REPORT

Meeting: **Marine Strategy Coordination Group (MSCG)**
Parties: **DG ENV, Member States, observers**
Date: **9 November 2026**
Location: **Brussels**
Chair: **Emil Andersen, DG ENV**
Rapporteur: **NSAC Secretariat**

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1. Implementation of Good Environmental Status (GES)

1.1 GES indicators and communication

The MSCG discussed the implementation of the GES decision, including ongoing work on indicators and threshold values.

An ICES workshop on Descriptor 3, Criterion 3 (D3C3), concerning the age and size structure of fish populations, took place at the end of June. It was noted that threshold values should be established at regional level, with regions sharing experiences and best practices. The Baltic Sea was mentioned as an example of regional cooperation.

The discussion also addressed the possibility of developing a simplified EU-level GES indicator to communicate progress towards achieving Good Environmental Status to the wider public.

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The GES4SEAS project has developed a methodology for simplifying GES communication, which was presented at WG GES. The question was raised whether WG GES should be allowed to explore this approach, given that similar work might otherwise be undertaken elsewhere.

Member State and stakeholder interventions

- **The Netherlands** expressed reservations about whether a simplified indicator would genuinely support the objectives of the MSFD. It warned against oversimplification and stressed the importance of retaining nuance, including the ability to identify where progress is being made, which features are deteriorating and where further efforts should be directed. The Netherlands is developing a red-failure approach to indicate failure of reaching threshold value. It also highlighted the forthcoming *State of European Seas* report as an important source of information.
- **Ireland** supported the concerns expressed by the Netherlands, noting that oversimplification would not adequately reflect the complexity of the MSFD, which was designed as a holistic framework.
- **Germany** supported efforts to simplify communication but distinguished this from integrating indicators. It considered the integration of indicators particularly difficult to agree upon.
- **Italy** warned of the risk of oversimplification and considered it premature to start developing such an indicator while work on the criteria is still ongoing.
- **Europeche** echoed MS's concerns, noting that existing assessment gaps could result in an EU-wide indicator presenting a biased and overly pessimistic picture of the state of the seas.

Despite the objections raised by several delegates, the MSCG chair decided to explore the possibility of simplifying GES communication.

1.2 GES and seabed integrity

The MSCG discussed progress towards establishing a minimum quality level for seabed habitats while allowing for human activities. This remains a technically and politically sensitive exercise, and no final conclusions have yet been reached.

The process has experienced delays. Although the MSCG had requested proposals for threshold values, these were not yet available. The complexity stems from several factors, including the availability of data and time series, differences in assessment methodologies, sampling processes and seasons, and varying levels of maturity across sea basins.

Nevertheless, progress has been made. Experts have agreed on a framework for action, including how to proceed when different assessments are required. Some Member States have also conducted their own analyses based on ICES advice, with several agreeing to discuss and compare their findings in subgroups to ensure greater consistency.

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The proposed threshold values are expected to be adopted in 2027. However, the current assessments do not yet account for all relevant pressures. The data call provided only one or two layers of pressure information, with certain pressures, such as eutrophication, not sufficiently covered.

It was emphasised that, although further data would always be desirable, decisions should be taken pragmatically rather than indefinitely postponed pending additional information. A precautionary approach should guide the process. Candidate threshold values should be treated as indicative rather than definitive, providing an initial indication of possible thresholds. Some Member States also considered whether an impact assessment of the proposed values would be necessary.

Member State and stakeholder interventions

- **France** highlighted the tight deadlines and the need for a better understanding and mapping of habitats. It stressed the importance of reaching a decision despite existing differences in data availability and threshold-setting approaches. Transparency regarding methodological choices and their implications was considered essential. France also referred to the spring MSCG meeting as an opportunity to ensure consultation with relevant stakeholders, including on interactions with fisheries and marine restoration.
- **Ireland** welcomed the additional time allocated to the work and supported the proposed framework. However, it stressed that considerable technical work remains to be completed. Ireland also requested consideration of the 10% threshold proposed for other habitat types.
- **Denmark** welcomed the extended timeline and supported adoption of the package in 2027. It noted that three months would be required for its internal procedures to establish a national position on adoption.
- **The Netherlands** had hoped to reach agreement on quality thresholds at the meeting but welcomed the prospect of concluding the work in 2027.
- **Sweden** considered the timeline very challenging, particularly given the complexity of the work and the need to coordinate it with the Nature Restoration Regulation (NRR).
- **Poland** supported the proposed timeline and the assessment approach presented in the guidance.
- **Europeche** stressed that the assessment should take a comprehensive approach covering all relevant pressures rather than focusing primarily on bottom trawling. Europeche also called for greater transparency regarding methodological choices, particularly the use of reference areas and the potential environmental and socio-economic consequences of associated closures. It further requested that ICES present Member States with alternative implementation scenarios and their respective trade-offs. These should include the cumulative impact of existing spatial measures on fishing activities, fleets, landings and seafood value chains. Europeche underlined that

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the choice between different scenarios involves political considerations that go beyond scientific advice. Finally, it called for broader stakeholder consultation and further discussions within the relevant expert groups, including TG Seabed, WG GES and the MSCG, before the methodology is adopted at political level.

- **NSAC** stressed that setting ecological thresholds remains scientifically and politically complex, with no clear consensus on the habitat requirements for healthy ecosystems. It called for a policy-science-society approach, including dedicated stakeholder workshops organised by Member States, to ensure indicators are scientifically robust, widely accepted and effective. NSAC also emphasised the importance of integrating fishing-sector knowledge and industry data into habitat mapping and assessments, ensuring compatibility with existing data frameworks and meaningful stakeholder involvement throughout the indicator-development process.

MEDAC supported NSAC's position and its proposal for dedicated stakeholder workshops.

DG ENV noted that Member States provide the available data and that relatively few areas are entirely free from bottom trawling. It acknowledged the importance of cumulative impacts but stressed the need to begin with the information currently available. A range of threshold values (between X and Y), rather than a single fixed number, could provide the necessary flexibility.

DG ENV clarified that the Commission does not intend to carry out impact assessments, although Member States may undertake such assessments themselves. It also clarified that the proposal does not envisage closing areas specifically to establish scientific reference areas.

2. Other EU Policy Developments

2.1 Zero Pollution Stakeholder Forum

The Commission provided an update on developments under the EU Zero Pollution Action Plan, which addresses ocean pollution as part of the broader zero-pollution objective.

The 2021 Zero Pollution Action Plan includes nine flagship initiatives and 33 actions, many of which have resulted in legislative developments. The evaluation of the MSFD also forms part of this broader policy framework.

The Commission highlighted the publication of the Polluter Pays Principle earlier in 2026 and the ongoing mid-term review of the Zero Pollution Action Plan. This review aims to strengthen the links between competitiveness and zero pollution.

The Zero Pollution Stakeholder Forum will provide a platform for discussions on pollution-related challenges, practical solutions and relevant EU programmes. The next forum was scheduled for 7 December, with registration open until the end of the week.

In addition, the Committee of the Regions will host a pavilion showcasing solutions contributing to the zero-pollution objective.

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3. Regional Cooperation and Coordination

3.1 OSPAR developments

An update was provided on the OSPAR 2029 Intermediate Assessment. The assessment was signed off at the OSPAR Commission in June 2029, with several assessments already published. Most indicator assessments are expected to be finalised in spring 2028.

OSPAR is also progressing work on the socio-economic aspects of its activities, particularly through the development of an integrated accounting framework for the North-East Atlantic (NEA) to support ecosystem-based management.

The work follows a phased approach. The first two phases focused on updating ecosystem extent and condition accounts, as well as ecosystem services accounts, and were finalised in October 2026.

The next step is to explore the possibility of continuing this work through the development of pilot economic insights.

4.1 AOB: Nature Restoration Regulation and MSFD coherence

Sweden presented a concept note on guidance for setting satisfactory measures. It stressed that such guidance should be linked to the GES definition and questioned whether the Commission was sufficiently taking marine-specific considerations into account.

Sweden expressed concern that much of the work under the Nature Restoration Regulation (NRR) appears to focus on terrestrial ecosystems and may not adequately reflect the specific characteristics of marine and ocean ecosystems.

It also raised the question of reporting timelines, noting that reporting under the MSFD takes place three months after the relevant POMESA reporting and that links should be established to avoid duplication of work.

DG ENV explained that the upcoming Marine and Water Directors meeting would address coherence between the NRR and MSFD. The Commission is currently reviewing ten Member States' National Restoration Plans (NRPs).

The Commission recalled that Article 5 of the NRR includes obligations relating to the identification of restoration needs and monitoring. The NRR also creates legal links between different regulations.

Regarding reporting, DG ENV indicated that it would inform the relevant NRR unit about the reporting requirements under the MSFD programmes of measures. One of the outstanding questions is whether MSFD reporting could also fulfil the reporting requirements under the NRR.

Improved coordination with colleagues in the Marine Expert Group is also being pursued.

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The Netherlands asked when the MSFD revision would be published and how the revised Directive would relate to the forthcoming Ocean Act, noting that some uncertainty remains.

DG ENV indicated that adoption of the revised MSFD is expected in February/March 2027 and that it will need to be aligned with the Ocean Act.

5. EU Ocean Pact

The Commission updated the MSCG on the implementation of the EU Ocean Pact, focusing particularly on:

- The evaluation of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP).
- The Vision 2040 for Fisheries and Aquaculture.
- The forthcoming Ocean and Water Research and Innovation Strategy.

5.1 Evaluation of the Common Fisheries Policy

The Commission presented the evaluation of the CFP, conducted in accordance with the Better Regulation criteria. The stakeholder consultation included: 87 responses to the call for evidence, 362 responses to the public consultation, 87 position papers, 11 recommendations from Advisory Councils, Meetings with ICES, EFARO and STECF.

Progress achieved since 2013 reform

The evaluation identified progress in several areas:

- Reduction in overfishing.
- Strengthened scientific knowledge and governance through improved data collection and scientific advice.

However, socio-economic performance has not met expectations. The main challenges identified include:

- Decreasing landings, partly due to the slow recovery of biomass.
- Insufficient adjustment of fleet capacity to available fish stocks.
- High energy dependency and increasing operational costs.

Food security and the external dimension

The Commission highlighted growing dependence on imports, linked to the poor recovery of fish stocks, a mismatch between catches and consumer preferences, and the slow development of aquaculture.

Actions to address these challenges include:

- Building strategic partnerships with third countries to improve the level playing field.

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- Strengthening the performance and capacity of Regional Fisheries Management Organisations (RFMOs).
- Introducing mandatory consumer information requirements under the Common Market Organisation (CMO).

Governance

The evaluation recognised improvements in the scientific basis of fisheries management but also identified shortcomings in control, enforcement and compliance.

A shift towards greater empowerment and co-management, including through Advisory Councils, was identified as important. However, the representativeness of Advisory Councils remains an issue, as do lengthy procedures under regionalisation.

Is the CFP fit for purpose?

The Commission's overall assessment was that the CFP remains fit for purpose.

The evaluation considered the three pillars of sustainability, the role of secondary legislation, external disruptions and systemic changes, the challenges arising from Brexit, the EU's position as an international frontrunner and the importance of accurate and reliable data.

The evaluation is intended to provide a diagnosis and an evidence-based assessment to inform future milestones, including the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), stakeholder dialogues, the Vision 2040 package and the Ocean Act.

Member State and stakeholder interventions

- **Finland** asked how climate change is taken into account in the recovery of fish stocks and how its impacts are reflected across the three pillars of sustainability.
- **Germany** considered that the main problem lies in insufficient implementation rather than the CFP itself. It highlighted the importance of fisheries management measures in Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) under Article 11, noting that procedures are often too slow and ineffective. Some measures have taken up to ten years to implement.
- **DG MARE** explained that the CFP does not contain specific provisions on climate change. However, Article 11 fisheries management measures in MPAs could contribute to climate resilience. Climate change is addressed more prominently in the Vision 2040 on Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation. The evaluation of Article 11 also identified difficulties with the Joint Recommendations mechanism, including cooperation between environmental and fisheries ministries and changes in political mandates.
- **Europeche** asked about the next steps for fisheries within the EU legislative framework. It noted that no revision of the CFP had been announced in Vision 2040 and that the Commissioner's indications pointed towards further stakeholder consultation. The Commission's 2027 Work Programme did not confirm that new fisheries legislation would be proposed.

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DG MARE clarified that Vision 2040 focuses on five problem areas and does not envisage a revision of the CFP Regulation. It instead foresees action within the existing legislative framework, including revisions to fleet guidelines and measures to contribute to a level playing field under the CMO.

5.2 Vision 2040 for Fisheries and Aquaculture

The Commission presented Vision 2040 as a key component of the implementation of the European Ocean Pact and a follow-up to the CFP evaluation.

The package consists of three elements:

1. Strategy for fisheries external action.
2. Vision 2040 for Fisheries and Aquaculture.
3. Energy Transition Roadmap.

The Vision is structured around three strategic pillars:

- **Supply of aquatic food.**
- **Demand for aquatic food.**
- **Creating the right conditions for success**, including labour, access to finance, the regulatory framework, access to space, research and innovation.

The Commission highlighted several enabling conditions and planned initiatives.

- A Blue Generational Renewal Strategy is expected in 2027. The Commission also referred to harmonised STCW-F standards.
- The Commission aims to strengthen demand for aquatic food and improve the conditions supporting the seafood sector.
- Targeted measures are envisaged to address shortcomings in the existing framework, including: The 2014 fleet guidelines, The landing obligation, Consumer information requirements, Support for small-scale fisheries (SSF), A new legislative framework for aquaculture.

Access to space

The Ocean Act is expected to provide a clearer framework for maritime spatial planning, including stakeholder consultation processes.

Research and innovation

The Commission highlighted the Ocean Eye initiative, intended to support real-time ocean data observation and stock monitoring, alongside efforts to accelerate innovation uptake and reduce risks associated with new technologies.

External action

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Priorities include: Sustainable global fisheries management, Social responsibility, Addressing overcapacity and unfair competition, Regional engagement, Ocean diplomacy, Sustainable supply chains.

Energy transition

An Energy Transition Roadmap will be developed, including short-term actions and quick wins.

The Commission called on Member States and regional authorities to move from vision to action by developing fleet-specific strategies through a bottom-up approach.

MEDAC asked whether a dedicated session could be organised for Advisory Councils.

DG MARE indicated that a dedicated session was envisaged for 16 December.

6. Copernicus Ocean State Report

The Commission (DG DEFIS) presented the Copernicus Ocean State Report, highlighting its role within the European space programme.

Copernicus combines satellite observations with in-situ data and provides six thematic services covering areas such as atmosphere, climate, energy and the marine environment.

The Commission is responsible for overall programme management. The programme includes the space component, involving ESA, and service components, including Mercator.

The Copernicus Marine Service provides ocean monitoring and forecasting, using Essential Marine Variables covering physical and other ocean characteristics.

The Ocean State Report, now in its tenth edition, is considered a state-of-the-art reference on the condition of the ocean. It provides important input for EU policymaking and contributes to raising public awareness.

Stakeholder interventions

- **Europeche** asked about links with EU expert groups and other initiatives, including work on the impacts of marine heatwaves on seabed habitats.
- **DG DEFIS** indicated that it was in contact with EMODnet and cooperating with the relevant operational group.
- **DG ENV** highlighted the integration of climate change into the MSFD as one of the identified weaknesses and referred to ongoing discussions on how climate-induced changes should be taken into account.
- **Lithuania** asked whether countries that do not sign the Mercator convention can nevertheless access Copernicus data.

DG DEFIS confirmed that Copernicus data are subject to an open-access policy and are therefore available regardless of whether a country signs the Mercator convention.

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7. JRC BLUE2 – Integrated Marine Ecosystem Modelling Framework

The Joint Research Centre (JRC) presented **BLUE2**, an integrated marine ecosystem modelling framework based on Earth-system models.

The tool has been under development for approximately 15 years and is designed to simulate ocean conditions while addressing the complexity of marine ecosystems.

The modelling framework integrates several interacting components, including:

- Atmospheric and climatic processes.
- Food-web dynamics.
- Land-to-sea interactions.
- The benthic zone.
- Human impacts.

The model incorporates atmospheric forcing, including wind, temperature and precipitation, and combines several interconnected models:

1. Land-use model.
2. Hydrological model.
3. Hydrodynamic model.
4. Biogeochemical model.
5. Lagrangian model.
6. Food-web model.

The resulting framework supports a comprehensive **catchment-to-sea** modelling approach.

BLUE2 can be used to test different policy and management scenarios under various EU policies and directives. Its geographical coverage includes the North Sea.

The framework is also intended to contribute to the development of the Digital Twin of the Ocean.

BLUE2 was specifically developed to support MSFD implementation and covers numerous descriptors and criteria across several marine regions, with the objective of progressively expanding coverage.

The models are particularly suited to assessing pressures and their impacts on ecosystem state.

Practical applications include:

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- **Environmental indicator reconstruction:** Reconstructing environmental indicators and comparing model outputs with observations to assess model performance.
- **Climate and policy scenarios:** Modelling future climate conditions and the impacts of planned measures.
- **Alternative policy scenarios:** Comparing baseline scenarios with alternative policy options to assess their potential effects.

The JRC provided an example of freshwater modelling to assess the impacts of nutrient reduction measures. Different assumptions concerning nutrient sources, such as fertilisers and manure, can be incorporated into freshwater models and subsequently into ocean models to assess implications for marine ecosystems. Different regions have different needs and circumstances regarding nutrient management.

Other applications include modelling climate change impacts and the distribution of marine litter.

DG ENV noted that the model has already been discussed and used in several technical groups. Given its long development history and its specific purpose of supporting MSFD implementation, there is considerable interest among Member States in using it for case studies.

The JRC and Commission emphasised that the model depends on the availability of reliable data and encouraged Member States to make relevant data available.

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