

# SWAN submission to the European Commission Call for Evidence on the Ocean Act



This submission is made on behalf of the Sustainable Water Network (SWAN), an umbrella of 25 of Ireland's leading environmental NGOs, national and regional, working together to protect and enhance Ireland's water environment, through participation in the implementation of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD), the Water Framework Directive (WFD) and other water-related policy and legislation. We are a founding partner of Fair Seas and a member of Seas at Risk (SAR).

SWAN welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the European Ocean Act's aims as a tool to implement the European Ocean Pact priorities. Ireland has one of Europe's largest Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ), yet still experiences 'spatial squeeze' as offshore renewable energy (ORE) is being developed to reach Ireland's climate goals, marine protected area (MPA) coverage is expected to expand from current 9% to 30% in the next four years, fishing communities seek sustainable livelihoods and other industries such as shipping, tourism, communications and security require overlapping marine areas. At the same time, Ireland has obligations to restore marine habitats under the Nature Restoration Law and protect the biodiversity in Ireland's seas, which includes 26 species of whales and dolphins, 24 seabird species and 71 species of sharks, rays and skates. With these many and varied priorities, a cohesive, statutory plan is essential for effective governance resulting in nature restoration, renewable energy and thriving coastal communities.

The Ocean Act must provide the necessary overarching framework to integrate the objectives from the many Directives, Plans, Strategies and Policies which are currently used to manage Europe's seas. We support adoption of the Act as a Regulation, to ensure enforceability, consistency and applicability across Europe.

SWAN reiterates Seas at Risk's demands for the key objectives to be included in the Ocean Act Regulation, namely legally binding objectives and timebound targets for protection measures including 30% MPA coverage, with 10% under strict protection, and achievement of Good Environmental Status (GES) under the MSFD. These targets must be enshrined into enforceable European law. The Act must also ensure consistent application of the ecosystem-based approach through MSP and other sectoral plans. Additionally, it must include provisions in law for sustainable financing through the Multiannual Financial Framework.

Last year's Pact recognised that the "ocean and seas are crucial for life on Earth, prosperity, competitiveness, security and a sustainable future... critical for regulating Earth's climate" and advocated for a holistic policy framework in the form of an Ocean Act. We agree with the "need for strategic, long-term maritime spatial planning aligned with EU policies on nature protection, renewable energy, food, transport, tourism and security," requiring EU-level governance to coordinate all ocean-related targets.

The ocean is keenly impacted by every aspect of the triple planetary crisis (pollution, climate change and biodiversity loss), yet seas which maintain GES under the MSFD and are protected through effective marine spatial planning (MSP) are also a necessary part of mitigating and solving these crises. GES has not been met in any of Europe's regional seas and in Ireland's EEZ, only six of 11 descriptors have achieved GES.

If well-implemented, the Ocean Act has the potential to align the many sectors which use Europe's maritime area. We fully support the goal of aligning MSP with the MSFD. Rather than a revision of these Directives, we call for the Act to provide coherence and a closer link between these Directives for the benefit of the ocean.

We also fully support the position paper submitted by our partners at Seas at Risk (SAR). SWAN signed on to SAR's Blue Manifesto and we reiterate its highlighting of the need for policy coherence between the MSFD and Marine Spatial Planning Directive.