

## REPORT

Meeting: **OSPAR ICG-MSFD**

Parties: **OSPAR contracting parties, observers**

Date: **7-8 October 2025**

Location: **Brussels (BE)**

Chair: **Carole Durussel**

Rapporteur: **Tamara Talevska**

### 1 Introduction

**Tamara Talevska** attended this meeting on behalf of the NSAC. NSAC has been observer to OSPAR since 2021.

**Talevska** briefly introduced NSAC, noting that OSPAR work on MSFD is highly relevant for NSAC stakeholders, particularly in light of the upcoming revision. The AC was mostly interested in Descriptors D3 and D6, and following closely the developments of MS progress on both MSFD and NRL. She expressed a wish for strengthened cooperation between NSAC and OSPAR in the future.

### 2 MSFD Common Implementation Strategy Updates (Alice Belin, DG ENV)

Updates were provided on the ongoing implementation of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) through the Common Implementation Strategy (CIS). The work of the **Working Group on Good Environmental Status (WG GES)** was highlighted, focusing on the advancement of activities to address identified gaps in the assessment of the achievement of GES.

Attention was drawn to the criteria that remain insufficiently covered and the appropriate level of adoption. A workplan for EU-level activities was presented, addressing Descriptor 3 (Commercial Fish and Shellfish, criterion D3C3), Descriptor 5 (Eutrophication), and the activities of the Joint Group on Ecosystem State and the Water Framework Directive (WFD), as well as Descriptor 7 (Hydrographical Changes).

A key priority has been identified in relation to **Article 8 assessment guidance**. New **threshold values** have been adopted, and work is ongoing to develop a unified repository to facilitate the assessment of GES in relation to indicators and corresponding criteria.

Activities under the Working Group on Programme of Measures and Socio-Economic Analysis (WG POMESA) have been postponed. The next meeting of the MSCG has been

scheduled for 12 November, while Member States (MS) are expected to discuss the revision of the MSFD on 11 November.

Political discussions are still ongoing regarding both the MSFD and the Maritime Spatial Planning Directive (MSPD), and further evolutions may occur in the coming months.

The **MSFD Evaluation Report** identified five major problem areas:

1. Legal Framework: Unclear objectives and definition of GES.
2. Implementation and Enforcement: A complex and lengthy implementation cycle.
3. Regional Coordination: Significant disparities across marine regions.
4. Policy Coherence: Insufficient coherence with other policies and limited application of the ecosystem-based approach.
5. Data Management: Non-harmonised monitoring practices, restricted data access, and heavy reporting burdens.

Two overarching **challenges** were highlighted:

- The failure to achieve GES, and
- The complexity of the existing legal framework.

To address these challenges, **actions** will be directed towards:

- Improving the regulatory framework,
- Enhancing the operational effectiveness of the Directive, and
- Simplifying reporting, monitoring, and data requirements.

**Timeline:**

- Call for Evidence: October 2025 – January 2026 (12 weeks)
- Targeted Stakeholder Consultations: November 2025 – March 2026
- Drafting of the Impact Assessment Report: November 2025 – mid-2026
- Legislative Proposal: Mid-2026

**NL** sought more information about the scope of targeted consultations.

**Belin** informed that different tools will be used (surveys, FGs bringing together stakeholders from the same region)

**NSAC** noted that a lack of coherence and linkage with sectoral policies continues to result in siloed approaches. The Joint Special Group on Marine Action Plan was cited as a successful precedent, and it was inquired whether similar mechanisms will be replicated. It was further

emphasized that ecosystem-based management (EBM) and effective conservation require active stakeholder engagement. This aspect was not reflected under the identified problem areas of enforcement and compliance. Stakeholder engagement was observed to remain largely limited to consultations and the collection of opinions, rather than being integrated into the co-creation of measures—a missing link for the effective implementation of conservation actions. Clarification was also sought regarding which stakeholder groups will be targeted during the upcoming targeted consultations.

**Belin** explained that work is ongoing on the definition of Ecosystem-Based Approach (EBA) to establish a common understanding of these concepts. Clear objectives and concrete thresholds are required to enable the effective implementation of measures. Regarding stakeholder engagement, it was noted that additional measures are being integrated into the Impact Assessment (IA). As the MSFD is a framework directive, prescriptive requirements for stakeholder engagement are limited, and it is therefore the responsibility of national authorities to ensure that engagement is based on co-creation. The Common Implementation Strategy was identified as the key tool for this process, and it was noted that ACs shall be part of these groups. Finally, she confirmed that industry stakeholders and Advisory Councils will be invited to participate in the targeted consultations.

**NL** asked if IA Report could be shared with MS in advance.

**Belin** responded that IA Report will be shared together with the legislative proposal in 2027, not before. This report will indicate whether a revision is necessary. Socio-economic impact of measures will also feature in this report.

**OSPAR** asked about coherence between MSFD and MSPD.

**Belin** responded that at the very minimum, the Commission is seeking to create bridges between the two directives with common approach to definition of ecosystem-based approach. DG MARE is leading on MSPD and DG ENV on MSFD and they are working closely together to align the files.

### 3 Intermediate Assessment Good Environmental Status (GES)

**Definition and threshold value** for GES is still to be established. Priority MSFD criteria needs to be further developed (following COM decision on requirements). Sea turtles criteria to be removed from priority list.

ICG-QSR is responsible for this intermediate QSR (Quality Status Report) assessment. Guidance document on intermediate assessment has been approved by OSPAR. Updates on indicator assessments due in 2029. ICG MSFD and ICG-QSR are performing coherence check.

#### 4 MSFD Programme of Measures (POMESA)

A total of **2,046 measures** have been implemented across all marine regions, with nearly half specifically designed for the MSFD. Around 50% of the measures directly target input prevention, pressure reduction, or habitat restoration, with litter and contaminants being the most frequently addressed pressures.

Progress has been observed across most descriptors. Measures tackling **marine pollution** are generally more specific and measurable, though further progress is needed on nutrient and chemical pollution. Species-related measures mainly address **bycatch reduction**, while seabed measures focus on **limiting the use of mobile bottom-contacting gears**.

**Climate change** is not covered by a dedicated descriptor but is monitored under a general framework assessing its impacts. **Socio-economic considerations** were included in only two Member States' programmes, as no clear EU guidelines exist. Related data are supported by the EU Blue Economy Observatory.

#### 5 MSFD Programme of Measures

Efforts have been made by NGOs to include **climate change** as an additional descriptor under the MSFD, though this is not considered feasible. As a cross-cutting issue, climate change affects baseline conditions across all descriptors, and a separate descriptor could dilute the overall approach to achieving GES.

Provisions already exist for considering how climate change influences GES standards, variables, and indicators. However, reopening the GES Directive is not currently planned.

A key strength of the MSFD lies in its mandatory nature, which requires Member States to allocate resources for monitoring. This obligation does not extend to climate change or ocean acidification.

#### 6 National Updates on Nature Restoration Planning and MSFD Integration

**France** – Consultations with stakeholders are being finalized to draft the national Nature Restoration Plan, coordinated with the Commission and accompanied by a strategic environmental assessment. The draft plan is expected in spring. An inventory of knowledge is being developed to support 2030 objectives for areas in poor environmental status. MSFD reporting will inform the plan, while highly protected areas will require more ambitious measures beyond 2030. Key challenges include improving knowledge strategies, refining a hybrid risk-based approach, and reducing pressures on soft sediments from demersal fisheries.

**Netherlands** – The need for additional monitoring, beyond existing MSFD requirements, is being assessed. A gap analysis comparing current conditions with NRL targets is expected in autumn. Decisions on additional measures and spatial designations are due by May, though discussions remain politically sensitive due to spatial constraints. Efforts are ongoing to clarify links between the National Restoration Plan and the MSFD Programme of Measures.

**Ireland** – Work builds heavily on MSFD implementation. A cost-benefit analysis identified fishing impacts as the most significant pressure. Policies are being aligned, and stakeholder workshops have been held. Restoration areas are being identified, though specific sites will be determined at a later stage.

**Belgium** – The National Restoration Plan is under preparation, with ongoing assessment of additional monitoring needs. Measures under the MSFD, Habitats, Birds, and Biodiversity Directives are being integrated into a unified framework.

**Sweden** – Development of the national restoration plan is underway.