



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



Policy Brief 6

Strengthening policy coherence in EU coastal and marine governance: Key recommendations

August 2025



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Summary:

This policy brief presents key findings and recommendations from the Horizon Europe-funded CrossGov project, which investigates policy coherence in EU marine and coastal governance. Drawing on a structured analytical framework (the CrossGov Policy Coherence Framework) and empirical analysis of five policy clusters - each composed of interrelated EU policies grouped for analytical purposes - the brief identifies systemic fragmentation as a major barrier to achieving coherent coastal and marine governance in Europe.

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).



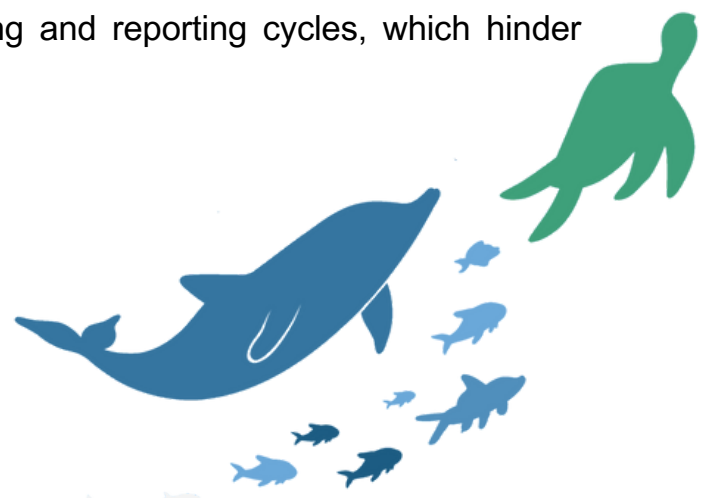
The governance challenge: Fragmentation in European coastal and marine governance

EU marine and coastal governance is entering a critical phase. With the adoption of ocean-related objectives in the European Green Deal and the recent launch of the European Ocean Pact and the anticipated Ocean Act, the EU is signaling a shift toward a more integrated and coherent approach to marine and coastal governance. These instruments aim to consolidate efforts across environmental protection, blue economy development, maritime security, and climate resilience. However, CrossGov shows that the current governance architecture is not fit for this purpose yet.

EU marine and coastal governance is shaped by a patchwork of policy instruments, each developed in response to specific challenges. **The Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD), Water Framework Directive (WFD) and Maritime Spatial Planning Directive (MSPD)** all mandate strategic planning towards shared goals as a way of coordinating actions on issues that are regulated by sectoral or thematic legislation, such as the **Common Fisheries Policy (CFP), Renewable Energy Directive (RED III), and the Nature Restoration Regulation (NRR)**.

While these instruments are individually well-intentioned and often ambitious, their simultaneous and uncoordinated implementation has led to:

- **Overlapping mandates**, which arise when multiple directives - such as the MSPD, MSFD, and NRR - require (spatial planning) measures for the same marine areas, often without clear mechanisms for integration or prioritization.
- **Conflicting objectives**, particularly between environmental and economic policies;
- **Spatial competition** in marine areas, such as between offshore wind development and fisheries;
- **Temporal misalignments** in planning and reporting cycles, which hinder joint implementation and monitoring;



- **Legal asymmetries**, where some directives (e.g. RED III) carry binding targets and enforcement mechanisms, while others (e.g. MSFD) rely on qualitative goals and best-effort obligations;
- **Administrative burdens** for national and sub-national authorities, who must navigate and reconcile multiple, sometimes contradictory, policy requirements.

These governance challenges reflect a **legacy of siloed policy development**, where sectoral interests have often taken precedence over integrated, ecosystem-based approaches. This fragmentation may undermine the EU's ability to deliver on the Ocean Pact's six strategic priorities (see [Policy Brief 7](#)). Without a coherent governance framework, these priorities risk being pursued in isolation, leading to inefficiencies, trade-offs, and missed opportunities for synergy. The **forthcoming Ocean Act** offers a unique opportunity to address these structural issues, but only if policy coherence is placed at the heart of its design and implementation.

Policy Coherence as a foundation for future marine governance

Policy coherence has emerged as a **strategic governance approach** that requires further strengthening. It is not simply about avoiding contradictions between policies. Coherence is about ensuring that policies across sectors, geographical areas and levels of governance **mutually reinforce** one another, enabling the EU to pursue multiple objectives simultaneously and sustainably.

Policy coherence means that policies are aligned in both their **design** and **implementation**. Policy coherence is not a static condition; it is a dynamic process that must be continuously assessed and managed. **It requires:**

1. **Legal and procedural alignment**, including harmonized objectives, measures, definitions, indicators, and reporting cycles;
2. **Institutional coordination**, both horizontally (across ministries and sectors), vertically (across governance levels) and geographically (across terrestrial, coastal and marine domains);
3. **Knowledge integration**, through shared data platforms, structured science-policy interfaces, and joint assessments;
4. **Inclusive stakeholder engagement**, to identify synergies, resolve conflicts, and build legitimacy.

The **CrossGov Policy Coherence Framework** was developed precisely to address this need. It provides a **comprehensive, yet practical methodology** for assessing and understanding coherence in marine and coastal governance. It enables policymakers, researchers, and practitioners to diagnose where and how coherence or incoherence occurs, **understand** the institutional and procedural drivers behind these patterns, and **identify** leverage points for improving alignment and integration.

In doing so, the Policy Coherence Framework supports the EU's broader transition toward ecosystem-based ocean management and policy integration, all of which are essential for realizing the ambitions of the Ocean Pact and ensuring the success of the forthcoming Ocean Act.

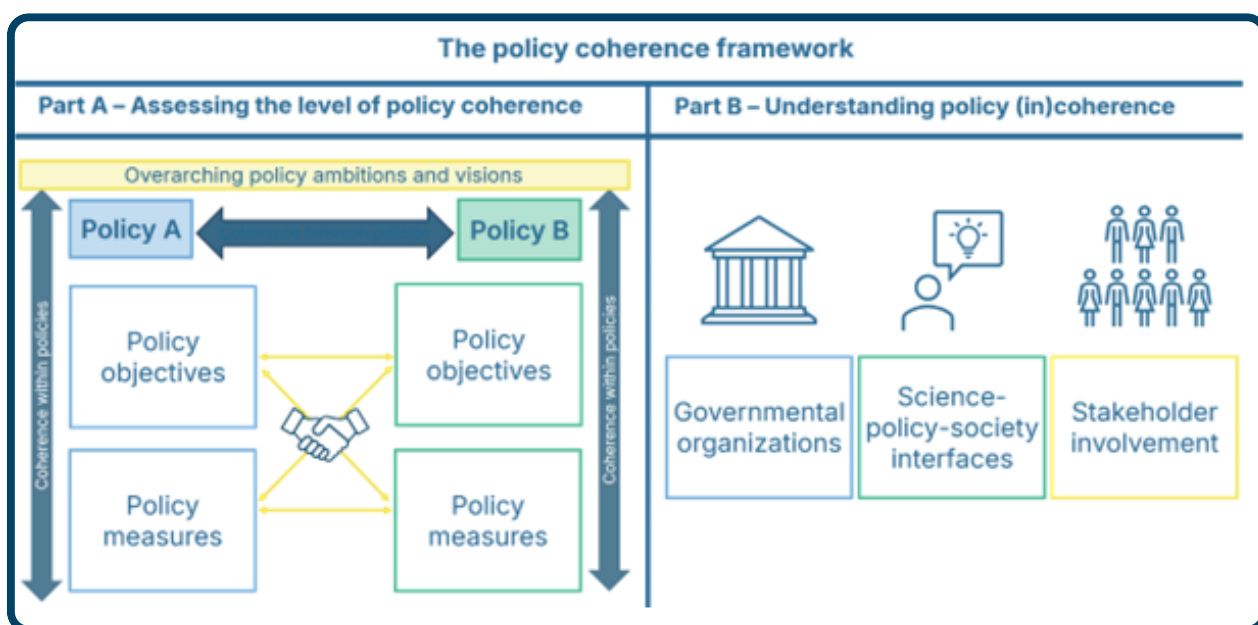
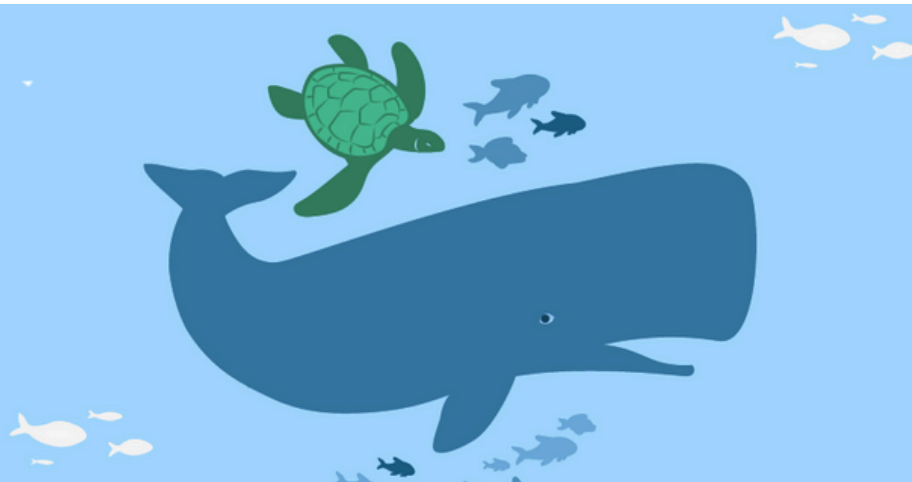


Figure 1 The Policy Coherence Framework offers two components: A) Assessing policy coherence and B) Understanding barriers and enablers of coherence. Together, these components provide a comprehensive understanding of coherence as both a policy outcome and a governance process. For a full guidance within Part A and B, please consult the Policy Coherence Handbook, available at www.policycoherencehandbook.eu.



Key findings: Insights from applying the Framework in EU marine governance

The application of the CrossGov Policy Coherence Framework across **five key policy clusters in EU marine and coastal governance** reveals both fragmentation and emerging opportunities for integration. The policies in these clusters were selected because they have overlaps and for analytical purposes.

1. Biodiversity cluster

The Habitats Directive, Birds Directive, MSFD, WFD, and the NRR exhibit a relatively high degree of normative coherence. They share overarching goals of ecosystem protection and restoration. However, differences in **geographical coverage, legal design and enforcement mechanisms** create gaps. For instance, while the NRR introduces binding restoration targets, it remains unclear how these will be integrated into MSFD Programmes of Measures, especially outside Natura 2000 areas. Aquatic ecosystems are dynamic, and ecosystem boundaries do not align with jurisdictional boundaries of legal instruments. Holistic management approaches require stronger interactions across freshwater and marine instruments.

Key Recommendations:

- ➔ **Strengthen legal interactions** between the Habitats Directive, Birds Directive, MSFD, WFD, NRR and MSPD.
- ➔ **Embed restoration targets** from the NRR into marine spatial planning and MSFD objectives and Programmes of Measures.
- ➔ **Establish monitoring frameworks** that account for coherence to track implementation across instruments.
- ➔ **Enhance coordination** between national and sub-national coastal and marine authorities.
- ➔ **Strengthen interactions across the land-sea interface** between the WFD and MSFD through clearer legal requirements, alignment of management units and institutional cooperation.

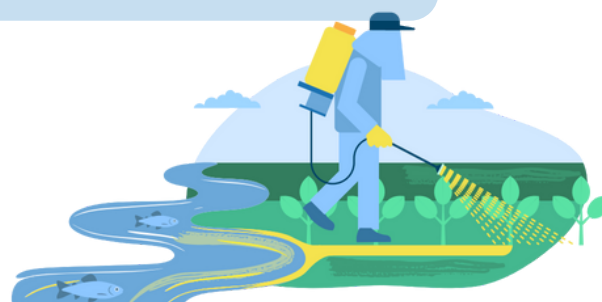
2. Pollution cluster

The WFD, MSFD, and Nitrates Directive all aim to improve water quality, particularly in coastal and transitional waters. However, their implementation is hampered by **differences in legal design, spatial scope, and implementation mechanisms**. The Nitrates Directive, in particular, is limited in both its geographic coverage, applying only to designated Nitrate Vulnerable Zones in some Member States. Its enforcement strength relies heavily on voluntary measures and national discretion. This undermines its alignment with the objectives of the WFD and MSFD.

Additionally, the three directives operate on **different planning and reporting cycles** and use some **divergent indicators**, which complicates integrated monitoring and creates administrative burdens. For example, in Finland's Archipelago Sea, authorities must conduct separate evaluations for the same water bodies under different frameworks. These procedural and legal misalignments hinder the EU's ability to address diffuse pollution effectively and to implement a coherent approach to water quality management across freshwater and marine domains. Nitrogen pollution is a major contributor to eutrophication in coastal areas, and to a lesser extent in freshwater systems. Therefore, measures aimed at reducing nitrogen in freshwater environments must also consider their downstream impacts on **coastal ecosystems**.

Key Recommendations:

- ➔ **Harmonize temporal planning and reporting cycles** between the WFD, MSFD, and Nitrates Directive.
- ➔ Strengthen the **legal and spatial alignment** of the Nitrates Directive with marine and freshwater quality objectives.
- ➔ Develop mutually supportive **indicators and integrated monitoring frameworks** to support coherent assessments.
- ➔ Improve **coordination between freshwater and marine authorities** to reduce duplication and enhance implementation efficiency.
- ➔ **Reinforce land-sea interactions in nitrogen management** by incorporating requirements in the Nitrates Directive and WFD to consider nitrogen impacts on coastal waters.
- ➔ **Update the Nitrate Directive to include phosphorus discharges.**



3. Biodiversity and offshore energy cluster

The relationship between biodiversity and offshore wind development, particularly under the MSFD, Habitats Directive, and RED III, is marked by structural incoherence. RED III's binding targets and permitting exemptions often override biodiversity safeguards, leading to spatial conflicts.

The [CrossGov Offshore Wind & Biodiversity Roadmap](#) highlights the risks of bypassing Environmental Impact Assessments in designated acceleration areas. It recommends embedding biodiversity criteria into wind energy tenders, harmonizing environmental assessment methodologies, and promoting nature-inclusive design (e.g., artificial reefs). The Netherlands provides a leading example, having integrated such criteria into offshore wind development.

Key Recommendations:

- ➔ **Integrate biodiversity objectives early** in marine spatial planning processes.
- ➔ **Avoid legal exemptions** under RED III that bypass Environmental Impact Assessments in sensitive marine areas.
- ➔ **Embed biodiversity criteria** into offshore wind energy tenders and promote nature-inclusive designs.
- ➔ **Harmonize environmental assessment methodologies** across Member States.
- ➔ **Establish inter-agency coordination platforms** for joint planning and permitting.



4. Biodiversity and fisheries cluster

Coherence between the MSFD, Habitats Directive, and Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) is constrained by differing legal objectives and enforcement regimes. The CFP emphasizes sustainable exploitation, while biodiversity instruments focus on conservation. Spatial conflicts arise when fishing zones overlap with marine protected areas (MPAs). Moreover, European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF) funding has often prioritized economic activities over environmental goals. The [CrossGov Fisheries & Biodiversity Roadmap](#) recommends strengthening MPA enforcement, aligning fisheries management with biodiversity targets, and improving the use of scientific data for the sustainable management of fishery resources. France's marine spatial plans, which integrate MPAs, fisheries, and energy zones through participatory processes, offer a promising model.

Key Recommendations:

- ➔ **Strengthen the design and enforcement** of MPAs and Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures (OECMs), such as Fisheries Restricted Areas, and improve engagement of the fishery sector in their co-management.
- ➔ **Align fisheries management plans** with biodiversity conservation targets.
- ➔ **Improve the use of scientific data** in fisheries decision-making.
- ➔ **Apply coherence-sensitive criteria** in EMFAF funding allocations.
- ➔ **Establish joint governance platforms** between fisheries and environmental authorities.
- ➔ **Encourage integrated national strategies**, as seen in France's alignment of its biodiversity, blue economy, and other ambitions in its spatial plan.



5. Pollution and agriculture cluster

The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), Nitrates Directive, WFD, and MSFD all influence land-based pressures on aquatic ecosystems. However, CrossGov analysis identifies significant coherence gaps. CAP subsidies can incentivize intensive farming practices that contribute to nutrient runoff, while exemptions and uneven implementation of the Nitrates Directive weaken its effectiveness in reducing agricultural pollution. These pressures undermine the ecological objectives of the WFD and MSFD, particularly in coastal and transitional waters.

Moreover, the lack of integrated land–sea planning and weak cross-compliance mechanisms limit the EU’s ability to address cumulative impacts on marine biodiversity. The [CrossGov Roadmap for Biodiversity and Agriculture](#) recommends aligning CAP conditionalities with marine and freshwater objectives, enhancing nutrient monitoring, promoting agroecological practices, and more integrated planning.

Key Recommendations:

- ➔ **Align CAP conditionalities** with the environmental objectives of the WFD and MSFD.
- ➔ Strengthen **enforcement and spatial coverage of the Nitrates Directive** to reduce nutrient pollution from agriculture.
- ➔ **Promote agroecological practices and performance-based incentives** in CAP to support biodiversity and water quality.
- ➔ **Improve cross-compliance mechanisms** to ensure that agricultural subsidies do not undermine environmental goals.
- ➔ **Advance integrated land–sea** planning to address cumulative impacts across sectors and ecosystems.
- ➔ **Enhance nutrient monitoring** at the catchment level.



Moving ahead

Together, these five policy clusters illustrate how coherence challenges manifest across different domains of EU marine and coastal governance. While the nature of fragmentation varies, **common patterns** emerge. These include **inconsistent legal obligations**, **siloed implementation**, and **insufficient integration across land–sea and sectoral boundaries**.

At the same time, the analysis reveals promising entry **points for reform**, including improved **coordination** mechanisms, shared **monitoring frameworks**, and more strategic use of EU **funding instruments**.

Building on these insights, [Policy Brief 7](#) explores how the identified coherence challenges affect the EU's ability to deliver on the six strategic priorities of the Ocean Pact, and what is needed to overcome them.

Reference:

Froukje Maria Platjouw, Gunnar Sander, Saskia Trubbach, Laura Friedrich, Maaïke Knol-Kaufman, Ben Boteler, Cristian Passarello, Jonas Kyrönviita, Niko Soininen, Emiliano Ramieri, **Strengthening policy coherence in EU coastal and marine governance: Key recommendations**, CrossGov Policy Brief 6, August 2025.

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