

Greater North Sea Basin Initiative (GNSBI)

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NSAC Advice on GNSBI and stakeholder engagement strategy

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1 Background

On 23 May 2025, NSAC participated in the Greater North Sea Basin Initiative (GNSBI) panel at the European Maritime Days in Cork, Ireland. This advice stems from our contribution to the discussions focusing on GNSBI and their stakeholder engagement strategy. We hope that GNSBI will follow the principles of participatory governance from inception to implementation.

We are grateful to GNSBI for having recognized the essential value fisheries have, not only in terms of food security, but also for their contribution to sustainable food systems and conservation of ecosystems, as well as their important role in discussions on societal priorities in terms of healthy and low carbon food provision for climate mitigation, nature protection and energy security. It is critical that they are given appropriate consideration in Marine Spatial Planning (MSP). With 20 years of experience, we believe NSAC is well placed to provide balanced fisheries stakeholder views on emerging topics in marine spatial planning.

2 North Sea Advisory Council (NSAC)

The North Sea AC is one of the 11 ACs dedicated to either horizontal topics or regional sea basins established with the 2003 CFP reform and expanded with 2013 reform. The NSAC focuses on demersal fisheries in the North Sea with 22 member organisations from 7 EU Member States, the fishing sector and Other Interest Groups, including environmental NGOs, sharing the North Sea basin and relevant stocks. Despite Brexit, costing us a fair share of fisheries, human resources and knowledge, we maintain a close contact with our former British members as we appreciate that fish and ecosystems are transboundary.



NSAC is supported by The European Commission

We provide policy and management advice to the European Commission and North Sea Member States, specializing in topics covering fisheries technical measures and innovation for management and conservation of fishery resources, Common Fisheries Policy, environmental legislation directly or indirectly related to fisheries, MSP, environmental considerations in science, such as climate change, pollution, cumulative impacts of offshore wind development and other marine activities, stakeholder engagement in policy and scientific processes and so on.

A special feature of ACs is that they work to provide consensus advice to EU and national administrations through iterative Working Group meetings, where topics are proposed and positions negotiated through open dialogue. Where consensus is not possible, minority positions are recorded, ensuring that no voice is lost or disregarded, providing a full picture to resource managers. AC Secretariats and Chairs have a unique responsibility to mediate between, and balance, various stakeholder positions with the aim of reaching a unified social position on any given topic.

ACs are privileged stakeholder bodies in that they have a direct link to EU services, with regular exchanges and dialogues at both EU and national levels, where stakeholders are able to speak with one voice and, through that, have a greater impact on policy proposals. All our meetings are open to observers and meeting reports published on the website, ensuring full transparency.

2.1 Challenges and conflict resolution mechanisms

Being composed of a diverse group of stakeholders with, at times, diametrically opposite views and values is challenging. Dialogues require sufficient time, effort and openness on all sides to be able to succeed in reaching the ultimate goal, which is consensus.

But there is so much more to NSAC than just this instrumental role of providing a unified societal voice. ACs offer a space for trust-building, learning, mutual understanding, and communicating across silos, understanding the technicalities and dependencies of different disciplines, and fostering empathy towards players other than your own. This collaborative platform has proven essential for effective fisheries management and its relevance will only be enhanced as we move towards a more integrated ecosystem-based management.

Sadly, the world is becoming increasingly polarised. We can see that simply by opening social media platforms serving as channels for immediate, and often poorly-thought-through reactions to local or global events. Until we realize that there is nothing to be gained from confrontation but everything to be gained from genuine curiosity and collaboration, stakeholder engagement and policy co-development will be reduced to a painful trade-off exercise, with no genuine support for, and effective compliance with, proposed measures.

It's at the intersection of different positions, through dialogue and collaboration, where innovative ideas and proposals take shape through co-development. We believe that innovation is a key tool that will enable us to not only survive but proactively shape one of the largest sustainability transitions in human history.

Conflict is not something to be feared but something to be managed and learned from. In fact, no progress is possible without friction. It's how we deal with it that makes a difference. With

two decades of stakeholder engagement, the NSAC has mechanisms in place to address and manage divergent positions, and we continue to work on improvements to our functioning so that it responds to the needs of each and every member. Our meetings and operations are guided by the Statutes, the Rules of Procedure, and the Code of Conduct with Meetings Etiquette, all accessible [here](#).

ACs, as all great things in life, are a work in progress. With objective and accountable Chairs, competent and neutral Secretariats, and members who are genuinely interested in dialogue and cooperation while understanding that trade-offs are inevitable, we believe that ACs are best equipped bodies for stakeholder input.

2.1 NSAC and the future marine spatial planning

MSP as a concept has an immense value for NSAC. Primarily because fisheries suffer the most from the so-called ‘spatial squeeze’. Free range fishing has been the norm until offshore wind and other activities started creeping in and claiming their space. Those assigned the label of ‘overriding public interest’ threaten traditional sectors such as fisheries with displacement. This is creating an unwelcome opportunity for disputes. Being at the receiving end of unfavourable repercussions of spatial planning priorities, fisheries are trying to make their voices heard by continuously pointing out traditional fishing grounds to be taken into account when planning space for new activities.

To explore the state of play in MSP in view of the ‘spatial squeeze’ in the North Sea and the role the NSAC can play in these processes, we organised a workshop on MSP and Stakeholder Engagement in 2023 in Brussels, with a wide spectrum of experts from national administrations, ICES, OSPAR, environmental NGOs, fisheries, offshore wind, researchers etc. The workshop covered a wide range of topics, such as the need for transboundary and multi-actor cooperation (including between EU and national administrations, OSPAR, ICES etc.), research priorities, multiuse and coexistence concepts, and cumulative effects, and resulted in topical advice¹. In 2025, we are building on this legacy by taking stock of current MSP processes and discuss emerging topics in a [webinar](#) on 1st July.

Accurate fisheries data is key for informing MSP. Making fisheries data accessible to wind farm developers at the start of the planning process gives fisheries a stronger voice in MSP decisions. The fishing industry should consider mapping out their important fishing grounds and making this data available to national administrations and other interested parties for effective governance.

In the NSAC, we’re contributing to this discussion through our latest **Advice on Mapping of Important Fishing Grounds**², which we’ve developed through an iterative Focus Group with a number of external speakers and experts from different national mapping projects, cross-government initiatives such as GNSBI, research institutes, NGOs such as the Global Fishing Watch, and EU platforms, to relay challenges, concerns and solutions in terms of mapping

¹ <https://www.nsrac.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/12-2223-NSAC-Advice-on-MSP-and-stakeholder-engagement.pdf>

² <https://www.nsrac.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/13-2425-NSAC-Advice-on-Mapping-Fishing-Grounds.pdf>

and displacement, data collection, sharing, visualisation, presentation and interpretation of such data and maps.

The advice highlights that effective and inclusive MSP requires proactive engagement of fisheries stakeholders throughout all project stages. Empowering bottom-up initiatives on mapping fosters trust and ownership. Stakeholder platforms such as Advisory Councils enhance collaboration, while integrating fishers' local knowledge in MSP builds credibility, relevance, and compliance. Standardizing mapping methodologies, combining AIS, VMS, and logbook data, and including social and cultural dimensions are essential for accurate depictions of fishing activity. Real-time data sharing should respect commercial sensitivity and fishers' privacy, encourage participation through incentives, and be coupled with transparency around benefits. Political support, legal mandates, and centralized data centers are vital for secure, cross-border data exchange, with ethical safeguards to protect sensitive fishing information. Sustained funding and accessible, regularly updated mapping platforms ensure long-term utility. Fisheries maps must balance transparency with confidentiality, involve fishers in interpretation, and avoid misrepresentation through clear instructions, tutorials and disclaimers. Fisheries should be recognized for their social, environmental, and cultural roles—not just economic value. Finally, mapping must include displacement impacts from developments like offshore wind, ensuring fair space allocation and compensation for affected fisheries.

In advice, we recognize GNSBI as an important platform promoting fair and equitable consideration of societal priorities and actors, but we question the omission of ORE track, giving an impression of ORE being seen as overriding public interest, which we believe should be avoided.

3 GNSBI and stakeholder engagement

We see NSAC as the key player in MSP processes as it assembles relevant EU fisheries representatives and NGOs who have a stake in the designation of marine space. This streamlined access to fisheries stakeholders' input is an important benefit. NSAC can act as a sum of its parts, where differing views are welcome and beneficial, or more than that, providing a platform for deliberations, negotiations and shaping of a unified position on spatial planning and on how stakeholder engagement is organised for peak effectiveness. With 20 years of stakeholder experience and with an established cooperation with GNSBI from its early stages, we believe we can be a valuable partner in designing and implementing GNSBI stakeholder strategy, so that it can deliver a lasting, meaningful and effective participation.

In this sense, we strongly encourage GNSBI to establish participatory approaches already in the drafting stage of its Stakeholder Engagement Strategy, ensuring early input into the strategy that will speak to and address the needs of relevant stakeholders. From there, continuous and systematic engagement with consistent communication of results, feedback and targeted open dialogues with stakeholders will ensure that stakeholders are well-informed and engaged throughout the process.

4 Conclusion

We hope that these considerations will help guide GNSBI towards a future-proof and equitable MSP. We thank again the GNSBI, its leading Member State Ministries and their representatives for allowing us to provide our views on MSP and stakeholder engagement during the European Maritime Days 2025 and look forward to continued engagement both in our meetings and events as well as GNSBI stakeholder processes. For further information or questions, please contact our Secretariat at tamara@nsrac.org (Tamara Talevska) and/or katerynau@nsrac.org (Kateryna Urbanovych).

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