

OUTER HEBRIDES REGIONAL INSHORE FISHERIES GROUP

NOTE OF COCKLE FISHERY MEETINGS

Productive meetings were held with community interests in Harris, Uist and Barra to consider the recent cockle survey completed by the Outer Hebrides Fisheries Trust. Officials from Marine Scotland (MS) Policy, Science and Enforcement, NatureScot and CNES were in attendance at all meetings.

MS officials, Anne and Lynda, provided a brief summary of cockle survey for beaches at each location, CNES. Colm Fraser provided update on new requirements for exporting live bivalve molluscs since 1 Jan 2021, with depuration and end product testing requirements, Roddy, NatureScot provided an update of appropriate assessment requirements necessary in close proximity to North Uist SPA, Duncan provided the possible management measures that could be considered to manage the cockle fisheries in future years.

Harris Meeting 17 March 2021

In attendance Iain Leitch, main cockle harvester and Representatives from West Harris Trust the Community Land Owners who own land surrounding the beach at Seilibost.

The draft classification for this beach from 1 April 2021– 31 March 2022 was all year Class B which meant that all cockles harvested from this beach would have to be depurated for a minimum 48 hours prior to export to the EU. No depuration or toxin facilities present in Lewis or Harris. A possible option of relaying cockles to a Class A was discussed but as no such beaches exist that would have to be considered in more detail with Food Standards Scotland.

Iain Leitch, had been harvesting cockles in excess of 30mm and highlighted other harvesters favoured grading catch near the road and left under sized cockles to die beside the road. He highlighted that the water pipe replacement had caused significant negative impact on the beach. Considerable heavy rainfalls over the previous 2 years had changed many sections of the beach which used to yield good returns of cockles. He would be discussing future depuration options with buyers and it was unlikely that he would be harvesting in Harris for some time. Mortality levels increased in summer months and should be restricted during periods of warm weather.

All present supported some form of improved management measures to ensure a sustainable, well managed fishery which would provide returns to harvesters.

All present supported a prohibition on nighttime harvesting, closed seasons and possible weekend prohibitions.

MS officials suggested various mechanisms that could be considered in the future:

Regulating & Several Orders, Landlords controlling the fishery, Council through by-Laws.

Chairman indicated that some of those had already been considered but was hopeful that some new control measures under a licensing regime could be implemented as part of the new fisheries strategy.

Chairman was hopeful that future management options for cockle fisheries could be discussed at the next RIFGs Chairs and that some new innovative measures could be piloted as part of the new fisheries strategy which had been launched in December 2020 with an increased role for the RIFG in the coming years.

Uist Meeting 17 March 2021

Attendees noted that there was no commercial harvesting at North Ford where stock levels are low.

South Ford which is being harvested sustainably over many years was yielding good returns, with cockles not being harvested during summer months when The South Ford was a B Classification.

Kilbride Shellfish usually purchase 30 – 40 tonnes of cockles annually from South Ford at an average of £4,000/tonne. In addition some other harvesters did sell their catch to other vivier lorry buyers but no information was available on value of tonnage purchased.

MacNeil Shellfish were investigating setting up depuration facilities at their Larkhall facility. It was still unclear how cockles would travel after the stress of depuration and it was good practice to reduce travel time to market following depuration and was the reason they would prefer depurating on the mainland rather than Uist.

They indicated that DEFRA had told them that they could export cockles from Class A waters as long as they were accompanied by the relevant paperwork. Colm noted that sellers should operate a traffic light system for toxin testing and once levels increase they should be testing on a more regular basis. Any consignment would require an export health certificate and whoever was signing the certificate would have to ensure that due end product resting had been completed and recorded.

All present supported an increased role for the RIFG in pursuing an effective system which would manage the cockle fishery to ensure future sustainability of the fishery which could be enforced by MS Compliance, along similar lines to enforcing MLS and prohibition on mechanical tractor harvesting.

NatureScot highlighted the North Uist SPA and made particular reference to the oyster catchers feeding patterns on North Uist beaches. It was necessary to have pre-cautionary measures in place to ensure that any future harvesting of cockles in close proximity to the SPA would have to be carefully managed.

Barra Meeting 18 March 2021

A well attended meeting representing a cross-section of harvesters, community representatives and Airport officials highlighted a number of issues. Harvesting on the beach was over 2 tides for many harvesters, with diminishing returns resulting in only around 6 harvesters being active down from nearly 20 in previous years.

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Barratlantic was the main local buyer and had toxin testing facilities on their premises.

All present expressed their concerns at current perilous state of the stocks and were all supportive of having control measures in place to guarantee a well managed local fishery which would be profitable. The enforcement of any management measures would have to be regularly monitored.

Chairman indicated that the community would be fully engaged in any new management regime that could be introduced to control effort and ensure there was a fully documented cockle fishery which accounted for value and landings being recorded.

A request to have regular surveys was considered too expensive as there was no evidence available to indicate the volumes or value accruing from the fishery. Some system was urgently required to capture value of landings as those exporting must have provided paperwork as part of their exports to the value of all exports. Comhairle Nan Eilean do provide movement documents and copies of those must be retained for a specified period in case any problems arise from any consignment.

Careful consideration was necessary if a weekend ban was introduced as this was the most likely time that people in employment would go to the beach to harvest cockles for own consumption.

Next Steps:

- **Strong support for management measures to regulate fishery**
- **Night time curfew unanimous support**
- **Support for system to accept landings through Fishery Office**
- **Consider how buyers could provide global cockle landings**
- **Depuration systems to be available and inspected by EHO's**
- **Chairman to raise cockle management at next meeting of RIFG**
- **Innovative Licence/permit to control harvesting numbers**
- **Conditions to be included in any licence/permit developed**
- **Further consultation with communities during development process**

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