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NSAC Advice Ref. 14-2526 **NSAC Advice on EU Ocean Act**

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Executive Summary

- The revised MSPD must evolve to deliver balanced, ecosystem-based and legally coherent marine spatial planning across all Member States.
- Static, administrative zoning should be replaced with a dynamic, sea-basin-scale planning model that proactively resolves spatial conflicts.
- Within the Ocean Act, sustainable European fisheries should be recognized as strategic contributors to European food security and sovereignty.
- The revised MSPD needs to fully integrate fisheries and wider socio-economic impacts and climate adaptation into maritime spatial planning.
- The value of fisheries should be understood beyond economic terms through their role in preserving Europe's diverse maritime heritage, culture and knowledge, strengthening coastal resilience, and maintaining the living connection between people and the sea.
- Realistic and evidence-based multi-use solutions that reflect operational realities at sea need to be promoted and facilitated through the legal framework.
- A gear-specific approach to marine spatial planning and MPA management should be applied, avoiding blanket fishing bans unless scientifically justified and in line with the conservation goals of the specific MPA.
- Coherence between the MSPD, MSFD and CFP should be increased, while preserving the distinct role of each instrument through coordinated implementation, reporting and governance.
- Policy coherence may be improved by strengthening cross-sectoral cooperation, information exchange and early stakeholder involvement across all stages of policy development and implementation. For this, Advisory Councils and the fisheries sector must be systematically and directly integrated into policymaking, data collection, and implementation dialogues.



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- Improving coherence also depends on making better use of existing knowledge. Interoperability, sharing and joint use of environmental and socio-economic data can be improved, while promoting stakeholder participation in marine data collection.
- Because marine ecosystems and industries transcend national borders, the Ocean Act must mandate robust regional sea-basin coordination, data-sharing, and transboundary cooperation.
- The legal status of all Ocean Act objectives must be clearly defined, distinguishing binding obligations from political commitments.
- Targets need to be science-based, supported by impact assessments and socio-economic analysis, and developed with broad stakeholder and Member State consensus.
- Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures should be explicitly recognised as contributing towards the 30% conservation objective to better reflect the diversity of conservation tools and measures available and encourage integrated ecosystem-based management.
- Coordination and communication across EU institutions, Member States and stakeholder groups needs to be improved to support coherent implementation of the maritime acquis. Existing collaborative structures, such as the Advisory Councils, could be better utilised as cross-sectoral platforms.

1 Background

In February 2026, the European Commission launched a [call for evidence](#) to shape the development of the European Ocean Act, planned for adoption by the end of 2026. In April, this was followed [by a public consultation](#). The Ocean Act aims to strengthen ocean governance in the EU, serving as a single reference point for all economic, climate, environmental, and social targets to protect and sustainably use ocean resources. The act will build on the revision of the Maritime Spatial Planning Directive, to ensure a more coherent and effective use of the maritime space and the ocean resources; structure the governance and coordination of the European Ocean Observation System; simplify reporting obligations, and reduce administrative burden in EU ocean policies. It is also expected to closely align with the revision of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive to enhance policy coherence and better integrate environmental objectives in maritime spatial planning.

Since President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen announced the European Oceans Pact, the NSAC has actively contributed to the policy debate. In 2025, the NSAC adopted advice on the European Ocean Pact, which was presented by the NSAC Chair during the High-Level Roundtable *Fishers and Oceans Dialogue: Helping Design the European Ocean Pact*.

The NSAC has also produced advice on subjects that will form key pillars of the Ocean Act. Given the intensity of competing maritime activities in the North Sea, the NSAC has been closely engaged in discussions on maritime spatial planning for several years. In 2023, the NSAC organised a dedicated conference on Maritime Spatial Planning and stakeholder engagement, which resulted in [policy advice](#) on improving stakeholder participation in MSP processes. In 2025, the Ecosystem Working Group hosted a [webinar](#) on the state of play of

MSP in the North Sea. Complementary work has also been undertaken on the mapping of fishing grounds¹, responding to concerns from the fishing sector regarding the progressive loss of fishing space, as well as on improving the availability and sharing of spatial data relating to fisheries restrictions and other maritime uses². Finally, the NSAC has established and maintained a fruitful cooperation with the Greater North Sea Basin Initiative (GNSBI), participated in two panels (2025 GNSBI workshop at EMD in Cork, and GNSBI 1st Stakeholder Conference in June 2026), as well as produced advice on the topic.³

Building on this work, the NSAC has developed this advice to contribute to the development of the European Ocean Act. The following chapters set out NSAC's recommendations on the key issues that should be addressed to ensure that the file delivers more coherent, integrated and effective ocean governance while safeguarding both healthy marine ecosystems as well as viable and sustainable fisheries.

2 NSAC Advice

2.1 Role of MSPD within the European Ocean Act

The forthcoming European Ocean Act, designed to unify ocean governance under a single strategic framework by 2027, presents a critical opportunity to address longstanding shortcomings in European maritime governance. Central to this initiative is the revision of the [Maritime Spatial Planning Directive](#) (Directive 2014/89/EU). As the MSPD marks its first decade of implementation, it is evident that while it serves as a foundational management tool, current planning frameworks remain too static in the face of changing marine conditions and increasing competition for marine space. The NSAC stresses that the revised MSPD, as a cornerstone of the Ocean Act, must evolve to deliver balanced, ecosystem-based, and legally coherent outcomes across all Member States.

2.1.1 Evaluating a Decade of the MSPD

In evaluating the first decade of the MSPD, recent European Commission review processes and stakeholder dialogues have underscored significant implementation gaps that the Ocean Act must resolve. While the directive succeeded in establishing national planning structures, it has struggled to maintain agility amidst rapid ecological, geopolitical, and social shifts and the accelerating blue economy. The evaluation⁴ highlights a critical need to better align spatial planning with overarching EU objectives on climate, biodiversity, and food security. It is clear that a revised directive must move away from rigid, administrative zoning toward a more dynamic, sea-basin-scale planning model that can actively resolve spatial conflicts rather than merely cataloguing them.

¹ [13-2425 NSAC Advice on Mapping-Fishing-Grounds.pdf](#)

² [06-2526-NSAC-Advice-on-data-sharing-guidelines-of-spatial-restrictions-data.pdf](#)

³ [15-2425 NSAC Advice on GNSBI and stakeholder engagement strategy](#)

⁴ <https://www.milieu.be/maritime-spatial-planning-directive-implementation-study-published/>

Furthermore, a critical assessment of the directive's original core objectives reveals a significant structural omission. Since its inception, the MSPD has focused on reducing conflicts and creating synergies between activities, encouraging investment through predictability and legal certainty, increasing cross-border cooperation for renewable energy and infrastructure, and protecting the environment through protected areas. While these objectives are vital, they treat marine spatial planning primarily through the lens of industrial coordination and environmental preservation, neglecting the fundamental role of the oceans in meeting basic human needs. The NSAC stresses that the revised framework must elevate food production, specifically sustainable European fisheries to a primary objective. Food is not merely another economic sector competing for marine space. Its value transcends purely economic gains, representing a fundamental pillar of public health, societal resilience, and strategic autonomy that must be safeguarded alongside energy and conservation targets.

2.1.2 Safeguarding fisheries as a strategic sector

A persistent gap in current MSP implementation is the marginalisation of traditional marine activities. The growing "spatial squeeze", a phenomenon largely driven by the rapid expansion of offshore renewable energy (ORE) and the designation of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), is displacing historical fishing activity. The Greater North Sea Basin Initiative (GNSBI) study⁵ on the impact of these developments on fisheries substantiates the warnings long voiced by the sector. The study demonstrates that fisheries are experiencing a severe negative impact from the cumulative expansion of MPAs and ORE installations, with specific gear types enduring acute operational and spatial stress. Since the release of those findings, the expansion of closed areas has only accelerated, intensifying pressure on the fleet.

The Ocean Act must ensure that the revised MSPD fully recognises fisheries as a strategic sector. Fishing activities require robust legal protection and proactive spatial safeguarding to preserve their fundamental contributions to EU food security, food sovereignty, coastal economies, and marine cultural heritage. Therefore, planners must fully and genuinely integrate food security and food sovereignty, socio-economic impact assessments, and climate change adaptation strategies directly into spatial planning frameworks, rather than treating fisheries as a residual user of marine space.

Furthermore, excluding fisheries from designated marine areas leads to a profound loss of historical, practical, and localized ecological and marine knowledge that fishers possess and have built over generations. This exclusion also triggers a dangerous displacement effect, compressing active fleets into smaller zones. From an ecological and socio-economic perspective, this compression of fishing effort into limited zones leads to concentrated localized pressure, which can exacerbate seabed disturbance and stock stress, thereby undermining the broader marine conservation and ecosystem health objectives that spatial closures were intended to achieve. Economically, this spatial restriction drastically increases operational costs through higher fuel consumption and extended steaming times, while physically crowding vessels into narrower corridors. This severe spatial compression inevitably triggers a localized "race to fish" within these dwindling, highly contested open

⁵ Schulze, T., Kraan, C., Hamon, K., van de Pol, L., Olsen, J., Jonsson, P., Sys, K., & Lasner, T. (2026). Spatial challenges of Greater North Sea fisheries: Greater North Sea Basin Initiative (GNSBI) : Work-Track: Long Term Perspective of Fisheries (LTPF) (T. Schulze, C. Kraan, K. Hamon, L. van de Pol, J. Olsen, P. Jonsson, K. Sys, & T. Lasner; Thünen-Report, Vol. 129). Johann Heinrich von Thünen-Institut. <https://doi.org/10.3220/253-2026-89>

areas, as vessels are forced into intense, immediate competition for remaining resources, threatening their economic survival. Furthermore, this heightened density dramatically increases the risk of gear conflicts and maritime accidents, threatening the safety of fishers.

European fisheries are far more than an economic sector; they are a cornerstone of Europe's maritime identity, cultural heritage, and coastal communities. Across the EU, fishing traditions have shaped local knowledge, cuisine, languages, festivals, and ways of life for generations, sustaining communities whose social and cultural significance extends well beyond their contribution to GDP or employment statistics. The value of fisheries should therefore be understood not only in economic terms, but also through their role in preserving Europe's diverse maritime heritage, strengthening coastal resilience, and maintaining the living connection between people and the sea. Recognising this broader public value is essential to ensuring that the EU Ocean Act supports thriving fishing communities in healthy marine ecosystems.

2.1.3 Re-evaluating the "Multi-Use" paradigm

The NSAC advocates for realistic multi-use arrangements, where feasible. These solutions must be grounded in operational realities rather than purely idealistic theoretical models. Practical solutions should include allowing compatible fishing practices within offshore renewable energy (ORE) sites, avoiding blanket bans on fishing activities within MPAs without site-specific scientific justification, and promoting nature-inclusive designs for static marine constructions.

The Ocean Act should also encourage innovative mechanisms that facilitate coexistence, such as shared liability or insurance schemes, legally recognised multifunctional zones for compatible fishing activities, and co-management partnerships that incentivise developers and public authorities to engage local fishers in environmental monitoring and stewardship.

In other words, a critical element of making multi-use viable is the explicit, granular consideration of different fishing gear types in relation to specific marine locations and multi-use objectives. Marine spatial planning must reject a binary "open or closed" approach and instead implement a gear-specific compatibility framework. Similarly, within MPAs, management measures must be tailored strictly to the specific conservation features of the site; blanket bans on all fishing activity should be avoided in favour of scientific, gear-impact assessments.

Ultimately, the Ocean Act and the revised MSPD should prioritise genuine conflict avoidance from the outset of the planning phase, establishing pragmatic co-existence frameworks that respect the operational constraints of different fishing fleets.

2.1.4 Ensuring Coherence Between the MSPD and MSFD

The Ocean Act seeks to bridge the gap between resource utilisation and environmental conservation. For this to succeed, there must be strict alignment between the MSPD and the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) within a simple, clear, and harmonised legal framework. The NSAC observes that implementation currently suffers from institutional silos,

specifically between environmental and fisheries departments at both the Member State and EU levels.

We recommend that the Ocean Act ensures that the CFP remains the primary legal framework for fisheries management. While the MSPD and MSFD should operate in a coordinated and complementary manner, measures that regulate or restrict fishing activities (including those implemented through MPAs under MSP) should remain grounded in the CFP rather than being introduced solely as environmental measures. This will help avoid circumventing the fisheries governance framework, ensure the appropriate involvement of fisheries administrations and stakeholders, and support a coherent approach that integrates environmental objectives, such as achieving a Good Environmental Status (GES), with sustainable fisheries.

Greater policy coherence will ultimately depend not only on better coordination between legal instruments, but also on structured cooperation between institutions and stakeholders. The persistent inconsistencies identified between the CFP and the MSFD demonstrate the need for more systematic engagement between fisheries, environmental and maritime authorities throughout policy development and implementation. The Ocean Act should therefore promote governance arrangements that facilitate cross-sectoral cooperation, improve information exchange and ensure that stakeholders are actively involved in designing and implementing measures from the outset.

Further recommendations on strengthening coherence between the CFP, MSFD and broader EU marine policy are set out in our recent advice on the MSFD revision⁶.

2.1.5 Strengthening stakeholder engagement and transboundary cooperation and governance

Fragmented and inconsistent implementation across Member States has undermined the level playing field in the North Sea basin. The revised MSPD and the Ocean Act must establish a clear, harmonised framework for stakeholder engagement that mandates early, continuous, and meaningful participation throughout all stages of spatial planning.

To achieve this, Advisory Councils and the fisheries sector must be systematically integrated into policymaking, data collection, and implementation dialogues, as noted in the NSAC advice on the Mapping of Important Fishing Grounds¹. Advice also highlights that mapping methodologies should be standardized by combining Automatic Identification System (AIS), Vessel Monitoring System (VMS), and logbook data, while incorporating social and cultural dimensions to ensure an accurate depiction of fishing activities.

By formalising fishers' practical experience and historical knowledge as a core component of the evidence base, marine spatial plans can reflect real-world fishing patterns. Furthermore, as noted in the subsequent NSAC advice on Data Sharing Guidelines of Spatial Restrictions Data², fishers currently struggle to navigate an increasingly complex, fragmented, and non-interoperable web of spatial boundaries. To mitigate these operational risks and prevent accidental non-compliance, the Ocean Act and the revised MSPD should establish a standardized, centralized EU-wide digital mapping system compatible with onboard navigation plotters, ensuring that fishers have seamless access to real-time spatial restrictions.

⁶ https://www.nsrac.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/11-2526-NSAC-Advice-on-MSFD_final.pdf

Because marine ecosystems and industries transcend national borders, the Ocean Act must also mandate robust regional sea-basin coordination and transboundary cooperation. This includes maintaining continuous, structured dialogue with neighbouring non-EU nations such as the United Kingdom and Norway, ensuring that cumulative transboundary impacts are monitored through shared scientific evidence and collaborative data platforms.

2.2 EU Ocean Act targets

The objectives currently annexed to the European Ocean Pact include a combination of legally binding obligations established under existing EU legislation and broader political commitments of an aspirational nature. In this context, the NSAC considers it essential that the legal status of each objective under the future Ocean Act is clearly defined. In particular, clarification is needed as to whether political commitments, such as the objective of protecting 30% of EU seas, including 10% under strict protection, would remain aspirational or become legally binding targets. Should such commitments be transformed into legally binding obligations, the NSAC considers that only targets supported by a broad consensus among Member States and stakeholders, and underpinned by robust scientific evidence, impact assessments and socio-economic analysis, should be included. This is essential to ensure that implementation remains realistic, proportionate and capable of delivering effective environmental outcomes while taking into account regional differences, existing management measures and the socio-economic viability of coastal communities.

In line with existing European Commission guidance and international recognition under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), and where they meet the applicable CBD and EU criteria, the NSAC considers that Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures (OECMs) should be explicitly recognised as contributing towards the 30% conservation objective. OECMs represent an important complement to MPAs by recognising positive biodiversity outcomes delivered through effective fisheries management and other sectoral measures outside the designation of protected areas. Their explicit recognition would better reflect the diversity of conservation tools and measures available, encourage integrated ecosystem-based management and strengthen coherence between fisheries management and biodiversity policy. It would also acknowledge that well-designed and effectively implemented fisheries management measures can make a significant contribution to the conservation and restoration of marine biodiversity while supporting sustainable fisheries, food security, coastal livelihoods and the continued provision of ecosystem services. A more elaborate position on OECMs is available in our advice on the subject⁷.

2.3 Coherence within the EU maritime acquis

One of the main goals of the European Ocean Act is to improve coherence across the EU's fragmented ocean governance framework, an ambitious aim given the breadth of legislation and policy initiatives that currently shape marine governance. These include the CFP, the MSFD, the MSP Directive, the Birds and Habitats Directives, the Nature Restoration Law

⁷ <https://www.nsrac.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/01-2425-NSAC-Advice-on-Fisheries-OECMs.pdf>

(NRL), the various strategies and initiatives adopted under the European Green Deal, and the Marine Action Plan to conserve fisheries resources and protect marine ecosystems.

While these frameworks have significantly advanced sustainable ocean management, their implementation often remains fragmented. Stakeholders continue to identify inconsistencies between fisheries, environmental and maritime legislation, as well as insufficient consideration of social and economic dimensions. The challenge is therefore not the absence of legislation, but the lack of effective coordination between existing legal frameworks, institutions and policy objectives. Working within sectoral silos is unlikely to deliver the integrated environmental, social and economic sustainability that the EU seeks to achieve.

The recent evaluation of the CFP⁸ reinforces this concern, with multiple stakeholder groups highlighting the lack of coherence between fisheries and environmental legislation. Similarly, synergies between maritime sectors remain underdeveloped, and sustainability objectives are too often pursued independently rather than through integrated governance. The European Ocean Act therefore presents a crucial opportunity to establish stronger links between existing instruments instead of creating additional layers of regulation or reporting obligations.

Breaking down institutional silos requires strengthened cooperation between people and organisations. Effective implementation depends on improving communication, information exchange and collaboration across Commission departments, national administrations and stakeholder groups, as well as between policy, science and society. Existing collaborative structures, such as the Advisory Councils, provide an important foundation but could be better utilised as cross-sectoral platforms. Although Advisory Councils operate within the CFP framework, they should be able to engage more systematically with other policy communities whose decisions affect fisheries and marine ecosystems, including DG Environment, regional sea conventions such as OSPAR, maritime spatial planning authorities and other relevant institutions. Recent initiatives to strengthen cooperation between environmental and fisheries administrations, such as the Marine Expert Group, EU Ocean Board and the FISH-ENVI groups at Member State level, also represent important steps towards a more integrated approach.

While these efforts are welcome, careful attention should be paid to minimizing duplication of efforts and the ensuing stakeholder fatigue. Fisheries community is already overwhelmed and lacks sufficient capacity to ensure adequate representation at all relevant fora. At the same time it should be kept in mind that engagement, if it is to lead to the creation of consequential and effective policies and management measures, should be systematic, with long-term commitment by all involved to building trust and shared understanding between different groups. These commitments, roles and responsibilities should be clearly established and institutionalized to avoid vague outputs and diffusion of responsibility.

Finally, improving coherence also depends on making better use of existing knowledge. Considerable amounts of environmental and socio-economic data are already collected under different EU policies, but these datasets remain dispersed across separate reporting systems and institutions. The Ocean Act could facilitate greater interoperability and data sharing while encouraging broader stakeholder participation in data collection. Fishers already contribute valuable observations through on-board monitoring, and emerging technologies such as environmental DNA sampling could also be incorporated into monitoring programmes conducted by ORE installations and other marine users. Better integration of data sources

⁸ [https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/documents-register/detail?ref=SWD\(2026\)120&lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/documents-register/detail?ref=SWD(2026)120&lang=en)

would support more adaptive and evidence-based management while reducing duplication of monitoring efforts.

Ultimately, the success of the European Ocean Act will depend less on introducing new legislation than on improving the coherence, implementation and governance of the existing acquis. By aligning policy objectives, fostering institutional cooperation, strengthening stakeholder participation and integrating knowledge across sectors, the Ocean Act has the potential to provide a more effective framework for achieving long-term environmental, social and economic sustainability in Europe's seas.

3 Conclusion

The European Ocean Act represents a unique opportunity to strengthen the coherence, effectiveness and legitimacy of EU ocean governance. As pressures on Europe's seas intensify, the challenge is not the absence of legislation, but ensuring that existing policies and governance frameworks work together to deliver balanced environmental, social and economic outcomes. The Ocean Act should therefore focus on improving the implementation and coordination of the existing acquis rather than introducing additional regulatory complexity.

For the NSAC, the revised Maritime Spatial Planning Directive should serve as the cornerstone of this integrated governance framework, ensuring that maritime spatial planning evolves into a dynamic, ecosystem-based process capable of balancing the increasing demands placed on marine space. This requires stronger alignment with MSFD and CFP, while preserving the distinct roles of each instrument. Such coherence must be supported by harmonised implementation, coordinated reporting, interoperable data systems and structured cooperation across institutions and sectors.

The Ocean Act should also recognise fisheries as a strategic component of Europe's blue economy, contributing not only to food security, coastal livelihoods and cultural heritage, but also to the achievement of environmental objectives. Effective marine governance will only be possible if fishers and other stakeholders are involved as partners throughout policy development, implementation and monitoring. Their knowledge, experience and data are indispensable for designing practical, evidence-based and widely supported management measures.

Overall, the success of the European Ocean Act will be measured not by the number of new commitments it introduces, but by its ability to foster genuine policy coherence, improve cooperation across governance levels and ensure that sustainable use and marine conservation are pursued as complementary, rather than competing, objectives.

The NSAC wishes to thank the Commission and North Sea Member States for taking into consideration this advice. Please do not hesitate to reach out to us with any questions regarding the position. We are committed to taking any future steps to implement an inclusive and effective Ocean Act.