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NWWAC Advice on the EU Ocean Pact

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Context

In July 2024, President von der Leyen announced the development of a European Ocean Pact in her political guidelines for the next European Commission (2024-2029)¹. This is a strategic initiative aimed at enhancing the coherence and effectiveness of EU ocean-related policies. Recognising the ocean's vital role in climate regulation, food security, clean energy, and economic growth, the Ocean Pact seeks to align governance frameworks, support the sustainable blue economy, and strengthen the EU's global leadership in marine conservation. Addressing fragmented policies, it is envisaged that the initiative will integrate environmental, economic, and social dimensions, thus ensuring that all stakeholders - from coastal communities to industry and policymakers - are engaged in shaping a resilient and competitive maritime sector. The Ocean Pact is set to be introduced as a Commission Communication in the second quarter of 2025 and will build upon existing EU strategies, including the Common Fisheries Policy and the sustainable blue economy framework. Through consultations and cross-sector collaboration, the initiative seeks to establish a unified vision for ocean governance, balancing conservation needs with economic opportunities in a rapidly evolving geopolitical and environmental landscape. In that perspective, the European Commission launched a [call for evidence](#) to collect stakeholders' point of views on this initiative.

The NWWAC thanks Commissioner Kadis for the opportunity to participate in the High-Level Roundtable “Fisheries and Oceans Dialogue: Helping design the European Ocean Pact” on 21 February 2025 and contributing to this meeting by providing a consensus-based statement ([link](#)). Members were however surprised to note the conspicuous absence of the fishing sector on Day 3 of the European Ocean Days at the “Immersing in Fisheries and Oceans Dialogues”. With its stated aim to gather “diverse perspectives to foster collaborative discussions, share insights and develop actionable strategies to help design the European Ocean Pact” it is hard to understand how the sector was not invited to participate directly in the discussions on the day. The ACs appreciate the opportunity to contribute to shaping this initiative via the public consultation and are thankful for the extended deadline afforded to them due their consensus based decision making. However, direct consultation with AC members in one of the many plenary meetings organised by the 11 ACs in spring 2025 should have been an essential part of the consultation on the design of this initiative.

¹ https://commission.europa.eu/document/e6cd4328-673c-4e7a-8683-f63ffb2cf648_en

Introduction

The North Western Waters Advisory Council (NWWAC) welcomes the opportunity to provide advice to the European Commission on key aspects of the European Ocean Pact, focusing on the sustainable management of fisheries. In light of pressing environmental and socio-economic challenges, the NWWAC highlights the following recommendations to ensure that the Ocean Pact delivers effective and balanced outcomes for marine ecosystems, fisheries, and coastal communities.

Key messages

1. The Ocean Pact should move beyond fragmented, sector-specific management approaches and **embrace an integrated and inclusive multispecies, multisectoral governance model**.
2. The Ocean Pact should **promote an effective EBM approach** that considers all pressures on marine environments, including land-based activities and climate change impacts. The Pact should encourage **adaptive management strategies** based on evolving scientific evidence to ensure balanced conservation and sustainable use of marine resources.
3. The Ocean Pact must ensure that the blue economy develops sustainably, recognising the **fishing sector's role in European food security**.
4. Policies should facilitate innovation and investment in low-impact, low-carbon and high-efficient fishing practices. European seafood products should be valorised and the high standards of the European fishing fleet recognised through the Ocean Pact.
5. The Ocean Pact should **support enhanced data collection, sharing, and coordination** among Member States to improve informed policymaking and industry innovation. Funding for scientific research, ensuring adequate resources for both projects and human capital should be prioritised.
6. The Ocean Pact must reinforce policy frameworks that **ensure socio-economic resilience** by recognising the cultural and economic significance of fisheries. Support mechanisms, including financial aid and training programmes, should be expanded to help fishers and coastal businesses adapt to environmental and market changes.
7. Continued support for the ACs is needed to ensure they have capacity to contribute effectively to the future of EU fisheries governance.

Breaking the silos – an integrated and holistic ocean governance

The Ocean Pact should move beyond fragmented, sector-specific management approaches and embrace an integrated and inclusive multispecies, multisectoral governance model. Collaborative decision-making should be reinforced to ensure cohesive policymaking that accounts for the interdependencies of marine sectors.

Several EU policies and initiatives should increase coherence and interconnection such as the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD), Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP), the 2030 EU Biodiversity Strategy, the Sustainable Blue Economy Strategy, the EU Nature Restoration Law and the Marine Action Plan. In that perspective, conservation objectives enshrined in these policies/initiatives must incorporate human needs to promote resilience in both ecosystems and communities. Furthermore, alignment between the EU's broader ocean governance frameworks, and international commitments, including the Global Biodiversity Framework and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), should be strengthened via the Ocean Pact.

Article 3 of the Treaty on the functioning of the European Union (TFEU) identifies fisheries as an exclusive competence of the EU. However, Member States hold exclusive competence over other sectors of the blue economy, which can lead to conflicts and discrepancies between the individual Member States when it comes to implementation and prioritisation. A key challenge in this regard is the growing issue of spatial squeeze, as an increasing number of marine sectors compete for limited space at sea. Due to fragmented governance and overlapping competences, fishers are experiencing a significant loss of fishing grounds to other marine users, particularly ORE, impacting both ecological and socio-economic sustainability. To ensure the resilience of marine ecosystems, coastal communities, and European food security, the holistic and coherent approach promoted by the Ocean Pact must actively address spatial squeeze, recognise the “rights of fishers to fish” and balance the spatial distribution of maritime activities.

The Ocean Pact aims for a holistic and coherent approach to ocean policies, with a view, among other things, to boosting competitiveness. In line with this ambition, it is important that European initiatives ensure fair competition between the different categories of seafood products. Consequently, the NWWAC supports a global approach that preserves the environment and coastal communities. Insofar as the EU promotes sustainability in international forums and has strong environmental ambitions for its fishers, it must therefore use all available tools, including those ensuring a framework of fair competition between European and imported products.

Moving towards an Ecosystem-Based Management (EBM)

The Ocean Pact should promote an effective EBM approach that considers all pressures on marine environments, including land-based activities and climate change impacts. The Pact should encourage adaptive management strategies based on evolving scientific evidence to ensure balanced conservation and sustainable use of marine resources.

This aligns with the Paris Agreement, Article 2.b, which emphasizes increasing the ability to adapt to the adverse impacts of climate change and fostering climate resilience as well as low greenhouse gas emissions development, in a manner that does not threaten food production.

The NWWAC recognises that there are many pressures on the marine environment, for example climate change, pollution and other consequences of human activities. Collectively, they pose a synergistic threat to marine ecosystems and their ability to deliver services such as food production and climate impact mitigation. Ensuring sustainable fisheries, including the setting of fishing opportunities in line with best available scientific advice and considering ecosystem dynamics, is essential to maintain and restore healthy and productive ecosystems which are resilient to other stressors such as climate change.

The NWWAC recommends that the Ocean Pact should consider the definitions of ecosystem-based management provided by ICES and by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), which take into account the human, socioeconomic dimension of this approach and involves strong stakeholder participation. The AC agrees that, when developing fisheries advice, focusing exclusively on fishing pressure will not lead to the expected effects of sustainable management in the long term. Instead, by taking into account the full complexity of marine ecosystems, as well as the cumulative impact of pressures and mitigation measures, it will be possible to achieve long-term viability for the sector and the marine environment. Therefore, scientific advice should incorporate data from the entire ecosystem, including socio-economic and climate change data, where possible. The ecosystem approach can address the critical need for a more effective and holistic management approach. In this regard, the NWWAC highlights the significant advances made throughout the WKIrish process. More specifically, the AC recommends that ecosystem-based fishing mortality reference points (FECO) are incorporated as an option in the catch scenario table for each stock subject to a full analytical assessment.

Finally, the AC wishes to confirm a specific point on climate change, advising that the setting of fishing opportunities should consider possible changes in catch composition due to stock migration and the presence of new and invasive species not only in the NWW, but in EU waters overall.

Encouraging a sustainable and resilient blue economy

The Ocean Pact must ensure that the blue economy develops sustainably, recognising the fishing sector's role in European food security. Policies should facilitate innovation and investment in low-impact, low-carbon and high-efficient fishing practices. European seafood products should be valorised and the high standards of the European fishing fleet recognised through the Ocean Pact.

Raising awareness about seafoods' benefits is crucial for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially those related to hunger, nutrition, and sustainable livelihoods. Indeed, seafood provides vital nutrients, supports millions of livelihoods, and contributes to ecosystem health, offering a pathway to food security and environmental sustainability.

As pointed out in the Joint NWWAC-NSAC advice on social aspects in fisheries from December 2022 ([link](#)), when fishery managers consider social and economic dimensions, there is a tendency to focus solely on employment and earnings and to disregard numerous other important aspects that could contribute to both the environmental, social, and economic sustainability of the commercial and recreational fishing sectors.

These aspects include and are not limited to education and health, working and living conditions of fishers, safety on board, gender parity and considerations on ageing workforce. While not all matters are relevant or should be dealt with in every discussion, the Ocean Pact should encourage an appropriate impact assessment of proposed measures that not only includes discussions on prices for fish and earning, but also discussions on relevant social aspects.

The Ocean Pact must reinforce policy frameworks that ensure socio-economic resilience by recognising the cultural and economic significance of fisheries. Support mechanisms, including financial aid and training programmes, should be expanded to help fishers and coastal businesses adapt to environmental and market changes.

Strengthening Ocean knowledge

The Ocean Pact should support enhanced data collection, sharing, and coordination among Member States to improve informed policymaking and industry innovation. The Commission should invest in initiatives that improve real-time data availability for fisheries management, environmental monitoring, and climate resilience. To build trust in management decisions, the NWWAC recommends that data collection is enhanced through improved mechanisms for collecting and utilizing data from vessels. This could bridge gaps between scientific advice and on-the-ground realities. Moreover, expanding science-industry initiatives can foster collaboration and promote mutual understanding.

The Ocean Pact should prioritise funding for scientific research, ensuring adequate resources for both projects and human capital. Greater investment is required in marine science disciplines to address critical knowledge gaps, including fisheries stock assessments, ecosystem dynamics, and climate change adaptation. The EU should facilitate cross-border research collaborations and data-sharing agreements to maximise the effectiveness of scientific investments.

Data collection and data quality should be addressed as a priority, as they pose challenges to the establishment of effective management measures. Fully documented fisheries are lacking in some cases, and this affects management decisions on métiers, species and habitats that are most in need of consideration regarding biodiversity and focused action. Having a sound scientific basis is crucial to achieve balanced objectives across all three pillars of sustainability, allowing for both the better protection of threatened ecosystems and a thriving and competitive European fishing sector.

ACs have played a crucial role in shaping EU fisheries policy through stakeholder-driven advice and consensus-building processes for the past 20 years. The Commission should further integrate ACs' expertise into decision-making structures, reinforcing their role in bridging science, policy, industry and civil society interests. The NWWAC encourages continued support for ACs to ensure their capacity to contribute effectively to the future of EU fisheries governance.

Connecting the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) and the Ocean Pact

The interconnection between the Ocean Pact and the CFP should be clarified by the Commission. It must ensure that the CFP evolves in response to scientific evidence and socio-economic realities, ensuring sustainable fisheries while maintaining the competitiveness of EU fleets. Flexibility should be built into the CFP to accommodate emerging challenges such as climate-induced stock shifts and technological advancements. A balanced approach is needed to align conservation objectives with the socio-economic well-being of fisheries-dependent regions and food security. The NWWAC will expand on the CFP in the framework of the consultation specific on the issue.

The Ocean Pact will build on the foundations laid by the “Fisheries and Oceans” package of measures. This designation refers to the EC communications of February 2023, and in particular to the action plan for the protection and restoration of marine ecosystems in support of sustainable and resilient fisheries. The NWWAC provided detailed advice on the action plan in December 2021 ([link](#)) and in August 2023 ([link](#)), specifically highlighting:

- A lack of consistency between the EU food policy ambitions and its conservation objectives, leaving the key role of fisheries in terms of food security and socio-economic benefits in the background.
- The need to ensure the application of a holistic approach to marine ecosystems management, taking into consideration all sources of disturbance to the environment and/or species.
- Prioritisation of a tailored sea basin management strategies and development with the participation of local stakeholders to ensure that the proposed measures are useful and efficient.
- Lack of clear funding possibilities and provision of very large financial resources, which are especially required to ensure a just transition for the fisheries sector.
- More flexibility in existing funding mechanisms needs to be ensured to allow a more efficient allocation of funding across Member States more efficiently
- In the connection between the Ocean Pact and the CFP, third country relations are also an important aspect. Particularly for the NWWAC, in this respect it is important to take into account the 2026 review of parts of the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement.

Recognising the positive impacts of Advisory Councils (ACs)

ACs have played a crucial role in shaping EU fisheries policy through stakeholder-driven advice and consensus-building processes for the past 20 years.

Valuable advice and sound legislation can only emerge as a result of synergies from continuous engagement and contact with the stakeholders. ACs are best placed for such synergies to occur and for providing balanced advice based on compromise, given their diverse composition comprising the whole fisheries and aquaculture value chains (from catching/harvesting, to processing, trading, retail and exporting) as well as other interest groups including environmental and other NGOs. This collaborative work brings an added value to the contributions submitted by individual organisations. ACs have recently shared their views on how to incentivise ACs visibility and further improve their stakeholder input in a letter to the Commission submitted on 23 December 2023 ([link](#)).

The Ocean Pact should emphasise the further integration of ACs' expertise into decision-making structures, reinforcing their role in bridging science, policy, industry and civil society interests. The NWWAC strongly encourages continued support for ACs to ensure their capacity to contribute effectively to the future of EU fisheries governance.

Conclusion

The NWWAC urges the European Commission to ensure the Ocean Pact is a holistic, science-based, and inclusive approach to ocean governance, that balances conservation and sustainable development objectives. By enhancing collaboration, investing in research, and ensuring the resilience of coastal communities, the EU can lead the way in sustainable marine resource management. The NWWAC remains committed to supporting the Commission in achieving these goals and stand ready to contribute further expertise and recommendations.

As a final comment, the NWWAC strongly believes that this holistic approach must fully take into account the complexities of Brexit. Joint management of stocks is only one vital aspect for members of this AC. Harmonising the EU and UK's approach not only to fisheries management but importantly also environmental management and implementing level protection across these invisible borders is essential to ensuring that both EU and adjacent waters are given the recognition and value they deserve.

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