

REPORT

Meeting: **Inter-AC**

Parties: **Director General Charlina Vitcheva, DG MARE, AC Chairs & Secretariats, stakeholders**

Date: **18 November 2025**

Location: **INTERACTION**

Chair: **Stelios Mitolidis, Director MARE Unit D**

Rapporteur: **NSAC Secretariat**

1. Opening speech by Director General Charlina Vitcheva on general fisheries matters

The EU Ocean Pact, adopted in June, was positively received and provides a common framework for ocean-related policies, including behavioural change in coastal communities. A key deliverable is the upcoming Ocean Act, which will consolidate existing targets and simplify ocean governance under a single legal framework. To support this, two major legislative revisions are underway:

- The Maritime Spatial Planning Directive (MSPD), with consultations planned soon.
- The Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD), aimed at accelerating environmental progress while simplifying reporting and reducing administrative burden. A call for evidence will be launched shortly.

Both directives will be more closely aligned to ensure coherence and synergies across Commission services.

The CFP is also undergoing a comprehensive evaluation, with results expected in spring. On the CFP's performance, ministers in the AgriFish Council agreed that the policy is broadly achieving its goals. Important to recognise areas for improvement without reversing past progress.

For Vision 2040, ACs are invited to contribute practical and realistic solutions. The goal is to develop a strategic and operational document.

Considering energy transition, significant progress has been made by the Energy Transition Partnership in identifying key challenges and developing a roadmap towards carbon neutrality, including business model and value chain financing aspects. The ETP findings and recommendations will be presented and discussed at a high-level meeting on 17 February 2026 (registration: [link](#)).

Regarding coastal and island communities, DG MARE (with DG REGIO) is preparing a communication to strengthen their role in the blue economy and climate resilience. The call

for evidence will launch in early 2026, with dedicated work planned during Ocean Week (first week of March 2026).

Commitment to simplification and burden reduction was reaffirmed, aiming to eliminate overlaps, remove obsolete requirements and expand the use of digital tools. ACs play a key role in identifying unnecessary red tape, particularly for small operators.

Finally, the revision of the Control Regulation is a major milestone. Progress on secondary legislation was acknowledged, and a further AC workshop on the next batch of measures will be organised.

Following comments from ACs, the Commission also clarified:

- On the SSF Advisory Council, the Commission does not intend to impose structures but supports the creation of working groups and stressed the need for genuine inclusion of SSF interests in all decisions.
- The Marine Action Plan is being further implemented through the Nature Restoration Law, and future coherence will be ensured through alignment of the MSFD, MSP, and the upcoming Ocean Act.
- On concerns about new thresholds, targets and impact assessments, the Commission stressed that the CFP remains an exclusive EU competence and will be safeguarded, while still integrating broader ocean health objectives through the Ocean Act.
- On Brexit and EU–UK fisheries relations, vigilance, non-discrimination and science-based decision-making in upholding the TCA principles of proportionality, while balancing the UK’s regulatory autonomy, was reaffirmed. The 12-year fisheries agreement was highlighted as a major achievement.

2 Strategy on EU fisheries external action

The consultation on the CFP evaluation generated substantial stakeholder input on external action. Overall, the external action under the CFP is viewed positively, particularly from an environmental perspective, but less so in terms of governance effectiveness. SFPAs and RFMOs have low visibility among respondents, though those familiar with them provided generally positive feedback. NGOs called for stricter enforcement and better resourcing.

Key concerns include unfair competition and level playing field, food security and market predictability, and growing supply dependence, with geopolitical shocks such as Brexit and Russia’s war against Ukraine cited as major drivers of market instability.

Stakeholders broadly see good coherence between internal and external CFP action on biodiversity, ocean governance and SDGs, but weaker alignment on climate and fair trade, and frequent misalignment between internal tools and external ambitions. There are strong calls for greater transparency in bilateral agreements, closer oversight of EU vessels outside EU waters, and stronger sanctions for non-compliance.

The call for evidence on future EU External Action strategy (July–mid-September) received 49 responses from a broad range of stakeholders. There is wide alignment on the need for a science-driven external fisheries policy that strengthens RFMOs, combats IUU fishing through

traceability and transparency, and upholds social and environmental standards. Differences remain on implementation: NGOs favour faster precautionary action while industry prioritises a workable level playing field, predictability, and avoiding overregulation.

On IUU fishing, stakeholders support shifting from “zero tolerance” to “zero loopholes”, including the rollout of ICCAT certification next year. There is broad support for rigorous import controls, electronic documentation, and scaling electronic monitoring and observers to 100% in high-risk fleets and transshipments. Integration of climate and biodiversity in fisheries management is widely supported, with NGOs emphasising deep-sea protection.

While there is broad convergence, gaps remain between ambitions and concrete proposals. This session and future meetings will be dedicated to developing action-oriented recommendations.

3 Presentation of the Commission’s proposal for MFF 2028-2034

The European Commission has proposed a new Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for 2028–2034 that makes EU funding more integrated, flexible and results-oriented, while reinforcing support for fisheries, aquaculture and coastal communities.

The proposal is built around three pillars:

1. European Fund for Economic, Social, and Territorial Cohesion, Agriculture and Rural, Fisheries and Maritime, Prosperity and Security: implemented through National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs), similar to current EMFAF national programmes. This pillar also includes an EU Facility for direct and indirect management. A dedicated thematic regulation sets out conditions for support to the CFP, European Ocean Pact, and maritime and aquaculture policies.
2. European Competitiveness Fund (under Horizon Europe, direct management) finances investments through policy windows, including for fisheries, aquaculture and maritime sectors.
3. Global Europe Fund (external action): supports ocean diplomacy, international ocean governance and partnerships, including a dedicated budget line for SFPAs.

The total proposed EU budget is €2 trillion: 44% allocated to NRPPs, 21% to the European Competitiveness Fund, 10% to the Global Europe Fund and the remainder covers standalone programmes and NextGenerationEU repayments. A minimum €2 billion is reserved specifically for fisheries and maritime priorities. The Commission has proposed to make this minimum amount explicitly binding in legislation. Beyond this minimum, Member States can allocate additional funding from a non-ringfenced €453 billion to support fisheries, aquaculture and maritime priorities, including implementation of the CFP and the future European Ocean Act.

Under the NRPPs, Member States must include a dedicated fisheries and aquaculture chapter in their national plans, covering control, data collection, IUU fishing, generational renewal, coastal community development and balanced fishing opportunities.

The new funding system is built around sector-specific rules and national and regional programmes developed with stakeholder involvement, linking reforms and investments and strengthening support for transnational projects and crisis response to enable faster funding in emergencies. It introduces a shift from cost-based to performance-based funding, with payments tied to results, milestones and targets. The system aims to deliver simplification, faster payments, lower administrative burden, and stronger multi-level governance and partnerships.

The EU Facility allows the Commission to directly fund key CFP areas such as scientific advice, data collection and fisheries control, while preserving existing EMFAF actions and enabling shared management and flexible financial instruments for rapid crisis response.

Support for small-scale coastal fisheries and ocean-related activities is strengthened, including the possibility of 100% co-financing for certain measures and support for processing, data collection and control.

While basic eligibility rules remain, Member States gain more flexibility. Funding is conditional on:

- Compliance with WTO fisheries subsidy rules
- Respect of CFP objectives
- No serious infringements by beneficiaries
- No support for vessels that reflag or relocate to third countries
- No funding for business ownership transfers or deep-sea mining

A new horizontal principle will apply across all funding areas: the Do No Significant Harm (DNSH) principle. It will be embedded in the performance regulation and EU budget rules. Sector-specific guidance will ensure that funded activities do not cause environmental harm or undermine EU environmental objectives. While new for fisheries and aquaculture, this approach was already used extensively in other EU policy areas during 2021–2027.

The European Competitiveness Fund consolidates 14 existing EU funding instruments into a single framework. Management can be direct or indirect. The ECF totals around €451 billion, with a focus on innovation, technology development, competitiveness, and strategic resilience.

The Global Europe pillar brings together external EU financing instruments to support international ocean governance, ocean diplomacy, and stronger partnerships with non-EU countries.

Overall, the new delivery model creates a much broader funding space for fisheries, aquaculture and the blue economy. This is a major opportunity for Member States to design programmes that address coastal community challenges, generational renewal, innovation and sector transition.

In responses to questions from ACs, it was clarified:

- The financing needs of ACs have been taken into account in the design of the EU Facility. Funding for ACs is foreseen under direct management within the National and Regional Plans framework, managed at EU level.
- Basic conditions are set in the plans. Only minimum, essential eligibility rules are set in the thematic regulation.
- For investments environmental conditions will be guided by DNSH principles. Detailed DNSH guidelines will be developed by the Commission in 2026, in consultation with Member States. DNSH will apply across all three funding pillars.
- Brexit-related impacts and actions from previous periods have been taken into account in the new framework.
- The new delivery model does not create competition between policies. Instead, it requires Member States to clearly explain funding priorities in their national plans.
- Stakeholders, including ACs, are strongly encouraged to engage early with national and regional authorities starting in early 2026, actively influence the design of National Plans
- The EU Facility will continue to finance activities currently supported under the direct and indirect management parts of EMFAF. It ensures continuity and no loss of existing support mechanisms.
- There is no rigid list of predefined actions in the legislation. The model is designed to be flexible, more so than even the EMFAF.

4 Presentation of Joint Advice on functioning

Esbén Sverdrup Jensen (PelAC) presented joint AC advice on good management practices. While ACs have more than 20 years of experience, they differ significantly in topics covered, cultural environments, fishing areas and membership structures, meaning that there is no one-size-fits-all solution. At the same time, there is a clear need to ensure that ACs meet the standards expected of modern organisations.

The advice identifies a number of key challenges, including unclear roles and responsibilities for Chairs, Secretariats and members, and the need for clearer internal guidelines on accountability and duties. Ensuring a safe and positive working environment is highlighted as a priority, including addressing power imbalances and risks of disrespectful communication. Many ACs currently lack formal mechanisms for reporting inappropriate behaviour, including sexual harassment, which puts them behind most modern institutions and organisations. At the same time, the workload of ACs has increased significantly without a corresponding increase in resources for Secretariats, creating additional pressure on the system.

The joint advice proposes a series of improvements, including the development of a memorandum of understanding (MoU) to define roles, mandates and expectations more clearly, the introduction of HR-style systems such as 360-degree performance reviews and structured feedback mechanisms for Chairs and Secretariats, and the strengthening of democratic principles through term limits for Chairs and secure as well as anonymous voting procedures. It also recommends the establishment of formal policies to prevent and address inappropriate behaviour, including the possibility of sanctions where necessary.

In the longer term, the roadmap foresees the creation of mechanisms to receive, investigate and resolve complaints, including whistleblowing systems, internal conflict resolution committees and access to mediation services. It also stresses the importance of training and capacity building for Chairs, Working Group leaders and Secretariats, to ensure they are properly equipped to manage growing workloads and institutional responsibilities. Overall, the conclusion is that ACs are already functioning well and providing high-quality advice to the Commission and Member States, and that these reforms are not about fixing failures but about modernising the system, strengthening professionalism and transparency, and ensuring that ACs remain attractive, credible and fit for purpose in the future.

Julia Rubeck (DG MARE) explained that the current context includes the evaluation of the CFP Regulation and the performance reviews being carried out by the ACs. DG MARE welcomes the initiative presented and sees this as the right moment to launch a broader discussion.

A growing focus on conduct and behaviour has been identified in AC performance reviews. This issue has also reached the attention of Commissioner Kadis, who has proposed jointly developing guidelines on the functioning of ACs. These could take the form of a guidance document based on good practices already observed across different councils, and could include elements such as a code of conduct or a memorandum of understanding on acceptable behaviour. DG MARE underlined that the process should be organised in a bottom-up manner and include consultations with ACs, individual members, chairs and secretariats. The experience of secretariats was highlighted as particularly valuable, given their long-standing involvement and overview of AC functioning. The future guidelines could also be informed by the conclusions of performance reviews, making this an appropriate moment to start the work. Based on consultations with ACs, there is intention to prepare a draft text on the subject within the next two months, with the aim of moving the process forward by early January.

5 Closing remarks

PeLAC asked whether information from the ongoing assessment of Advisory Councils could be shared in a way that would support internal performance reviews or the development of guidelines. The Commission replied that there was no specific material available to share at this stage.

Further written inputs were invited, particularly on general fisheries matters and external dimensions. DG MARE confirmed openness to meetings related to the Multiannual Financial Framework.

As for next steps, a physical meeting is planned for February/March 2026, with likely focus on the Vision for 2040. The European Ocean Days in March will be soon distributed to ACs, with a specific event planned around the Vision for 2040. In May 2026, ACs will be represented at EMD. Finally, the intention is to have the CFP evaluation ready by spring 2026.