



**Coherent & Cross-compliant Ocean Governance for
Delivering the EU Green Deal for European Seas**

Policy Brief 7

Embedding policy coherence in the Ocean Pact and future Ocean Act: A strategic blueprint

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Summary:

The European Ocean Pact sets out six strategic priorities to guide the EU toward a more integrated, sustainable, and resilient marine governance system. However, CrossGov analyses reveal that persistent policy fragmentation and incoherence poses significant barriers to achieving these priorities. Building on these analyses (see [Policy Brief 6](#)), this policy brief synthesizes how coherence challenges affect the EU's ability to deliver on the six strategic priorities of the Ocean Pact, and what is needed to overcome these challenges.

Frequently used abbreviations:

MSFD (Marine Strategy Framework Directive); **MSPD** (Maritime Spatial Planning Directive); **WFD** (Water Framework Directive); **NRR** (Nature Restoration Regulation); **RED** (Renewable Energy Directive); **CFP** (Common Fisheries Policy); **CAP** (Common Agricultural Policy); **MSP** (Marine Spatial Planning); **MPA** (Marine Protected Areas); **(CAP)** Common Agricultural Policy; **(EMFAF)** European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund; **GES** (Good Environmental Status).



Strengthening Coherence to realize the Ocean Pact's strategic priorities

The European Ocean Pact sets out six strategic priorities to guide the EU toward a more integrated, sustainable, and resilient marine governance system. However, CrossGov analyses reveal that persistent policy fragmentation and incoherence pose significant barriers to achieving these priorities. Building on the insights from the five policy clusters ([Policy Brief 6](#)), this section **synthesizes how coherence challenges affect the EU's ability to deliver on the six strategic priorities of the Ocean Pact**. It highlights cross-cutting barriers and identifies targeted actions to address them.



Strategic priority 1 - Protecting and restoring ocean health

This priority focuses on protecting and restoring marine ecosystems and biodiversity to support the EU's environmental, economic, and social goals.

Current challenge:

Environmental directives such as the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) and Habitats Directive often lack the legal force and enforcement mechanisms of sectoral policies like Renewable Energy Directive (RED) III. RED III includes binding offshore wind targets and streamlined permitting, while the MSFD relies on qualitative descriptors and best-effort obligations. This allows economic development to override environmental safeguards, particularly in spatial planning and permitting processes. When environmental objectives are treated as secondary to economic or energy goals, the EU risks failing to achieve Good Environmental Status (GES), undermining the core ecological foundation of the Ocean Pact.

What's needed to overcome this challenge?

- Make the achievement of GES in the MSFD an obligation of result and introduce provisions in MSFD about new activities not undermining GES, as a parallel to the non-deterioration provision in the Water Framework Directive.
- Harmonize legal obligations across directives to ensure biodiversity and restoration goals are mainstreamed into sectoral policies, are enforceable, and carry equal legal weight.
- Integrate binding restoration targets from the Nature Restoration Regulation into MSFD Programmes of Measures and marine spatial plans.
- Strengthen coherence-sensitive monitoring frameworks to track ecological outcomes effectively; monitoring must capture the combined effects of multiple policies.





Strategic priority 2 - Strengthening the resilience of coastal communities

This priority supports coastal communities through improved infrastructure, inclusive governance, and sustainable livelihoods.

Current challenge:

Fragmented governance often results in duplicated or conflicting responsibilities at the local level. For example, coastal authorities may be required to implement overlapping directives (e.g. WFD, MSFD, MSPD) with different timelines, indicators and reporting requirements. This creates administrative burdens and planning fatigue, weakening the capacity of local institutions to respond adaptively to climate and socio-economic risks or biodiversity loss.

What's needed to overcome this challenge?

- Align planning and reporting cycles across directives to reduce administrative burdens and improve coordination.
- Support integrated land-sea planning and cross-sectoral coordination at regional and local levels.
- Provide technical guidance and capacity-building support for implementation that accounts for the need of coherence.
- Aligning elements of the stakeholder consultation process across policies.



Strategic priority 3 - Accelerating the sustainable blue economy

This priority aims to grow sustainable blue economy sectors while minimizing environmental impacts and fostering innovation.

Current challenge:

Accelerating the development of new ocean industries may increase pressures on the marine environment if not circumscribed by environmental legislation. EU funding instruments - such as the CAP and EMFAF - often support economic activities that are not aligned with environmental or social objectives. For example, subsidies may incentivize intensive agriculture or fisheries modernization without adequate safeguards for biodiversity, water quality or social equity. This undermines long-term sustainability and social inclusion.

What's needed to overcome this challenge?

- Sectoral policies should contribute to achieving the objectives of the MSFD, WFD and other environmental legislation.
- Introduce coherence criteria into EU funding instruments to reward integrated, sustainability-oriented projects.
- Align fisheries and agricultural subsidies with marine environmental objectives and coherence goals.
- Promote nature-inclusive design and multi-use infrastructure in blue economy sectors to reduce spatial conflicts and enhance ecosystem services.



Strategic priority 4 - Enhancing maritime spatial planning

Maritime spatial planning (MSP) is seen as a key integrative tool to manage competing uses of marine space. This priority emphasizes the need for coordinated, cross-sectoral planning that accounts for cumulative impacts and ensures ecosystem-based management.

Current challenge:

MSP is a key integrative tool, but its effectiveness in providing a framework for ecosystem-based management depends on the legal nature of environmental objectives, their alignment with sectoral objectives, and legal mandates. Incoherence between national and EU-level policies, between different sectoral strategies (e.g., energy, transport, conservation), as well as biodiversity objectives (nature restoration and Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), can lead to fragmented spatial plans. Legal inconsistencies and a lack of procedural alignment hinder the assessment of cumulative impacts and the reconciliation of competing spatial claims.

What's needed to overcome this challenge?

- Reinforce the obligation in MSPD to contribute to achieving Good Environmental Status as defined in MSFD. Environmental assessments towards that end, adapted to different types of marine spatial plans, should be required.
- Ensure that biodiversity areas (MPAs, Natura 2000 etc.) are integrated into the marine spatial plan.
- Mandate coherence assessments in national marine spatial plans using structured methodologies such as the CrossGov Policy Coherence Framework.
- Require cross-referencing of biodiversity, energy, and fisheries objectives in spatial planning instruments.
- Establish interministerial and interagency coordination platforms to align sectoral interests and resolve spatial conflicts.

Strategic priority 5 - Improving ocean knowledge and data sharing

To support evidence-based policymaking, this priority promotes investment in ocean research, data infrastructure, skills development, and innovation. It aims to close knowledge gaps and foster collaboration across science, policy, and society.

Current challenge:

Incoherent monitoring and reporting requirements across directives (e.g. MSFD vs. WFD) result in fragmented data systems and incompatible indicators and timelines. This hampers the development of shared knowledge platforms and limits the EU's ability to conduct integrated assessments or support evidence-based decision-making, key pillars of the Ocean Pact's knowledge agenda.

What's needed to overcome this challenge?

- Develop shared data platforms and harmonized indicators across directives (e.g., MSFD, WFD, RED III).
- Support long-term science–policy–society interfaces to facilitate knowledge co-development, integration into policies, and mutual learning.
- Fund interdisciplinary research on coherence analysis and governance innovation.



Strategic priority 6 - Fostering international ocean leadership

The EU seeks global leadership in ocean governance through diplomacy, international agreements, and coherent internal-external policies.

Current challenge:

The EU's credibility as a global leader in ocean governance depends on its ability to demonstrate internal policy alignment and effectiveness. Persistent incoherence weakens the EU's negotiating position in international fora, reduces the transferability of its governance models, and undermines its ambition to lead by example in implementing the UN Sustainable Development Goals, the European Green Deal and the Ocean Pact. For example, exemptions in RED III that bypass environmental safeguards risk undermining the EU's leadership on biodiversity and climate commitments.

What's needed to overcome this challenge?

- Demonstrate coherence-sensitive policy reform through the Ocean Act and revisions of the MSFD, MSPD and CFP.
- Promote best practices in coherence through regional sea conventions (e.g., HELCOM, OSPAR, UNEP-MAP).
- Use coherence as a benchmark in international negotiations and partnerships, reinforcing the EU's role as a global leader in integrated ocean governance.

Coherence as the cornerstone of the Ocean Union

The Ocean Pact and the forthcoming Ocean Act represent a **historic opportunity** to transform EU marine governance. But without coherence, these instruments risk becoming symbolic rather than systemic. By embedding coherence into the design, implementation, and evaluation of marine policies, the EU can transform the Ocean Pact from a visionary agenda into a practical roadmap for sustainable ocean governance. Coherence is not just a technical afterthought; **it is the foundation of a resilient, integrated, and sustainable Ocean Union.**

Reference:

Froukje Maria Platjouw, Gunnar Sander, Saskia Trubbach, Laura Friedrich, Maaïke Knol-Kaufman, Ben Boteler, Cristian Passarello, Jonas Kyrönviita, Niko Soininen, Emiliano Ramieri, **Embedding policy coherence in the Ocean Pact and future Ocean Act: A strategic blueprint**, CrossGov Policy Brief 7, August 2025.

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