Building Blocks for an Ocean Act

II. A Sustainable and Regenerative Blue Economy

Prosperity within planetary boundaries: Building a regenerative blue economy

Why is the Ocean Act needed for a European regenerative blue economy

The blue economy is a strategic component of Europe's economy, supporting millions of jobs and providing the economic backbone of many coastal regions. Fisheries, shipping, ports, tourism, renewable energy, biotechnology and aquaculture all depend on a healthy ocean and contribute to Europe's prosperity. The EU remains a global leader in several of these sectors, but is increasingly struggling to keep its competitive edge.

At the same time, the majority of these economic activities continue to exert significant pressure on marine ecosystems. Unsustainable fisheries, pollution, habitat degradation and greenhouse gas emissions undermine the very natural systems upon which these sectors depend – their underlying assets. The future of Europe's blue economy therefore lies in ensuring that economic activities operate within ecological limits and, where possible, contribute to the restoration and resilience of marine ecosystems. The Ocean Act should provide a common framework to guide this transition towards a regenerative blue economy.

Policy context and Ocean Pact commitments

Several EU initiatives already shape the development of the blue economy. The Competitiveness Compass and Clean Industrial Deal provide the overarching framework for industrial policy and investment. Sector-specific frameworks govern fisheries, shipping, ports, tourism and emerging ocean industries.

The Common Fisheries Policy remains the primary framework for fisheries management, while the upcoming Vision for Fisheries and Aquaculture 2040 will seek to support the long-term sustainability of the sector. The 2023 Marine Action Plan also identified opportunities to better align fisheries and environmental objectives.

In the maritime sector, the recent Industrial Maritime Strategy and the European Ports Strategy aim to strengthen competitiveness while accelerating decarbonisation and innovation, building on existing legislation, including the FuelEU Maritime Regulation, extension of ETS to the maritime, and the Alternative Fuel Infrastructure Regulation. In this context, ports and shipping are becoming the delivery mechanism for the EU's wider energy and industrial transition (hydrogen, e-fuels, electrification). The Industrial Accelerator, if expanded to include maritime sectors, could also provide a significant boost to Europe's industrial maritime capacity. At the same time, the Ocean Pact recognises the importance of emerging sectors and sustainable ocean technologies but does not yet establish a coherent framework to guide their development.

The Ocean Act provides an opportunity to connect these initiatives within a common vision for a sustainable and regenerative blue economy.

Key measures for the Ocean Act

Establish a European Industrial Policy for a Regenerative Blue Economy

The Ocean Act should establish a long-term framework to guide the transition or expansion of all maritime economy sectors towards sustainability, including emerging activities, with clear objectives, indicators and sector-specific transition pathways. These, paired with time-bound environmental and economic targets, will provide the necessary strategic foresight and predictability needed for all economic actors, across sectors, to engage.

This transition should be supported by adequate public funding under the next Multiannual Financial Framework, notably through the European Competitiveness Fund (ECF), which should play a key role in supporting the decarbonisation and sustainable transformation of maritime industries.

2. Align economic activities with ecosystem limits

Economic activities with significant impacts on marine ecosystems should be progressively aligned with environmental objectives and Good Environmental Status. The Ocean Act should support the phase-out of practices that are incompatible with ocean health goals while facilitating investment in sustainable alternatives.

3. Strengthen environmental assessments for ocean activities

The Ocean Act should reinforce the application of environmental impact assessments of marine activities, in line with the SEA Directive and the BBNJ Agreement for activities overlapping with the high seas, ensuring cumulative impacts are systematically considered and that decisions are informed by ecosystem-based management principles. The Speeding up environmental assessments regulation, currently being negotiated ahead of the Act, should reduce administrative burden where necessary, but not weaken the overall framework for environmental assessments.

4. Support the decarbonisation and sustainability of maritime transport

Building on existing legislation, the Ocean Act should support measures to reduce emissions, underwater noise and impacts on marine wildlife, including through improved implementation of existing EU maritime regulations such as FuelEU Maritime and the promotion of operational measures such as vessel speed reduction where appropriate.

The Ocean Act should also make ETS revenue earmarking mandatory for maritime decarbonisation. In addition, without EU-preference criteria in procurement, equipment manufacturers will lose the domestic demand needed to scale decarbonisation technologies (propulsion, coatings, navigation). The Ocean Act should therefore support inclusion of maritime manufacturing in the Industrial Accelerator Act's Union-origin requirements as a condition for a credible EU decarbonisation supply chain.

5. Accelerate the transition towards sustainable fisheries and aquaculture

The Ocean Act should promote ecosystem-based fisheries management, strengthen support for low-impact and small-scale fisheries, and encourage the development of sustainable aquaculture systems that minimise environmental pressures, in line with the Energy Transition Partnership (ETP) and building on the 2021-2030 Strategy guidelines for EU Aquaculture.