

REPORT

Meeting: **TG Seabed**
Parties: **DG ENV, MS, ICES, observers (NSAC, NWWAC)**
Date: **16 October 2025**
Location: **MS Teams**
Chair: **Laurent Markovic**
Rapporteur: **NSAC & NWWAC Secretariats**

1 Nature Restoration Law – State of Play by DG ENV

The **Nature Restoration Law (NRL)** entered into force in August 2024, setting legally binding EU targets to restore degraded ecosystems, including marine habitats and species. It builds on existing frameworks — the Habitats and Birds Directives, MSFD, CFP, Marine Spatial Planning, and the Water Framework Directive.

Member States are currently preparing **National Restoration Plans (NRPs)**, due in September 2026. Drafts will be assessed by the Commission in early 2027, with final plans to follow six months later. Reporting and review will begin from 2030.

The plans must include data on:

- Total habitat area and current distribution,
- Areas not in good condition,
- Favourable reference areas,
- Areas suitable for re-establishment,
- Planned restoration measures.

Under Article 5, Member States must restore marine habitats listed in the regulation (around 230 types, including reefs, sandbanks, and seagrass beds) and habitats of marine species such as mammals, turtles, seabirds, and fish. Knowledge gaps on habitat condition must be addressed by 2030 and 2040, and areas already in good condition must not deteriorate. The regulation ensures coherence with the MSFD, building on its existing data and assessments.

Support materials are available on the [Nature Restoration Regulation Reference Portal](#) (managed by the EEA), including templates, guidelines, FAQs, and explanatory notes. Marine aspects are discussed in the Marine Expert Group, while implementation support continues through the Nature Restoration Expert Group.

The LIVE Mapper Project, launched this autumn, is developing a manual on mapping, assessing, and restoring all habitats under the regulation. Additionally, an implementation

support event will be held in Dublin this November, focusing on marine components of NRPs and cooperation under regional frameworks.

Coordination with TG Seabed and the MSFD remains essential. TG Seabed work on habitat mapping, condition, and pressures directly supports Article 5 implementation. Thresholds and indicators under the MSFD can guide restoration targets and condition assessments for NRR habitats.

Next steps:

Member States are finalizing their plans. Continued exchanges will take place through TGCBED, the Marine Expert Group, and the Nature Restoration Expert Group.

Interventions:

ICES: recalled that strong parallels exist between this work and ongoing efforts on thresholds in WKD6SCOPE, particularly concerning favourable reference conditions, the definition of thresholds, and GES assessments.

IE: In Ireland, MSFD 2024 assessment is being applied to Group 7 offshore habitats under the NRR, closely linked to ongoing work on quality thresholds from WKD6SCOPE. Key challenges concern the definition of GES, as the NRR targets habitats not in good condition. Reliance on extent thresholds and condition proxies in past assessments has caused uncertainty in identifying restoration areas. Further complexity arises from the NRR–CFP link and how to account for overlapping habitats, such as corals and reefs with sediment habitats.

JRC: Asked if there are steps being taken to establish a common methodology or methodological standards for NRR between MS. The current definition of “condition” remains vague, and both, the habitat identification for species and the use of quality thresholds could vary significantly.

DG ENV: No common methodology is currently being developed; Member States, through regional cooperation, could agree on a common approach. Regarding habitats for species, many questions have been received, and options for providing Commission support are being considered

TG Seabed: Through TG Seabed, new pressure assessments are being developed and are expected to be available by next September, with opportunities for improvement and updates. Where relevant, assessments from the Habitats Directive will also be used. The NRR habitat specifications, based on detailed EUNIS levels, often lack sufficient data on condition or spatial distribution. Reporting at a broader habitat group level is considered feasible for the current phase, with finer resolution to be targeted in future reporting cycles.

DG ENV: The EUNIS Level 4 classification used under the NRL is more specific than in other frameworks. This level of detail was chosen to ensure that restoration efforts are targeted to the specific needs of each habitat type. The EEA is preparing an interpretation manual to align habitat classifications across the MSFD, the NRL, and the Habitats Directive. No changes to the current classification system are foreseen, as it is established in the law.

However, reporting at the group level is permitted, though it may require data at the individual habitat level, depending on the reporting preference.

SE: At the national level, efforts are being made to adapt MSFD indicators to assess the condition of habitat groups under the NRR and NRPs. The approach aims to build on existing data and gradually integrate modelled habitats where substrate mismatches occur. Additional indicators, such as those reflecting supporting species groups or species interactions, are being explored to better define group-level conditions (e.g., what constitutes a good mussel bank or seagrass meadow).

NL: In the Netherlands, efforts are being made to align the MSFD and NRR as closely as possible. This alignment generally works well for broad habitat types - for example, Group 7 habitats differ slightly, as the littoral zone is subdivided by sediment type under the NRR but not under the MSFD. Monitoring programmes are being adjusted to evaluate broad habitat types, which supports both the MSFD and NRR. However, challenges remain for other habitat types, as many have not yet been defined; this is expected to be addressed at the sub-regional level. Coordination with OSPAR is also being pursued, where overlaps exist between NRR Group 1–6 habitats and OSPAR-listed declining habitats. Consideration is being given to how Habitats Directive types could be integrated, as they partly overlap with broad habitat types but not fully. NRR focuses on the broad habitat categories.

ES: In Spain, a lack of habitat mapping presents a major challenge, making it difficult to provide the required habitat extent data. A further challenge is that in some areas, habitat loss results in disappearance rather than degradation, meaning assessments show 100% in good state, despite substantial historical loss. Determining the original state of these habitats is extremely difficult due to long-term changes over decades.

EL: One of the largest knowledge gaps exists in the deep sea, regardless of its precise definition. Information is needed on both the condition and extent of specific habitats within broader habitat categories. For instance, degraded habitats may require pressure reduction, while loss of deep-sea corals may necessitate active restoration.

DE: Challenges were encountered in splitting habitat types with both terrestrial and marine components, particularly in transitional waters. These issues were largely political rather than technical and required additional time to resolve. For the marine component, marine reporting units were used as a basis, consistent with the MSFD and the WFD. The favourable reference area generally reflects the current habitat extent, with historical areas included where documented declines or complete losses exist. Areas assessed as not in good condition under the Habitats Directive, WFD, or MSFD are similarly classified under the NRR. It was noted that alignment with the MSFD provided the easiest and most effective harmonization, facilitating both implementation and political agreement for the restoration plan.

BE: Noted that a common language should be established across EU regulations. Reporting timelines should be aligned, particularly between marine NRR and MSFD, including measures and status assessments. Definitions of favourable condition (Habitats Directive) and GES (MSFD) are less aligned. A practical approach suggested using MSFD extent thresholds as guidance for the NRR, such as: up to 75% of Type 7 habitats in GES and up to

10% stricter protection to achieve GES or determine it. How does this translate into the favourable reference area?

2 Feedback on ICES data call and WKD6SCOPE workshop

The **WKD6SCOPE workshop** was conducted with a large number of participants, both in-person at ICES HQ and remotely. It was one of the early steps established through a request from DG ENV to ICES to support TG Seabed in defining **quality threshold values**.

The workshop was intended as a scoping exercise, gathering diverse views to inform the analysis phase, which will use data from the recent data call. This phase will feed into a formal ICES advice process, culminating in a peer-reviewed synthesis report with key take-home messages.

Progress over the past decade was highlighted, including developments in VMS coverage and assessment methods. The data call deadline has passed, and submissions are undergoing quality control, with ongoing back-and-forth between countries and technical experts.

The analysis phase will be conducted in two parts: the first, from mid-November to Christmas, will focus on running **indicators and threshold-setting methods**; the second, after New Year, will focus on **cross-comparisons and interpretation of results**.

Preparations for the third workshop are ongoing, with emphasis on comparing and prioritizing indicators and threshold-setting methods, rather than revisiting governance. Key considerations include whether single thresholds per habitat type should be used, how finer-scale analyses (e.g., C-square level) can be integrated, and how differences between marine regions may affect aggregation. The data call also invited submission of alternative assessment methods, and a limited number of methods are currently planned for use, with the possibility for additional contributions during the analysis phase.

Interventions:

DG ENV: Noted that the submitted indicators are mostly general, not linked to specific species or habitats. Clarification was sought on whether future work is expected to focus on specific habitats (e.g., other habitat types) or if implementation is likely to remain at the broad habitat type level.

ICES: The approach depends on the available data. A dataset from Finland on macrophytes could support analyses similar to those conducted for soft-bottom habitats. Other habitat types, such as biogenic reefs and corals, have not yet been examined in detail. Consideration is needed on how to incorporate these other habitat types, and this topic appears as an agenda item in upcoming discussions. A valuable dataset on VMEs was also noted, supported by predictive habitat modelling work.

IE: Future ICES workshop could address coral and sponge habitats for which only point data are available rather than full extent data. Consideration of a common methodology, such as defining buffer zones around these points, was proposed as a useful topic for discussion.

BE: A new scientific approach is being proposed to set thresholds in relation to continuous environmental change. Emphasis was placed on the need for thresholds per habitat type, whether EUNIS or MSFD habitat types, to align with MSFD governance. It was suggested that addressing ranges of thresholds within each habitat type for achieving GES should be prioritized.

ICES: Governance experts at the workshop emphasized that the purpose of assessments and thresholds is to determine whether human activities are being managed in a way that appropriately protects the ecosystem. It was noted that human activities may be mapped at a finer scale than broad habitat types (BHTs). A hierarchical, nested approach was suggested: broad assessments can identify BHTs at potential risk, but finer-scale analysis is needed to evaluate the impact of specific activities within each BHT. Questions such as whether portions of a BHT have already achieved GES or require activity restrictions are critical for management decisions.

BE: Noted that while spatial management occurs at a finer scale, all activities within a given area must be assessed against the same threshold value or range. Introducing a continuum of threshold values across grid cells or environmental gradients was considered problematic, as it would complicate management decisions—for example, determining whether an offshore pile is compliant.

DE: Experience from local waters indicates that covariates can significantly influence outcomes. For example, trawling intensity was observed to be correlated with water depth and sediment type, complicating analyses. Broad habitat types span large depth ranges (e.g., 10–40 m), within which sub-habitat communities differ, and nearshore areas experience higher trawling intensity than deeper areas. Failure to account for these covariates could lead to misinterpretation, such as attributing changes in an indicator directly to trawling intensity when they may instead result from depth or sediment gradients.

ES: Two approaches will be tested in the workshop. In the first approach, threshold calculations will be conducted using data types 1 and 2, which aim to minimize environmental variability. This approach allows thresholds to be calculated with minimal influence from environmental factors, but the threshold must still reflect the variability within the MSFD broad habitat. In the second approach, data type 3 will be used to develop thresholds for the entire MSFD broad habitat, including natural environmental variability. While this variability may increase uncertainty, it is considered an unavoidable aspect of habitat-level thresholds.

ICES: the use of different approaches (data types 1, 2, and 3) reflects diverse schools of thought. The analysis will reveal how these data types behave and allow estimation of the magnitude of uncertainty, particularly in relation to covariates.

TG Seabed: The next TG Seabed meeting is expected in a few months, while workshop and ICES activities will continue in the interim.

3 Evaluation of the MSFD and Identified Problems

Alice Belin, DG ENV, presented the findings of the evaluation of the MSFD. She commented that while the MSFD has been successful in creating new knowledge, supporting regional cooperation, and raising awareness for the seas, the main conclusion was that GES was not achieved by the 2020 deadline. This led the Commission to conclude there is sufficient justification to revise the Directive.

Five key problem areas with the current directive's implementation:

- **Legal Framework:** Issues with the vagueness of certain concepts, objectives, and procedures in the directive's text.
- **Implementation:** A complex and burdensome implementation cycle for member state authorities, along with a lack of enforceability in some cases.
- **Regional Coordination:** An unequal level of development across Europe's four marine regions and inconsistent cooperation levels among member states.
- **Policy Coherence:** While objectives align with other environmental legislation, there are timing and procedural issues. However, there are sometimes conflicts in objectives with sectoral legislation, such as fisheries and the EU blue economy.
- **Data Management:** Problems ranging from a lack of harmonization in monitoring and data collection to issues with data quality and its accessibility for decision-making and public communication.

Belin outlined the **objectives of the MSFD revision** process which was announced in the Water Resilience Strategy and the Ocean Pact in June of this year.

It has two equal **general objectives**:

1. To increase the effective protection of the marine environment and make concrete progress towards Good Environmental Status.
2. To simplify implementation and reduce administrative burden.

These translate into three **specific objectives**:

1. Improve the regulatory framework by resolving issues within the directive's text and clarifying its geographical scope.
2. Make the directive more operational through a stronger link between measures, targets, and the achievement of GES, while also improving regional cooperation and integrating climate change considerations.
3. Simplify implementation by focusing on streamlining the reporting process and improving monitoring and data management, potentially by harmonizing data standards.

Belin commented that the estimated timeline for the revision is provisional. A call for evidence and an Open Public Consultation survey are expected to be launched in the next two to three weeks and will run for 12 weeks. Further targeted consultations and work on the impact assessment report will continue in the coming months. The Commission aims to propose a new legislative instrument by the first quarter of 2027.

The presentation concluded with an interactive session, inviting experts to participate in a series of Slido questions, specifically on a "toolbox of measures" for descriptor six (D6). Participants were asked to respond in their expert capacity, and not as representatives

of their respective member states or organizations.

4 Work programme and roadmap D6 package: next steps

[MSFD CIS Work Programme 2024-2027](#)

[TG Seabed - process towards D6C5 TV and D6 TVs package](#)

ICES 2025 Workshop on Scoping Input to Inform Seafloor Quality Threshold Setting (WKD6SCOPE). <https://doi.org/10.17895/ices.pub.30426775>

Threshold Package Consolidation (Highest Priority)

The overall goal is to consolidate the "threshold package" for GES and deliver it by mid-next year. Attendees agreed that the work on quality thresholds is the most important priority for the group in the next year.

This was followed by a discussion on the issue of 10% areas without pressures.

The issue of defining the "10% areas without management pressures" was debated, with some arguing its priority.

Ireland suggested that the 10% areas discussion should follow the adoption of quality thresholds, as the thresholds are needed to better understand where those areas should be located.

Malta stated that the 10% target is a "red line" for them and reiterated their previous concerns or disagreement.

Sweden offered to share the methodology from their pilot project, which assessed the 5% to 15% interval and incorporated a conservation value assessment to guide the selection of these areas.

5 Technical focus on 'other habitat types' and clarification on the concept of 'loss

[Assessment of sea-floor integrity under the EU Marine Strategy Framework Directive](#)

A persistent, fundamental problem was raised regarding the mismatch in habitat classification for MSFD broad habitat types, specifically between the EUNIS classification (managed by the EEA) and the data used by EMODnet seabed habitats.

Germany mentioned the challenge of inconsistent definitions, such as the mud content for muddy and sandy habitats. Cyprus highlighted an issue where classification based on sediment and depth (EUNIS Level 2) does not match the classification derived from the biological level (Level 3 or 4).

The Commission requested that representatives from Belgium, Cyprus, and Germany send a joint email to clearly explain the issue and point to relevant documents (e.g. the ICES report). This is intended to facilitate liaison with EMODnet and the EEA, and potentially invite their representatives to a future meeting.