

## REPORT

Meeting: **Marine Strategy Coordination Group (MSCG)**

Parties: **DG ENV, Stakeholders**

Date: **13 May 2020**

Location: **Zoom**

Chair: **DG ENV**

Rapporteur: **NSAC Secretariat**

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### Review of MSFD

A review of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) is currently underway. Several consultation processes have already been concluded, including public consultations, targeted consultations, and a Call for Evidence. The review process focused on identifying the main shortcomings of the current framework and assessing whether the proposed solutions are appropriate and effective.

A key aspect of the review is ensuring greater coherence and alignment with other EU environmental legislation, particularly the Maritime Spatial Planning Directive (MSPD) and the future EU Ocean Act. At this stage, it remains uncertain whether the MSPD and the MSFD will eventually be merged. The current approach prioritises substance over institutional form, and a possible merger is considered only one among several policy options.

To support the revision process, the European Commission carried out an impact assessment examining the environmental, social, and economic implications of different policy options for revising the MSFD. The assessment aimed to identify the most effective measures for improving implementation and achieving environmental objectives while balancing administrative and economic considerations.

The consultation process generated significant stakeholder engagement, with a total of 1,168 responses received.

### Key Messages from the Open Public Consultation

The main messages emerging from the open public consultation included:

- A call to increase the level of ambition through mandatory and time-bound environmental targets;
- The need to simplify rules, clarify concepts, and ensure more effective environmental protection measures;
- Improved alignment and coherence with other EU environmental legislation and with the MSPD.

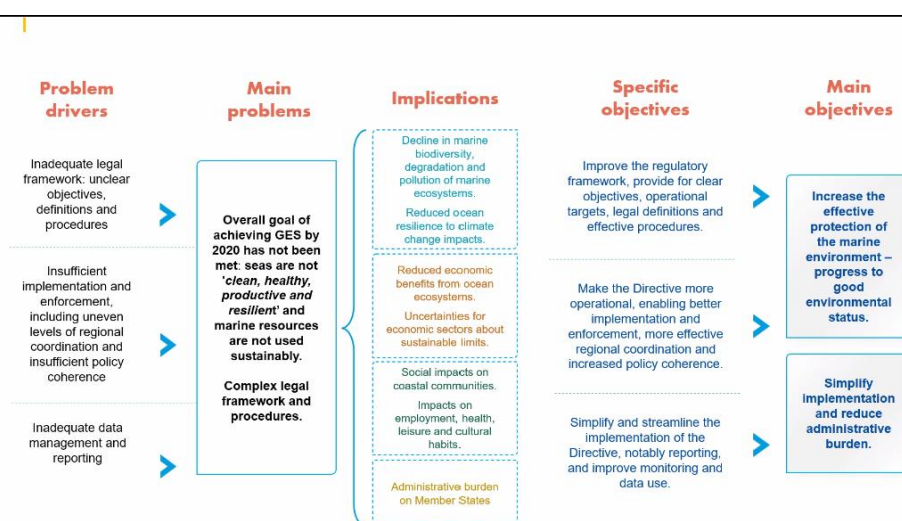
### Key Messages from the Call for Evidence

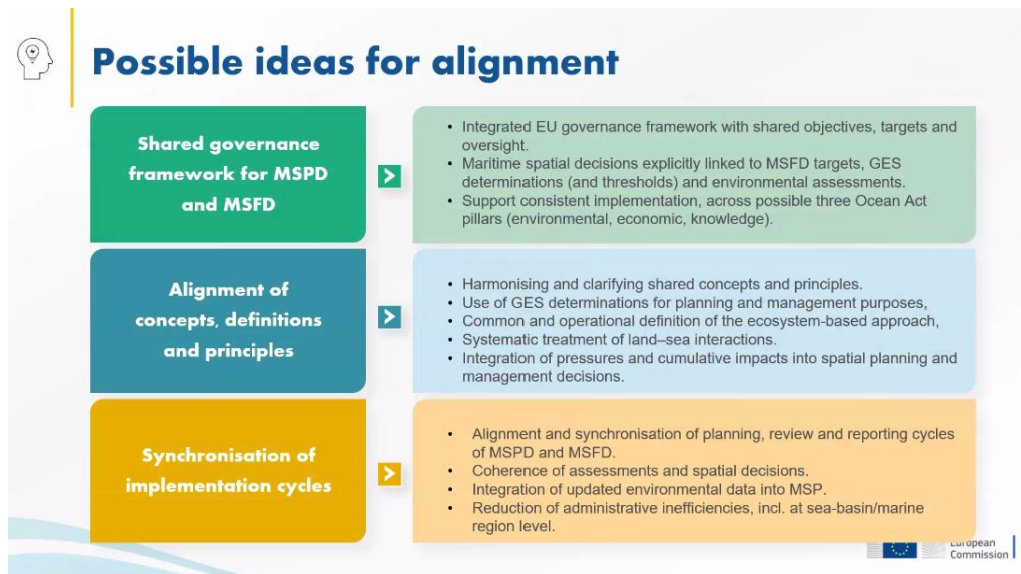
The Call for Evidence highlighted several additional priorities:

- Maintaining or increasing the level of environmental ambition while making the MSFD more operational and simplified, including providing greater legal certainty and reducing administrative burdens for businesses;
- Improving coherence and alignment with other EU legislation, the future Ocean Act, and the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP);
- Strengthening regional cooperation through enhanced regional implementation and establishing a clearer role for regional sea conventions.

In addition to the broader consultation exercises, targeted surveys were conducted with NGOs, businesses, and academic stakeholders to gather more specialized feedback and sector-specific perspectives.

Based on the evidence collected, the European Commission prepared an **intervention logic framework** identifying the main problems, the drivers behind these problems, and their implications. This framework also sets out the specific and overarching objectives intended to guide the revision of the MSFD.





Member States (MS) were generally opposing the possibility of merging the MSFD with the MSPD. Many expressed concerns that a merger could further complicate implementation due to the involvement of different departments and authorities, requiring complex inter-ministerial coordination. Instead, Member States appeared to favor stronger coherence and alignment between the directives while maintaining them as separate but interconnected instruments.

Several MS emphasized the importance of systematically addressing land-sea interactions within the revised framework. In discussions on coherence, reference was also made to the need for alignment with the Water Framework Directive, the Habitats Directive, the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP), and the Nature Restoration Law (NRL).

While there appeared to be broad agreement on the overall diagnosis of the challenges facing the MSFD, MS stressed that the key issue would be how the proposed reforms are implemented in practice. There was strong support for strengthening environmental protection, provided that implementation remains practical and administratively manageable.

A need was expressed for the directive to better reflect differences between marine regions. Member States highlighted that a “one-size-fits-all” approach would not be appropriate given the varying ecological, geographical, and governance conditions across Europe’s sea basins.

Concerns were also raised regarding the treatment of offshore wind development within the MSFD framework, including some external suggestions that offshore wind activities could potentially be exempted from certain MSFD requirements. I

Some MS requested more concrete examples of operational targets to better understand how revised obligations would function in practice. Some already have advanced operational targets and permitting procedures in place and expressed concern that harmonization efforts could undermine existing national systems.

Funding was identified as a critical factor for achieving Good Environmental Status (GES). MS also called for less frequent reporting obligations and suggested that contaminants in fishery products should not form part of the MSFD descriptors.

Strong emphasis was placed on ensuring that MSP incorporates an ecosystem-based approach and makes use of MSFD indicators. In this context, MS underlined the importance of aligning concepts, definitions, methodologies, and indicators across relevant legislative instruments.

Finally, participants stressed the importance of integrating assessments of pressures and cumulative impacts between directives. However, concerns were also expressed regarding the practical difficulties of synchronizing implementation and reporting cycles, particularly where different directives fall under the responsibility of separate authorities or ministries.

#### State of Europe's Seas (SoES) Report

The European Environment Agency (EEA) is currently preparing a report on the state of Europe's seas. The upcoming **State of Europe's Seas (SoES)** report is intended to support ongoing EU policy processes, including the review and revision of the MSFD.

The report integrates MS reporting submitted under the MSFD in order to assess the condition of Europe's marine environment. It is based on data reported to the EEA during the first MSFD implementation cycle covering the period 2018–2024. The assessment draws in particular on reporting under Article 8 concerning the state of marine waters and pressures, Article 9 on the definition of Good Environmental Status (GES), and Article 10 on environmental targets established to achieve GES.

A key output foreseen for 2026 is the publication of the first State of Europe's Seas Synthesis Report, scheduled for release by the end of 2026. The report is expected to provide a comprehensive assessment of Europe's marine environment based on Member State MSFD reporting.

The EEA also highlighted the role of the [WISE-Marine](#) portal, which serves as the main information system on Europe's seas. The platform functions as a single, coherent, and publicly accessible system for MS reporting under the MSFD. It provides information on actions being taken to achieve and maintain GES of the marine environment. At present, data from two reporting cycles are available on the portal, while data from the third reporting cycle are expected to become available in autumn 2026.

The WISE-Marine dashboard will include Report's information on whether GES has been achieved or not achieved, the overall state of Europe's seas, human activities and their uses, pressures affecting marine ecosystems, and environmental targets established by Member States. The platform will also provide information on trends, reported pressures and targets, and rankings of human activities contributing to marine pressures.

Results are made available at EU, regional and subregional, as well as national levels, making the platform useful both for experts and for other users interested in exploring the state of Europe's seas.

The State of Europe's Seas report will provide integrated assessments of the health of the marine environment by analyzing ecosystems, environmental pressures, and human activities, while also identifying key priorities and future outlooks for achieving GES.

The findings are expected to contribute directly to several ongoing EU policy processes, including the European Commission's Article 12 assessments, the evaluation and revision of the MSFD, and broader initiatives such as the EU Ocean Pact and the Zero Pollution Action Plan. The report is also intended to help raise public and political awareness of the condition of Europe's seas.

#### EU Ocean Pact

**Ocean Eye** aims to establish a smarter and more effective system for ocean observation while promoting an international alliance on ocean monitoring and data sharing.

MS' reporting under the MSFD is already recognized as an important contribution to ocean observation. The initiative includes a dedicated research and innovation pillar, and the European Commission is expected to present an Ocean Observation Strategy and an Ocean Innovation Strategy. A legal act on ocean observation could also be included in the future EU Ocean Act.

An upcoming Commission communication is expected to set out a framework for coordinating the various ocean observation campaigns across Europe, with the objective of improving consistency and coherence across existing data collection systems.

The fisheries sector was identified as having a potentially important role in ocean observation. The Seabed 2030 initiative was highlighted as a key example, aiming to map 100% of the seabed by 2030.

However, challenges were also noted, particularly regarding data sharing. Fishers can be reluctant to share data due to trust issues and uncertainties around data governance. In addition, incomplete or unclear implementation of the GDPR framework may contribute to mistrust among stakeholders.

Marine data production is currently fragmented across multiple institutions. Organizations such as ICES, STECF, and Copernicus already generate large volumes of marine and environmental data and are well-established sources of expertise.

The Ocean Eye initiative is intended to build on, rather than replace, existing systems. It will act as a complementary framework to improve coordination, accessibility, and coherence across existing ocean observation efforts.

**The Ocean Pact Dashboard** is intended to support monitoring and reporting under the future EU Ocean Pact framework. It will be part of a broader reporting architecture, alongside the State of the Ocean Pact report and the work of the EU Ocean Board.

The dashboard will track policies and measures across the six priorities of the Ocean Pact: environmental protection and restoration, the blue economy, research and innovation, coastal communities, and maritime defense and security, with environmental protection and restoration as the primary priority. Work is ongoing to develop indicators to measure progress across these areas.

A prototype is expected to be presented by Commissioner Costas Kadis at European Maritime Day 2026 in Cyprus (20–22 May). Developed through a participatory process involving multiple Commission departments and agencies, the dashboard will integrate national and regional data. Member States will be consulted again once a more advanced version is available. The final dashboard is planned for launch by the end of 2026.

It will feed into the **State of the Ocean Pact report**, published every three years, combining quantitative dashboard outputs with narrative contributions from Commission services and agencies.

Discussions covered fisheries indicators such as MSY, MSY Btrigger, and Feco, with DG MARE preparing methodological guidance. While engagement has so far focused on Commission departments and Communities of Practice, broader stakeholder consultation is also foreseen, including Advisory Councils and regional sea conventions.

Existing systems such as EMODnet, Eurostat, and Copernicus are being considered as data sources, with suitability assessed case by case. There is also interest in reusing MSFD indicator products and potentially complementing them with citizen science data in the future.

### Regional Seas Conventions

Within **OSPAR Commission**, work is well underway on the 2029 Intermediate Assessment, which is scheduled for adoption at the OSPAR Commission meeting in 2029. Several thematic reports have already been finalized and are expected to be presented in June, covering offshore renewable energy, aquaculture, plastics production and consumption, bioengineering, and marine bird bycatch. For marine bird bycatch, a threshold value for the indicator has been agreed, while a common indicator for sea turtle bycatch exists but without an agreed threshold. A new candidate indicator for elasmobranch species is also planned for inclusion in the intermediate assessment.

OSPAR is also advancing cross-cutting work on climate change and ocean acidification through a dedicated working group, which is developing common assessment approaches and indicators. In addition, socio-economic assessments and cumulative effects assessments are being developed at regional level. A regional action plan on benthic habitats is currently being finalized and is expected to be adopted at the June OSPAR meeting.

Further progress includes an updated **OSPAR Science Agenda** identifying key knowledge gaps, designed to guide research priorities and encourage scientific contributions. A new online platform supporting this agenda has been launched. Work on ocean accounting is also advancing, aiming to better link ecosystem condition with economic and social outcomes to support ecosystem-based management.

#### Seabed threshold values D6

The ICES advice development process follows a structured, multi-step approach aimed at improving indicator development and threshold setting for marine environmental assessments.

#### **Step 1: Data call to DCF national correspondents**

The process began with a data call to Data Collection Framework (DCF) national correspondents. Reporting shows that bottom-contacting fishing pressures are relatively well documented, while reporting on other pressures, such as deoxygenation, remains limited. Bottom trawling is identified as by far the most significant physical pressure.

#### **Step 2: Scoping and demonstration phase (WKD6SCOPE workshop)**

In the second step, a scoping and demonstration workshop (WKD6SCOPE) was held. From a pool of approximately 500 indicators, five were selected for further development. In addition, four operational threshold-setting methods were chosen from a total of eleven available approaches. All methods were fully documented to ensure they can be reused by Member States.

#### **Step 3: WKBENTH4 workshop**

The third step, WKBENTH4, focused on refining indicator and quality threshold estimates. It also involved cross-indicator and cross-threshold-setting method comparisons to assess robustness and consistency. The workshop evaluated usability for NRR habitats group 7 assessment and reporting requirements.

#### **Step 4: Publication**

The process culminates in the publication of WKBENTH4 and the associated ICES advice, released on 13 May.

#### **Links:**

Report on the workshop to evaluate options for setting seafloor thresholds (WKBENTH4)  
<https://doi.org/10.17895/ices.pub.31898953>

Advice EU - Seafloor integrity thresholds (MSFD D6C5): operational methods and application to the Nature Restoration Regulation and report on the workshop to evaluate options for setting seafloor thresholds (WKBENTH4)  
<https://doi.org/10.17895/ices.pub.31898953>

#### **Key signals from WKBENTH4**

The WKBENTH4 workshop key finding was that differences in results are generally larger between indicators than between methods, highlighting the importance of testing multiple indicators rather than relying on a single one. The workshop further indicated that using multiple methods in parallel can help address data gaps and improve transferability and comparability across assessments. While threshold-setting methods for bottom trawling impacts are already available, additional work is required for other pressures and for combined-pressure assessments. Data, indicators, and methods developed in this context are considered transferable for use in NRL reporting.

### **Next steps in TG Seabed**

Following WKBENTH4, the Technical Group on Seabed (TG Seabed) will undertake a series of meetings and intersessional work to further develop the approach. A drafting group will prepare the D6 package, including proposals for:

- D6C4 (habitat loss): **2%**
- D6C5 (adverse effects): **25%** (with quality threshold pending), with a possible additional threshold value for **10% of area without manageable pressures**

At the end of June, TG Seabed will discuss the advice and draft report, including national approaches to threshold setting. During the summer period, MS are expected to test and select appropriate data, indicators, and threshold-setting methods. In September, TG Seabed will hold a two-day in-person meeting where MS will present their choices, followed by a group discussion and final agreement on the proposed D6C5 quality threshold.

In autumn, the threshold values and the full D6 package will be presented to WG GES and MSCG for endorsement and adoption.

Several MS expressed concerns regarding the proposed timeline. They emphasized the need for additional time to allow national validation and approval of thresholds, given their significant implications for both NRL reporting and the MSFD framework.

Other participants stressed the importance of maintaining momentum and avoiding delays in the process.