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Regarding: Consultation on the revision of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD)

Position paper of the Belgian Fisheries Producers Organisation (BFPO)

The Belgian Fisheries Producers Organisation (BFPO) welcomes the European Commission's initiative to evaluate and revise the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD). BFPO fully supports the objective of achieving and maintaining Good Environmental Status (GES) in European seas. Healthy marine ecosystems are the indispensable foundation for sustainable fisheries, coastal employment and Europe's food security. Environmental sustainability and economic viability should not be framed as opposing goals; they are mutually dependent and must be pursued together.

At the same time, the revision of the MSFD must improve clarity, coherence and operability. The Directive should remain a workable framework that supports effective environmental protection without creating overlapping obligations or disproportionate burdens for sectors that are already heavily regulated and scientifically monitored, such as fisheries. The current evaluation presents an opportunity not only to strengthen marine protection but also to restore trust and legal certainty within the broader maritime policy framework.

A central issue in the revision concerns the interpretation of Good Environmental Status. There is an increasing risk that GES could be implicitly equated with a pristine, activity-free marine environment. BFPO strongly opposes such an interpretation. Marine ecosystems are dynamic systems shaped by both natural variability and long-standing human activities. Fishing, when sustainably managed, forms part of this socio-ecological system. The objective of GES should therefore not be to restore all marine habitats to a theoretical pre-industrial state, but to ensure that ecosystem structure, functions and productivity are maintained within the bounds of natural variability while preserving resilience and enabling sustainable use. Clarifying this point is ultimately a policy responsibility. The latest available scientific advice should form the basis for decision-making, as it provides essential insight into ecological impacts and environmental limits. However, science alone cannot determine the appropriate balance between conservation objectives, socio-economic sustainability and food production. Policy decisions should therefore rely on the best available science while also taking into account the socio-economic viability of the fisheries sector and the importance of safeguarding Europe's food security.

The relationship between the MSFD and the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) must also be clarified and reinforced. Over the past two decades, the CFP has delivered measurable progress towards sustainability through multiannual management plans, strengthened control mechanisms and modernised technical measures. These instruments directly contribute to the environmental objectives of the MSFD. However, this contribution is not adequately reflected in assessments of Good Environmental Status. In particular, Descriptor 3 on commercial fish and shellfish must remain fully aligned with the CFP. Fishing mortality at FMSY is the internationally recognised sustainability benchmark and should remain the primary reference point. Introducing parallel or additional sustainability thresholds under the MSFD risks creating legal inconsistency, confusion and situations in which stocks considered sustainable under the CFP framework are deemed non-compliant under the MSFD.

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The debate surrounding seabed integrity under Descriptor 6 illustrates the broader need for policy clarity. The assessment of seabed condition depends entirely on the reference level chosen for Good Environmental Status. Defining such reference levels remains challenging due to limited historical baselines and data gaps for many marine ecosystems. If GES is defined as a resilient and functioning ecosystem compatible with sustainable use, different management conclusions may arise.

Conservation, understood as preventing significant adverse impacts, is not equivalent to full ecological restoration. Closing areas that are already heavily modified and where sensitive habitats are absent may not always be proportionate. Rather than relying primarily on blanket bans or large-scale spatial closures for fishing activities, the MSFD framework should encourage approaches that enable fisheries to adapt and coexist with environmental objectives. This includes supporting the development and uptake of more selective fishing gear, technical adaptations to vessels and fishing practices, and other mitigation measures that reduce environmental impacts while allowing fishing activities to continue in a sustainable manner. Such an approach would better align environmental objectives with the socio-economic sustainability of the fisheries sector and Europe's food production capacity. At the same time, it is important to avoid policies that effectively offshore environmental impacts beyond EU waters. Reducing European fishing opportunities while increasingly relying on seafood imports from outside the EU risks shifting ecological pressures elsewhere, often to regions where environmental and social standards are lower. Such an approach would undermine the objective of genuinely sustainable seafood production and will weaken the resilience of the European fisheries sector, ultimately putting Europe's food security at risk. The choice between these approaches has far-reaching implications and should be explicitly addressed by policymakers before additional indicators or thresholds are refined.

The growing reliance on quantitative indicators and thresholds, particularly following Commission Decision 2017/848, raises further concerns. While thresholds can enhance comparability and transparency, they have progressively transformed qualitative descriptors into de facto binding quantitative targets, often without sufficient socio-economic assessment. A strictly pressure-based approach assumes a direct and systematic link between the presence of a pressure and ecosystem degradation. Such reasoning oversimplifies ecological complexity and risks triggering automatic restrictions rather than outcome-based management focused on ecosystem condition and functionality. Thresholds must therefore be scientifically robust, regionally adaptable and developed through transparent dialogue with stakeholders. They must also be accompanied by careful evaluation of socio-economic consequences to ensure proportionality.

The MSFD must also be implemented within a genuinely holistic framework that assesses cumulative impacts across all maritime sectors. Marine ecosystems are influenced not only by fisheries but also by offshore renewable energy, submarine cables, maritime transport, aquaculture, tourism and land-based pollution. In practice, implementation efforts have too often focused disproportionately on fisheries, while other maritime uses continue to expand rapidly. A balanced and credible revision requires that all sectors be assessed under comparable scrutiny and that cumulative pressures be evaluated in an integrated manner.

The rapid development of offshore wind farms in the North Sea is a clear example of the spatial and ecological challenges currently facing fisheries. While BFPO recognises the importance of renewable energy for climate neutrality and energy autonomy, offshore wind expansion significantly reduces available fishing grounds and may lead to displacement of fishing effort. Such displacement can generate unintended ecological and socio-economic effects, for example intensified fishing activities in

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increasingly smaller fishing grounds and safety risks due to gear conflicts or increased proximity to other vessels as a result of the increased spatial squeeze. Comprehensive lifecycle impact assessments, transparent evaluation of cumulative impacts and clear definitions of compatible and non-compatible maritime uses are essential to avoid systematic exclusion of fishing activities without proper justification. Submarine cables present similar challenges. Their installation, maintenance and potential removal can disturb seabed habitats, and operational interactions with fishing gear may result in economic losses for fishers. Impact assessments must therefore be proportionate and transparent. Fair compensation mechanisms should exist for gear losses and losses of fishing grounds resulting from interactions with cable and windfarm infrastructure.

Climate change represents a major driver of marine ecosystem change and must be more explicitly integrated into MSFD implementation. Ocean warming, acidification and deoxygenation increasingly influence species distribution, stock productivity and benthic habitat resilience. Without adequate integration of climate drivers, ecosystem changes risk being incorrectly attributed to sectoral pressures such as fisheries. Strengthening resilience-based management and distinguishing climate-induced variability from human-induced impacts are therefore essential components of a credible revision.

Marine spatial planning adds another dimension to the debate. Fisheries are the oldest maritime use in European waters and contribute directly to Europe's food sovereignty. In a context of rising global population and limited agricultural land expansion, marine capture fisheries provide animal protein with a comparatively lower environmental footprint than many terrestrial alternatives. The revision of the MSFD must therefore safeguard access to traditional fishing grounds where no significant environmental risk exists and ensure that spatial constraints are distributed proportionately across sectors. Comprehensive cumulative impact assessments are necessary to determine whether regulatory burdens are equitably shared.

The sea–land nexus must also receive greater attention. Land-based nutrient runoff, chemical contaminants and plastic pollution significantly affect coastal and marine ecosystems. Achieving Good Environmental Status cannot be accomplished if marine sectors alone bear the regulatory burden while major drivers of degradation originate on land. Stronger alignment between the MSFD and water, agricultural and industrial policies is therefore indispensable.

Governance reform under the forthcoming Ocean Act offers an opportunity to break down administrative silos, particularly between environmental and maritime authorities, and to improve coordination among scientific and technical bodies. Regional cooperation must be strengthened to reflect the transboundary nature of marine ecosystems. Meaningful stakeholder involvement remains essential for legitimacy and effective implementation.

Adequate and predictable funding is equally critical. The fishing sector requires financial support to invest in innovation, selectivity improvements, decarbonisation, data collection and monitoring. A significant reduction in fisheries funding under the next Multiannual Financial Framework would undermine both environmental ambition and the sector's capacity to contribute to sustainability objectives.

Finally, simplification must deliver tangible benefits rather than merely shifting administrative complexity. Reporting obligations should be streamlined, duplication avoided and implementation cycles aligned with other relevant EU legislation. A safeguard mechanism should be introduced to allow review of targets that prove disproportionate or practically unfeasible. Pressure-based indicators

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should only be applied where scientifically justified and where they do not undermine balanced, ecosystem-based management.

In conclusion, the revision of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive represents a strategic opportunity to strengthen marine environmental protection while restoring coherence, proportionality and trust within EU ocean governance. A credible revision must clarify the operational meaning of Good Environmental Status, ensure full coherence with the Common Fisheries Policy, treat all maritime sectors equitably in cumulative impact assessments, safeguard proportionality in spatial measures, explicitly integrate climate change and secure adequate funding. By embedding the MSFD within a coherent, ecosystem-based and proportionate framework, the European Union can reconcile biodiversity protection with sustainable fisheries, coastal livelihoods and long-term food security.

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