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POSITION PAPER

OCEAN ACT AND THE REVISION OF THE MARINE STRATEGY FRAMEWORK DIRECTIVE

TOWARDS HEALTHY OCEANS, SUSTAINABLE BLUE FOOD SYSTEMS AND RESILIENT COASTAL COMMUNITIES

INTRODUCTION

The European Bureau for Conservation and Development (EBCD) welcomes the European Commission's consultations on the future Ocean Act, built upon a revised Maritime Spatial Planning Directive (MSPD), and on the revision of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD).

EBCD chose to respond to these consultations through a single position paper because both initiatives have been launched simultaneously and will together shape the future governance of Europe's seas. While they pursue distinct objectives and should remain separate legislative instruments, they inevitably address a number of common issues, including marine governance, maritime spatial planning, environmental objectives, stakeholder participation and the sustainable use of marine resources.

This paper therefore presents EBCD's views on each initiative individually while highlighting a number of horizontal considerations that should underpin both legislative processes. Our objective is not to advocate for greater integration between the two legislative instruments, but rather to contribute to a coherent policy framework that delivers healthy marine ecosystems while supporting sustainable fisheries, aquaculture, food security and resilient coastal communities.

EBCD believes that both initiatives should follow the principles of better regulation. Future legislative requirements should be scientifically robust, proportionate, supported by comprehensive socio-economic assessment and developed through meaningful stakeholder engagement. At a time when European seas face increasing pressures from climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution and growing competition for maritime space, environmental ambition must be accompanied by practical implementation and balanced governance.

HORIZONTAL CONSIDERATIONS

Although the Ocean Act and the revised MSFD have different legal bases and objectives, their implementation should be coherent with the wider EU legislative framework governing Europe's seas.

The Commission should ensure consistency between these initiatives and existing legislation, including the Common Fisheries Policy, the Nature Restoration framework and other relevant environmental and maritime legislation. This should not result in additional legislative complexity or overlapping obligations, but rather improve legal certainty and facilitate implementation by Member States.

EBCD also encourages stronger coordination between the relevant Commission services, notably DG MARE and DG ENV, as well as between environmental, maritime and fisheries authorities at national level. Better administrative coordination would improve policy delivery, reduce unnecessary duplication and support more effective implementation without altering the distinct objectives of each legislative framework.

THE OCEAN ACT: CREATING A BALANCED FRAMEWORK FOR MARITIME SPATIAL PLANNING

EBCD supports the objective of consolidating marine environmental objectives and planning tools within a coherent legislative framework. However, the legal status of future objectives should remain clear.

The Commission should clarify whether political commitments contained in the Ocean Pact - such as the objective of protecting 30% of EU seas, including 10% under strict protection - would become legally binding obligations under the revised framework. Should political commitments be translated into binding targets, only those supported by robust scientific evidence, comprehensive socio-economic assessment, and broad consensus among Member States and stakeholders should be included.

Maritime spatial planning should continue to be based on an ecosystem approach while explicitly recognising the strategic importance of aquatic food production. Fisheries and aquaculture contribute significantly to food security, nutrition, climate mitigation and the socio-economic vitality of coastal regions. As competition for marine space continues to increase, sufficient space must remain available for sustainable fisheries and aquaculture alongside other maritime uses and environmental objectives.

EBCD also encourages the explicit recognition of Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures (OECMs). In line with international guidance under the Convention on Biological Diversity and existing Commission guidance, OECMs can complement the MPAs in implementing the 30x30 Global Biodiversity Framework Targets, and represent an important mechanism through which sustainable fisheries management can contribute to biodiversity conservation while supporting viable coastal communities.

EBCD Position Paper on the Ocean Act and the Revision of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive

A MODERNISED MARINE STRATEGY FRAMEWORK DIRECTIVE

The revision of the MSFD provides an opportunity to make the Directive more adaptive, scientifically robust and better aligned with today's environmental challenges.

Climate change should be fully integrated into the Directive's objectives, monitoring systems and assessment methodologies. Rapid changes in ocean temperatures, species distributions and ecosystem functioning require adaptive environmental targets capable of evolving alongside scientific knowledge. Static historical baselines may no longer adequately reflect ecological realities.

Any environmental targets, descriptors or threshold values introduced under the revised Directive should be based on robust scientific evidence and accompanied by transparent assessments of uncertainty. Marine ecosystems remain highly complex and scientific understanding continues to evolve. Targets should therefore:

- be supported by robust peer-reviewed science;
- acknowledge scientific uncertainty and existing data gaps;
- be adapted to the ecological characteristics of each sea basin;
- be periodically reviewed and updated; and
- be accompanied by comprehensive socio-economic impact assessments.

Environmental measures should also follow the principle of proportionality. Marine pressures arise from multiple land-based and maritime activities. Responsibilities for achieving environmental objectives should therefore reflect the relative contribution of different sectors rather than placing disproportionate obligations on fisheries or aquaculture alone.

Meaningful stakeholder participation remains fundamental to successful implementation. Fisheries and aquaculture stakeholders possess valuable practical knowledge of marine ecosystems and should be involved from the earliest stages in the development of indicators, targets, monitoring methodologies and management measures. Early engagement improves both the scientific quality and the practical feasibility of environmental policies while increasing stakeholder ownership and compliance.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

EBCD calls upon the European Commission to ensure that:

- both legislative proposals are developed on the **basis of sound science, proportionality and better regulation**;
- **policy coherence** is strengthened across EU marine legislation while preserving the distinct objectives of each legal framework;
- any **binding targets are based on robust scientific evidence**, comprehensive socio-economic assessment and broad stakeholder support;
- **OECMs are explicitly recognised** as contributing to European conservation objectives;
- **climate change is fully integrated into the revised MSFD**;
- environmental measures reflect the **cumulative impacts** of all sectors and are applied proportionately;
- fisheries and aquaculture are recognised as **strategic contributors to food security**, coastal livelihoods and the sustainable blue economy; and
- **stakeholders are actively involved** throughout the development and implementation of both initiatives.

WHO WE ARE

The **European Bureau for Conservation and Development (EBCD)** is a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) founded in 1989 and based in Brussels (Belgium). EBCD supports science-based solutions, full stakeholder participation, due consideration for the socio-economic aspects and respect for cultural diversity, while specializing in maritime affairs, fisheries, aquaculture and oceans governance. EBCD works at the interface between fisheries management and the conservation of marine resources.

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