

BGMCF - Meeting 16

Date:	28 th January 2015
Venue:	DARD, Dundonald House, Belfast
In attendance:	Mr Donal Maguire – Chairman of the BGMCF Ms Joanne Gaffney – Secretariat Mr Michael Murphy – Secretariat Mr Kenny Parker – DARD Mr Mark McCaughan – DARD Ms Clare Frew - DARD Mr Colin Armstrong – DOENI Mr Matt Service – AFBI Mr Declan Quigley– SFPA Mr Michael Havelin – Industry Rep – Foyle Mr George Golden – Industry Rep Carlingford/Dundrum Mr Raymond Dougal – Industry Rep Belfast/ Larne Mr Richard Henning – industry observer Mr Michael O’Driscoll – Vessel owner and operators association
Apologies	Mr Richie Flynn – IFA Ms Roni Crowley – DAFM Mr Barry Fox – Loughs Agency Mr Arthur McCarthy – Industry Rep Castlemaine/Shannon/Cork

Donal Maguire (DM) welcomed all to the meeting.

1. Minutes of the last meeting

The minutes of the last meeting were accepted as presented.

2. Action Points from the last meeting

Secretariat confirmed that all actions were addressed

3. Seed Campaign 2014

At present only preliminary data is available but 2014 was a much better year for seed fishing than 2012 and 2013. Final fishing volume was in the region of 12500t (Gross) and 10,500t (net), 544t (net)_of which was sourced in NI waters. The three main relaying areas were Wexford, Castlemaine and Belfast, with small tonnages being relayed in Carlingford and Foyle. DM queried the low relay tonnage to Carlingford and industry members indicated that this was a result of the area already having a sufficient volume of stock on the ground.

DQ of the SFPA appealed to all industry members to submit outstanding log sheets and indicated that he will be in contact with vessels operators who have not yet submitted all data.

The final consolidated seed figures will be available at the next meeting of the Forum.

4. Seed Fishery in NI Waters

MMC opened the discussion by apologising that it was not possible to open the Burial Island seed bed in 2014, he cited conservation issues associated with Strangford Lough as the reason for the delay in opening this area.

He outlined the following history of the horse mussel beds in Strangford Lough explaining that it holds a historical population of *Modiolus modiolus* (Horse Mussel) which formed diverse biogenic reefs in the Lough in the past. When the Lough was designated as a cSAC in 1990, these reefs were a key feature of the designation (Annex 1).

A sublittoral survey conducted in the 1970’s identified the *Modiolus* reefs as being of great conservation interest and the reef habitat also supported queenies and skate (Note – Fish make use of both the higher production of benthic prey and the added structural complexity. Scallop species occur in the same habitat and may as spat have been attached to the hydroids growing on the mussels). By the late 1980’s the reefs were deteriorating and in 1993 another survey highlighted the full extent of the *Modiolus*, with all areas showing

deterioration. By 2003 the Strangford Lough Ecological Change Investigation (SLECI) reported that the Modiolus Reefs were in unfavourable conservation status. DARD in response to this issued a ban on all mobile gear in the Lough in December 2003.

Since 2003 Ulster Wildlife Trust have submitted two complaints to the EU on the management of Strangford Lough. Both cases progressed to the PILOT stage but in the event that the case developed further it could result in millions of euros in Fines that would have to be funded from the NI budget. In response to the complaints a *Modiolus Restoration* plan was initiated by DARD and DOENI, a key feature of which is a large non-disturbance zone in the Lough, however despite all these efforts the habitat continues to decline. The reasons for this may be a disturbance in the predator/prey balance and thus direct intervention is now being proposed. This could involve moving Modiolus into Strangford from other areas such as Burial Island. A genetics study was undertaken on the Modiolus at Burial Island and it has been confirmed that the Strangford population and the Burial Island population have the same genetics; therefore these Outer Ards populations could be used to restock Strangford Lough.

AFBI undertook surveys of Burial Island in May and September 2014 and found Modiolus, Mussels and Brittle stars, additional protection of the area is being considered and DARD, DOE, the Commission and Ulster Wildlife Trust are in discussions on how best to proceed. MMC concluded his historical account at this point.

MS outlined the work AFBI undertake in relation to seed mussel; AFBI conduct biannual seed surveys in the 5 traditional seed areas in NI waters. Surveys use the ground discrimination software ROXANNE and ground truthing dredges and grabs. AFBI like to use an industry vessel for ground truthing as it gives a better picture of fishable biomass. All these results inform a Habitats Regulation Assessment (HRA) and recommendations on opening areas arise from this assessment including any required mitigation measures.

In spring 2014 the survey identified a settlement of mytilus mussel seed adjacent to the modiolus bed at Burial Island. Since then detailed diving and video surveys were conducted by AFBI, QUB and DOE. Since late autumn an accurate picture has been available and there is now an intention to open the bed to seed fishing this year. A post winter review was undertaken in early January 2015 and the acoustics are encouraging with seed remaining at the site. A low number of starfish were found on the bed. The seed has grown and is now 10-30mm. A UK coastguard bathymetric survey has also assisted in delineating the boundary of the bed.

AFBI have proposed a buffer zone around the Modiolus and this is under discussion with DOE so that the fishing area can be agreed before a spring fishery. MS requested an industry vessel be made available to ground truth the bed. GG offered to provide a vessel for this task.

Action: Industry vessel to be made available

Industry members welcomed this development

DOE wish to protect the Modiolus area but also facilitate other activities in the areas.

MMC assured industry that DARD wish to see the industry operate sustainably while protecting conservation interests.

Industry members queried the activities of other fisheries in the area specifically the Scallop fishery. MMC stated that the bathymetry of the area meant that other dredge fisheries avoid the area as it's not suitable for their equipment, but current information indicates the mussel bed is 1.5km in length and 500m wide.

DQ asked if the Modiolus decline is caused by mussel health or environmental conditions. DOE indicated that an answer to this is not currently available, but that it appears that natural factors rather than anything else is now responsible for the continuing decline.

Industry members again welcomed the willingness of DARD and DOE to open the seed bed; they expressed the view that this was a huge step forward after the very frustrating 2014 closure.

Industry members also requested that the bed be closely monitored for predators especially starfish which can destroy a bed in a very short period of time. After all the efforts of industry and regulators the bed must not be lost to predators now.

5. Plan for 2015 Fishery (Inc. Scheduling of Boat Surveys)

Industry members also queried if AFBI will be undertaking a wider survey in advance of a potential May opening as NI beds are particularly valuable to all NI producers but particularly those in the Foyle.

AFBI will conduct surveys across all areas in March/April and DM stated the BIM surveys of IRL waters will also commence in March. MS indicated that he was particularly interested in Skullmartin

While it is very important to define fishing tides as early as possible to allow the scheduling of vessel maintenance and certification and crew holidays (correspondence relating to this was brought to the attention of the Forum) it was acknowledged that it is still too early to make a decision on fishing tides as not enough survey information is yet available.

It was agreed that the Forum would reconvene in the first week of April to look at the survey data and that tides will be recommended then.

Action: Forum to meet on the 2nd of April

DARD asked that industry members consider how best to allow vessels access the Burial Island Bed without overcrowding in the event that there would not be a Spring fishery in other areas.

Action: Industry members to consider the DARD request

RD expressed concern as to the surveying restrictions on vessels in NI waters, where vessels are very limited in the areas they can survey, and requested that surveying not be so tightly limited to small boxes. MMC stated that limitations were necessary to protect species, and habitats both designated and undesignated, however DARD would aim to assist industry with their surveying requirements by providing observers.

6. Castlemaine Harbour

JG reminded industry members that the fishing plan for Castlemaine expires in 2016, and that DAFM asked that industry members should consider any required changes to the fishing plan as soon as possible so as to allow adequate time for the required assessment. JG has already received a request from the Co-op to meet with them to discuss this issue.

Action: JG to meet with the Castlemaine producers.

MOD highlighted the difficulties being caused by the extended biotoxin closure in Castlemaine Harbour and again requested that zoning of biotoxin areas be considered in the harbour. DM stated that this was an issue for the MSSC not the Forum but that he was aware that zoning did cause additional concerns for food safety.

Movements of mussel from biotoxin positive areas to negative areas for relaying is not a disease issue however it does pose valid concerns for food safety. Some concerns have also been expressed that the activity also poses the risk of introducing harmful algal species to areas where they are not currently found. In IRL the decision on whether a movement will be permitted from a closed to open area will be made by the local SFPA senior port officer.

Action: matter to be passed to MSSC

7. Mussel Husbandry review, Seed allocation review

An industry consultation document is awaiting final sign off by DARD and DAFM and will be issued in the coming months. MH expressed concern that businesses which have not had much activity in the last few years as a result of seed shortages would be penalised in a review at this time. DM stated that any review would take account of these issues.

8. MSC Certification

DM expressed concern that there are a number of outstanding payments due for the MSC maintenance costs. BIM and the Aquaculture Initiative are not in a position to carry the costs of the scheme maintenance and it must come from producers. There is concern that companies may be selling mussels under MSC while not paying the required fee. While all industry members are entitled to join the scheme, payment is required to claim certification, all agents and processing companies will be reminded of the MSC requirements and

advised that they are breaching chain of custody requirements if mussels are being labelled MSC from companies who are not on the list. Letters will be issued in the coming week and where payments are not received, processors will be immediately advised.

Industry members of the scheme expressed concern that not everyone is contributing and supported BIM/Aquaculture initiatives efforts to address this.

9. Research Plan 2015

AFBI and BIM both confirmed that mussel research plans have been factored into the work programme for 2015

10. Loughs Agency Implementation Plan

Barry Fox has informed the Secretariat that meeting have taken place between the Loughs Agency, the MI and BIM but there have been no major developments in the implementation plan. Progress is being made but it is slow.

11. Lough Foyle – Management measures affecting the Mussel Industry

RD and MH raised the issue of disturbance of mussel ground and stock in Lough Foyle by oyster fishery displacement as a result of the area closures put in place by the Loughs Agency. Mussel stock losses have occurred as a result of this. The Forum was asked to raise this issue with the Loughs Agency and get information on how they propose to manage this

Action: JG to contact B Fox and circulate response

12. Alien Species

MOD raised the issue of the concerns relating to alien species for importation of Mussels to Castlemaine. JG confirmed that samples had been taken on all beds during the 2014 fishery and thanked the operators who had facilitated the observer during the seed fishery. She further confirmed that a procedure to facilitate imports had been agreed but was not used in 2014.

13. Norovirus

The issue of Norovirus and possible implications for the mussel industry was discussed. There is industry concern that mussels may be treated in the same way as oysters in any new controls and that this would not address the different risks posed by the two species. JG informed the group that the Commission had not implemented a numerical limit for Norovirus as had been initially proposed. Instead a risk based approach and further research priorities had been agreed. Such a risk based approach would address the different problems posed by different species

Action: JG to circulate an update on this issue.

14. Date of next meeting

The next meeting will take place on the 2nd of April in BIM

15. AOB

Dublin Bay Seed Fishing

DQ informed the Forum that fishing for seed in 2014 around Howth had caused great concern to NPWS and local residents. There is no indication that mussel boats were fishing in areas outside those in the fishing plan but he asked industry members to be careful when fishing in that area to ensure their compliance.

Pollution Incidents

The large sewage spillage in Belfast Lough was brought to the attention of the Forum. Industry members experienced great difficulty in getting information from DOE and NIW at the early stages of the incident despite the serious food safety issues associated with such a spill. Such difficulties were also a feature of the oil spill in Carlingford Lough. Due to producer vigilance and environmental condition food safety was not compromised as a result of these incidents but there is a high risk posed by pollution and communication must improve.

MS expressed surprise that he had not been informed of the Belfast Incident by DOE

Action: JG to provide MS with reports on the incident in Belfast Lough.