

Agenda Item No: 10

QUARTERLY REPORT OF THE CHIEF FISHERY OFFICER

For the period 17th February 2007 to 18th May 2007

Weather

Prevailing strong to gale-force onshore winds that were a feature for much of the previous quarter, started to abate from around the second week of March. This was then followed by a prolonged period of mainly light to moderate winds mostly from the east or north east, resulting in most of the local fishing fleet putting in a welcome and much needed increase in fishing effort.

Fishing

Mobile gear vessels

Virtually all the locally based and regular visiting trawlers from Northern Ireland, that had again spent much of the winter targeting prawns off the coast of Northumberland and north Yorkshire, have now returned to their respective ports. This resulted in a steady increase in fishing effort both within and adjacent to the district, particularly from around mid March.

As to be expected at this time of the year, a great deal of fishing effort by the Cumbrian trawling fleet is directed at the prawn fishery. It is most encouraging to be able to report that many local skippers have indicated prawns would seem to be more abundant at the start of this season than for several years past. This was borne out by inspections carried out at both Whitehaven and Maryport, where local trawlers were seen discharging some good landings of up to 120 stones of prawns. It was however noted that the percentage of tailed to whole prawns was higher than usual, although this was offset to a degree by an increase in the price of tails, which at around £30 per stone is believed to be the highest for some time.

News of any good catches certainly travels fast in the fishing industry, so it wasn't long before 30 – 40 Irish trawlers were sighted on the local

prawn grounds to the south and west of St Bees Head. Again many of these were large, high powered vessels using twin-rigged trawls, and Officers observed some of these making substantial landings at Whitehaven consisting of up to 600 stones of both whole and tailed prawns along with up to 40 boxes of mixed white fish.

Any white fish catches taken by the local trawlers were mostly very skimpy, apart that is from some good hauls of roker (thornback ray) taken from close inshore between St Bees Head to Sellafield during the last week of March. One small Whitehaven based trawler was seen to land 25 boxes of mainly good sized roker on the evening of 27th.

No reports have been received of any seine netters working in the district during the quarter. One large south west based beam trawler was seen berthed in Whitehaven on 30th April. It is believed that this vessel worked the Solway grounds for several days before steaming south to Morecambe Bay. Substantial landings of scallops were made at Whitehaven by the fleet of large south west Scotland registered dredging vessels now based at the port.

Demand for both prawns and white fish remained generally firm throughout the quarter, although on occasions roker was reported to be difficult to market at the Fleetwood auction. An indication of prices from prawn buyers and the Fleetwood market are as follows:

Species	Price per kg – lowest	Price per kg – highest
Plaice	40 pence	£3.25
Roker (skate)	25 pence	£2.60
Cod	£1.20	£3.40
Turbot	£3.50	£8.80
Brill	£2.50	£6.70
Dover sole	£2.50	£12.00
Whole Prawns (averaging around)	£3.20	£3.80
Prawn Tails (averaging around)	£4.80	

Fixed gear vessels

Potting and creeling

The majority of creel fishermen in the district took advantage of any settled spells of weather to get gear on to the ground. By mid April

most had pots and creels set, but from all reports fishing for both lobster and brown crab proved to be very patchy.

Whilst it is not unusual for catches of lobster to vary considerably from day-to-day early in the season, scrutiny of catch returns submitted by licensed vessels would seem to indicate that catches throughout the district are down a little compared to the corresponding periods of recent years. To a degree this may be due to reports that lobsters are going through their seasonal moult somewhat earlier than usual this year. It is however expected that fishing will improve during coming weeks as the shells harden.

Brown crabs are believed to have been quite plentiful, particularly in the southern sector of the district, although discards have been very high due to poor quality. A Ravenglass based fisherman informs me that whilst he has occasionally landed between 75 – 100 kgs, 35 – 40 kgs per day would be nearer the average.

The large whelk potting boat “Euroclydon” continued to make some excellent landings at Whitehaven, occasionally in excess of 10 tonnes. Virtually all fishing effort by this vessel is again believed to have taken place outside the district, mainly in the vicinity of Luce Bay on the Scottish side of the Solway.

Netting

The much improved catches of cod experienced by the gill netters during the previous quarter proved to be short lived, as we have no reports of any notable landings of the species being made during the last 3 months.

The main quarry for the gill net fleet has again been thornback ray (rocker) with some excellent hauls of up to 15 boxes (90 stones) again taken from nets set off Maryport and Allonby Bay.

Beach net fishermen have also met with some success, mostly from the Braystones area. A particularly large haul of rocker, estimated to be in the region of 70 stones was reported during mid April, whilst the same fishermen is also believed to have caught a large quantity of bass later the same month. Good sized turbot were also been taken in fair numbers whenever the tides and weather conditions proved suitable.

Molluscan shellfish

Mussels

No commercial harvesting of mussels has taken place in the upper Solway during the quarter. This is due entirely to the poor quality of the only available stock of sized mussels on the intertidal bed at Ellison Scar.

The Committee may be interested to know that around 120 tonnes of mature mussels were harvested in the Ravenglass estuary during April. This mussel fishery actually falls outside the Committee's area of jurisdiction, as the right to the fisheries within the estuary was granted to the Muncaster Estate around the time of Magna Carta. However I am pleased to report that I was able to provide advice to both the Estate's Marine Environmental Consultant and the fishermen involved, on harvesting methods. It is expected that good management of this fishery will eventually lead to it yielding substantial amounts of good quality mussels on an annual basis.

Cockles

All cockle beds within the Committee's district in the upper Solway are currently closed to any form of fishing under the terms of our current annual closure byelaw (between 15th April and 14th September).

Winkles

Winkles proved to be much more in demand than the previous quarter, with buyers said to be paying up to £1.40 per kg to supply buoyant markets in Europe, mostly France and Spain. The result of this is that our shore based Officer has reported a marked increase in commercial scale gathering particularly in the south of the district, with much of this again being undertaken by people of eastern European origin.

Shrimps

Catches of shrimp from the upper Solway improved as the quarter progressed, although there are currently 6 boats targeting the fishery.

By late April/early May landings of around 60 to 100 kgs were being made for fishing over the high water period, to 120 kgs for those boats working the full tidal cycle.

Angling

Whilst recreational sea angling continues to be as popular as ever, catches taken from both the shore and boats were for the most part quite poor throughout the past 3 months.

It was however encouraging to see increasing numbers of good sized plaice being caught, particularly later in the period under review. Bass were also taken more frequently as time progressed as were mackerel, which were being caught from around late April. This is a most unusual event as mackerel do not normally show in any numbers off the Cumbrian coast until June or July. Is this yet another indication of climate change?

Other species taken by anglers included codling, flounder, pollack, dogfish, conger eel and the occasional thornback ray caught whilst fishing from the boat.

General enforcement

The period under review has seen the "Solway Protector" out of service for over 4 weeks in order to carry out essential repairs and maintenance identified in the 2006 survey. The 7m RIB "Protector Bravo" was also off station for 2 weeks again to carry out essential maintenance. Much of the work on both boats was undertaken by the Committee's Officers.

Despite this down time Officers managed to carry out 25 patrols at sea in the "Solway Protector", with "Protector Bravo" and the 5m RIB "Protector Alpha" being deployed on a total of 10 times, making a total of 35 patrols. Under the circumstances I consider this to have been a fair effort.

Regular shore patrols were carried out throughout the district, with particular attention focused on monitoring the ever increasing effort in the beach net fisheries and intertidal gathering of Molluscan shellfish and winkles. Officers as usual carried out regular inspections at all the fishing ports and landing stations within the district, and apart from having to issue a small number of verbal warnings for essentially minor infringements, compliance with all relevant fisheries legislation has yet again been very good. Further details on activities and enforcement at sea can be found in the report of the Master of the "Solway Protector".

D T DOBSON
Chief Fishery Officer

21st May 2007