated and now fishermen had moved on to other fishing opportunities having acknowledged that the 2008 suction dredge fishery had come to a close. He felt the handwork cockle fishery would be exploited during the winter months and would provide a means to keep the industry going. Mr Lake disputed this, stating there was not market for small cockles and the meats would begin to shrink during the winter.

Councillor Baxter believed the surveys had been completed to a high standard and proposed that the members accept the Clerk's proposal to close the fishery.

It was Resolved that the suction dredge cockle fishery should close at 2359 on Thursday 18th September 2008.

Proposed: Councillor Baxter

Seconded: Councillor Williams

4 votes in favour

None against

Following the vote Councillor Rye expressed his concern that only two out of four associations had responded within the allotted time. Councillor Williams advised that unless they wished to object there was no necessity to respond.

There being no other business the meeting closed at 1108 hours.