

REPORT

Meeting: **Joint Special Group on Marine Action Plan**
Parties: **DG MARE, DG ENV, Member States, observers**
Date: **30 June 2026**
Location: **Albert Borschette, Brussels and online**
Rapporteur: **NSAC Secretariat**

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1 Opening

The opening remarks emphasized the implementation of the **2023 Marine Action Plan** to address growing climate pressures on marine ecosystems. Key priorities include protecting and restoring ocean health, expanding marine protected areas, reducing bycatch, protecting seabed habitats, strengthening monitoring, and increasing stakeholder engagement. The discussion highlighted the links between the **Water Resilience Strategy**, the **Ocean Pact**, and marine policies, stressing cooperation and knowledge sharing to support sustainable fisheries and effective Natura 2000 management. The **Nature Restoration Regulation** and

National Restoration Plans were presented as key opportunities, with the **Common Fisheries Policy** identified as a central tool for delivering restoration objectives. The importance of scientific research, selective fishing methods, and collaboration among Member States, stakeholders, and marine users was underlined to ensure effective implementation.

Through the day, the Commission and Member States exchanged on:

- **CFP Regulation evaluation**
- **Commission update on the Marine Action Plan**, covering bycatch and seabed integrity, Natura 2000 fisheries guidance, and implementation support for fisheries management in Natura 2000 sites.
- **Ocean Pact implementation**
- **Member State presented** on Marine Action Plan implementation regarding sustainable fishing, just transition, research and innovation, monitoring and enforcement, and stakeholder engagement
- **Future Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2028–2034**
- **Implementation of the Nature Restoration Regulation (NRR)**, including progress on national restoration plans and the REDRESS project on deep-sea habitat restoration.

2 Presentation of the Future MFF 2028-2034

The proposed future EU funding framework would replace separate instruments such as **EMFAF** and **LIFE** with a single funding framework and common rulebook, increasing competition for resources and requiring closer cooperation between DG ENV and DG MARE. The Council has reached a partial agreement on the new fund, which includes support for fisheries control, data collection and implementation of the **Ocean Pact**, while key CFP funding provisions remain under negotiation within the next **Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF)**. Budget proposals range from **€2–4 billion** for a ring-fenced CFP allocation to **€7.29 billion** proposed by the European Parliament's Fisheries Committee, with priorities including fleet modernization, decarbonisation, innovation and maritime research. Member States will need to develop integrated National and Regional Partnership Plans, aligning fisheries, environmental and climate objectives. Overall, effective coordination will be essential to maximize the impact of limited sustainable funding while supporting both marine conservation and fisheries.

3. Presentation by the Commission on its activities to implement the Marine Action Plan

3.1 Bycatch of sensitive species (MSFD D1C1 Criterion)

Under **MSFD D1C1**, the focus is on ensuring that mortality rates from incidental bycatch remain below levels that threaten the long-term viability of species populations.

15 Member States have reported information for this criterion, but only 10 have established threshold values. Most reporting has come from the Mediterranean and North-East Atlantic regions. While all Member States have reported on marine mammals, coverage of other sensitive species remains limited. No threshold values have yet been established for marine turtles or cephalopods.

Threshold values have been developed for marine mammals across all regions, raising the key question of what level of bycatch can be considered sustainable. In the North-East Atlantic, threshold values have also been developed for certain fish species and seabirds. However, threshold values are not currently harmonized across regions. Regional cooperation remains important, particularly for marine mammals, while fish-related thresholds are often developed through international organizations such as ICES and GFCM, which may support greater harmonization.

The five priority species identified under the Marine Action Plan are: Harbour Porpoise, Common dolphin, Common angel shark, Balearic shearwater, Mediterranean monk seal.

3.2 Progress on Threshold Values for Seabed Integrity (D6C5)

Under **MSFD Descriptor 6 Criterion D6C5**, Member States are required to establish threshold values for the quality and extent of seabed habitats to achieve **Good Environmental Status (GES)**.

The current work focuses on two main elements:

- The extent of each broad benthic habitat type that may be adversely affected, with a proposed threshold value of **25%**.
- The definition of the condition or quality level that determines when a habitat is considered adversely affected.

During the next assessment cycle in 2030, Member States will report whether GES has been achieved and identify management measures required through their programs of measures.

DG ENV asked **ICES** to assess available indicators and threshold-setting methods for seabed habitats, test different approaches using existing datasets, and examine how cumulative pressures and combined indicators could be addressed

ICES concluded that **indicator choice and risk tolerance levels** have the strongest influence on threshold values, while additional indicators and combined approaches may help address knowledge gaps and improve comparability. A full understanding of all cumulative pressures is not required to establish initial D6C5 thresholds, but decisions on acceptable risk levels and assessment scales remain important.

Next steps include testing approaches with national data, presenting Member State analyzes at the September TG Seabed meeting, finalizing the D6 threshold package in September–October, and seeking endorsement from the **EG GES** and **MSCG**.

DG ENV also stressed the need for improved seabed data and highlighted a **€30 million Horizon Europe call** to support seabed mapping under the **Nature Restoration Regulation**.

3.3. Commission Guidance on Natura 2000 and Fisheries – DG ENV D.3

The Commission guidance, developed under the **Marine Action Plan**, clarifies the application of the **Habitats Directive** and **Birds Directive** to fisheries activities in marine **Natura 2000 sites**. It aims to strengthen implementation of environmental and fisheries legislation, improve cooperation between authorities, support cross-border coordination, and increase stakeholder involvement.

For **Special Areas of Conservation (SACs)**, Member States must establish conservation objectives, implement appropriate measures, regulate fisheries where needed, monitor habitats and species, and ensure compliance and adaptation of measures. Fisheries measures should be **site-specific, science-based and proportionate**, with socio-economic impacts considered and stakeholders involved throughout the process.

The guidance highlights the use of **Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) tools** and other planning frameworks to introduce conservation measures, including technical gear modifications, spatial or temporal closures, fishing restrictions, and alternative fishing practices. Examples include banning bottom trawling on sensitive habitats such as **Posidonia seagrass beds** or limiting fishing in vulnerable areas.

DG ENV also clarified that the **non-deterioration obligation under the Nature Restoration Regulation (NRR)** differs from existing legal provisions, but relevant assessment approaches—such as risk assessments and analyzes of interactions between activities and habitats—can be adapted to support NRR implementation.

4 Update on the Ocean Pact implementation

The implementation of the **EU Ocean Pact** is advancing across six priority areas aimed at protecting ocean health, promoting a sustainable blue economy, supporting coastal communities, strengthening research and innovation, enhancing international ocean governance, and improving coordination. Actions under the first priority focus on restoring marine ecosystems through the implementation of the **Water Resilience Strategy, revision of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive**, development of **blue carbon initiatives**, and continued support for **effective Marine Protected Areas**.

The sustainable blue economy priority includes the **evaluation of the Common Fisheries Policy**, development of a **Vision for Fisheries and Aquaculture 2040**, **strategies for maritime industries, ports and tourism**, and a **Blue Generational Renewal Strategy**. **Support for coastal, island and outermost regions** will focus on improving resilience, economic opportunities and adapting policies to regional needs, including through updated fleet guidelines and regional strategies.

The Ocean Pact also prioritizes research, knowledge and innovation through initiatives such as **Ocean Eye, the European Digital Twin Ocean and a European Ocean Research and Innovation Strategy**. International commitments include the implementation of global agreements on biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction and fisheries subsidies, the EU Catch IT system, and strengthened cooperation through initiatives such as a Pact for the Mediterranean.

Finally, governance will be reinforced through the creation of a **High-Level Ocean Board**, an **Ocean Pact Dashboard** to monitor progress, the publication of regular progress reports, and the development of an Ocean Act, including a revision of the Maritime Spatial Planning Directive.

5 Member State Updates on Marine Action Plan Implementation and Fisheries-Environment Measures

North Sea

France

France is implementing its National Biodiversity Strategy and MPA strategy through risk-based fisheries management, bycatch reduction measures and Natura 2000 site assessments. It is preparing fisheries measures for Natura 2000 sites by 2027 and supports targeted restrictions where significant impacts are identified rather than a general ban on bottom trawling in all MPAs. France also supports a just transition through EU and national funding, including compensation for temporary closures linked to cetacean protection.

Denmark

Denmark aims to protect 30% of its marine areas, including 10% under strict protection, and has established trawl-free zones covering around 20% of inner waters and the Kattegat. The country is preparing joint fisheries recommendations, developing Natura 2000 management measures and supporting a fisheries partnership between industry and NGOs. Measures also include compensation schemes for affected fisheries, harbor porpoise and seal protection, and stronger coordination between fisheries and environmental policies.

Sweden

Sweden is promoting selective and low-impact fishing through cooperation between authorities, fishers and scientists. Measures include reducing seabed impacts through habitat protection thresholds and restrictions on bottom trawling in MPAs, supporting sustainable fishing transitions through EMFAF funding, and strengthening monitoring through remote electronic monitoring and digital catch reporting. Sweden applies an integrated governance approach combining fisheries management, marine policy and spatial planning under a single authority.

Germany

Germany is implementing Marine Action Plan measures through fisheries restrictions in marine protected areas, including limits on bottom-contact fishing in the Dogger Bank and

coastal protected areas. It is developing additional measures for seabirds, fish, marine mammals and benthic habitats while supporting selective fishing gear research and bycatch monitoring. A just transition is supported through funding for fleet adaptation and vessel decommissioning, alongside strengthened cooperation between fisheries and environmental sectors.

Poland

Poland is implementing measures for sensitive species protection, habitat restoration and sustainable fisheries. Actions include harbor porpoise protection measures, eel management with catch limits and restoration actions, alternative gear trials to reduce bycatch, seabed mapping for nature restoration, and EMFAF support for environmentally friendly fishing practices. Cross-sectoral cooperation between fisheries and environmental authorities has been strengthened through dedicated coordination mechanisms

Others

Estonia

Estonia is expanding its marine protected area network, with five new MPAs increasing protected waters to over 22%. The country continues monitoring of harbor porpoises, eel, salmon and sea trout, while supporting biodiversity and fisheries innovation through EMFAF projects. Fisheries control is being strengthened through electronic reporting, remote electronic monitoring trials and implementation of the revised Fisheries Control Regulation.

Cyprus

Cyprus is advancing marine protection and sustainable fisheries through measures to reduce bycatch, including dolphin interaction schemes and acoustic deterrent devices, while strengthening marine protected areas through no-fishing zones and improved spatial and temporal closures. The country continues scientific research, sensitive habitat mapping and deep-sea surveys to support evidence-based management. Actions also include a gradual phase-out of bottom trawling, improved monitoring and enforcement through upgraded Vessel Monitoring Systems, support for MPA management through park rangers, and continued implementation of EU and international frameworks. Cyprus has also ratified the BBNJ Agreement and maintains stakeholder engagement through consultations with fisheries organizations.

Lithuania

Lithuania highlighted actions to reduce bycatch and improve biodiversity protection, including a joint recommendation on harbor porpoise protection, updated eel management planning and seabird bycatch monitoring. Scientific studies on eel populations showed strong dependence on restocking, while marine habitat mapping identified 17 habitat types under the Nature Restoration Regulation. Lithuania is also developing compensation schemes, including EMFAF support for gillnet fisheries affected by marine mammal protection measures.

Portugal

Portugal is progressing with the gradual phase-out of bottom trawling and developing conservation plans for vulnerable species. An Action Plan for sharks and rays is being

prepared, while a national bycatch reduction action plan has completed public consultation and is awaiting government approval.

Spain

Spain is developing new legal and conservation measures to address accidental bycatch, including a Royal Decree establishing a national framework and a recovery plan for harbor porpoises. Additional conservation plans are being prepared for angel sharks, seabirds, marine turtles and cetaceans. Spain is also preparing management plans for marine protected areas to support the EU 30x30 protection target and continues to promote selective fishing practices, scientific advice and stakeholder involvement. Spain continues implementation of the Western Mediterranean Multiannual Plan through selective trawl gear requirements and promotion of low-impact fishing methods. It emphasizes proportionate conservation measures, stakeholder participation and balancing environmental objectives with socio-economic needs. Improvements in scientific cooperation, data collection, electronic monitoring and Natura 2000 management support adaptive fisheries management.

Croatia

Croatia has strengthened its scientific basis for fisheries management through studies on incidental catches and sensitive species interactions in the Adriatic. National measures have been updated to reduce impacts, including compensation for marine mammal depredation and improved eel management. Croatia continues sustainable fisheries management through technical, spatial and temporal measures, including temporary no-take areas under GFCM frameworks. The country has expanded its marine Natura 2000 network to around 32% of national waters and is developing targeted fisheries measures based on conservation objectives rather than applying general trawling bans.

6 Presentation of the CFP Regulation evaluation

The evaluation of the **Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) Regulation** (2014–2024) assessed whether the 2013 framework remains effective and fit for purpose, using the EU Better Regulation criteria of effectiveness, efficiency, coherence, relevance and EU added value. Based on extensive stakeholder input, the evaluation found that the CFP has contributed to reducing overfishing, improving scientific knowledge and strengthening governance, with the share of stocks fished at sustainable levels increasing from **50% in 2014 to 63% in 2022**. However, progress has been slower than expected, with limited recovery of fish biomass due to delayed conservation measures, insufficient recovery time, climate change, pollution and other external pressures. The ecosystem-based approach has improved but remains incomplete, and the landing obligation has not delivered the expected changes in fishing practices.

The evaluation highlighted continued socio-economic challenges for the fisheries sector, including profitability, investment needs, employment pressures, rising energy costs and fleet capacity imbalances. While aquaculture and processing sectors remain economically viable,

aquaculture growth is constrained by administrative barriers and the EU processing industry remains increasingly dependent on imports due to limited domestic supply.

The CFP has strengthened the EU's international role by improving cooperation with third countries, supporting Regional Fisheries Management Organizations, promoting sustainability standards and enhancing compliance and transparency. Governance has improved through stronger scientific advice, better data collection and stakeholder involvement, although weaknesses remain in fisheries control, enforcement, regional decision-making processes and the consistency of implementation.

Overall, the evaluation concluded that the CFP Regulation remains **fit for purpose**, with its environmental, economic and social sustainability objectives still valid. However, achieving long-term fisheries resilience requires not only conservation measures but also sustainable business models, appropriate fleet capacity, investment, social considerations and adaptation to external pressures such as climate change, energy costs, geopolitical developments and Brexit.

The Commission will use the findings to guide future initiatives, including the **Vision for Fisheries and Aquaculture 2040**, energy transition measures, coastal community initiatives, the Ocean Act and future funding discussions. Short-term actions include reviewing multiannual plans following a stakeholder call for evidence and assessing possible improvements to **EMFAF**, including simplification and alignment with international obligations. Broader CFP reforms will require further stakeholder discussions and political decisions.

Member States generally supported a targeted and pragmatic review. **France** emphasized maintaining the strengths of the CFP while improving the ecosystem-based approach, scientific knowledge, fleet modernization and decarbonisation, simplifying implementation, preserving the multiannual approach and strengthening coherence with wider EU policies and international fisheries action.

7 Implementation of the Nature Restoration Regulation (NRR) in the marine environment

7.1 Update on the progress in the implementation of the NRR with focus on marine restoration and national restoration plans

The implementation of the **Nature Restoration Regulation (NRR)** in the marine environment is a key priority for Member States, which are currently preparing their **national restoration plans**. The process follows the principle of subsidiarity, with the EU setting overall objectives while Member States determine suitable measures, locations and implementation approaches in cooperation with stakeholders. Draft plans must be submitted to the Commission by **September**, with final plans expected in **2027**. These plans will define restoration targets, priority areas, measures, monitoring systems, funding needs and stakeholder involvement, and will be updated in 2032 and 2042.

Where restoration measures affect fisheries, they must be implemented through the **Common Fisheries Policy (CFP)** framework, including relevant procedures and joint recommendations between Member States. Key challenges include knowledge gaps, the need for improved monitoring and data collection, and ensuring early and transparent stakeholder engagement. Strong cooperation across sectors, particularly between fisheries, biodiversity and climate policies, will be essential.

Ongoing support includes workshops, scientific advice on seabed integrity thresholds, guidance on marine restoration approaches and knowledge-sharing initiatives. Successful implementation will depend on coordinated action, effective stakeholder involvement and restoration measures that deliver benefits for **biodiversity, climate resilience, sustainable fisheries and coastal communities**, supported by EU guidance and technical assistance.

7.2 REDRESS project as an example of restoration of deep-sea habitats

The **REDRESS project** is an EU-funded initiative focused on restoring vulnerable deep-sea habitats across European waters, particularly those affected by bottom-contact fishing, climate change, pollution and other pressures. Covering areas from Iceland and the Azores to the Mediterranean and Levantine seas, the project brings together research institutions, companies and NGOs to identify degraded habitats, prioritize restoration areas, develop innovative techniques, assess socio-economic benefits and support effective governance.

The project targets key deep-sea ecosystems such as cold-water corals, deep coral gardens, sponge habitats, soft sediments and chemosynthetic ecosystems. It combines **active restoration** methods, including habitat recovery and species reintroduction, with **passive restoration** through protection measures that allow natural recovery. New technologies, such as underwater vehicles, sensors and artificial structures, are being developed to support restoration and monitoring.

REDRESS also evaluates the economic and social benefits of restoration and emphasizes cooperation with fisheries stakeholders to ensure practical and sustainable solutions. Challenges include high operational costs, the difficulty of monitoring remote deep-sea areas, technological limitations and climate change impacts. The project is exploring climate refugia and areas with higher restoration potential to improve long-term success.

The project supports EU objectives under the **Biodiversity Strategy, Nature Restoration Regulation and Marine Strategy Framework Directive** by providing scientific evidence, decision-support tools and guidance for future restoration efforts. Initial results, particularly for deep-water coral restoration, are promising, although further testing across regions and conditions is needed. The project highlights that restoration must be combined with long-term protection, international cooperation, stakeholder engagement and public support to achieve lasting ecosystem recovery.

8 Observer interventions

Stakeholders emphasized the need to balance **marine environmental objectives with the economic viability of the fisheries sector**. **Europêche** highlighted that improvements in marine environmental conditions have not yet translated into economic benefits for fishers, with fleet decline driven by multiple factors including policy choices, market pressures, imports, administrative burdens, access to marine space and financing constraints. Stakeholders called for EU sustainability standards to be better reflected in trade policies and supported a **case-by-case, science-based approach** to fisheries restrictions in marine protected areas (MPAs), particularly for bottom trawling. They stressed that MPAs should be linked to clear conservation objectives, proportionate measures and stronger coherence between fisheries policy, marine spatial planning and environmental legislation. Concerns were also raised about the scientific basis and application of seabed integrity thresholds under the MSFD.

The Commission highlighted that **NRR** is supported by impact assessments showing significant long-term benefits when environmental, social and economic factors are considered. It clarified that the **Marine Action Plan** is a Commission-wide initiative designed to achieve both environmental and fisheries objectives, while Member States remain responsible for proposing specific measures. Any fisheries restrictions must be based on case-by-case assessments, and further implementation of Natura 2000 fisheries measures is needed, as only a limited proportion of sites currently have such measures in place.

Regional coordination groups stressed the importance of continued monitoring of **endangered, threatened and protected species bycatch**, supported by adequate funding under the Data Collection Framework. While monitoring has improved through observer schemes and electronic monitoring, challenges remain for small-scale fisheries due to limited resources and safety constraints. Stakeholders also called for better use of collected data to support decision-making.

MedPAN highlighted that many marine protected area managers are not yet fully prepared to implement the NRR due to gaps in funding, baseline data, staffing and technical expertise. Training needs were identified in restoration techniques, monitoring, stakeholder engagement and policy implementation, with an emphasis on ecosystem-based approaches and caution regarding active restoration without sufficient scientific preparation.

Environmental organizations, including **Coalition Clean Baltic**, called for faster progress on marine protection and ecosystem recovery, including achieving the EU 30x30 MPA targets, reducing bycatch of vulnerable species, strengthening eel conservation and accelerating MSFD implementation. They stressed that effective MPAs require strong protection measures, including restrictions on damaging activities where necessary.

ClientEarth/Seas at Risk and other stakeholders emphasize the importance of **co-designing solutions** with fishers, scientists and civil society. Recommendations included encouraging low-impact fishing practices, improving gear-specific indicators, creating incentives for sustainable fishing methods and developing coordinated approaches to reduce shark and ray bycatch.

Baltic Advisory Council highlighted the need for stronger marine spatial planning and regional coordination to manage increasing competition for marine space between fisheries, restoration, offshore energy and other activities. It stressed that fisheries should remain an important part of food security and coastal resilience, and that restoration measures should address wider environmental pressures such as pollution, eutrophication and climate change rather than focusing only on fisheries impacts. Early involvement of fisheries stakeholders and science-based assessments of degraded areas were considered essential for successful restoration.