



Marine Strategy Framework Directive

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Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD)

Overview

The MSFD is the EU's key law aimed at keeping our seas healthy, productive, and resilient. Adopted in 2008 and updated in 2017, the Directive sets out the goal of achieving and maintaining "Good Environmental Status" (GES) across all EU marine waters. It uses an ecosystem-based approach, looking at 11 separate issues – from marine litter and underwater noise to biodiversity and habitat protection – to ensure that our marine environments continue to provide essential benefits like food, climate regulation, and recreation.

Implementation state-of-play

Recent evaluations and implementation cycles by the European Commission and its research bodies have shown both progress and significant gaps in the MSFD's implementation. The evaluation report for the second cycle (2018–2023) reveals that, while there have been notable improvements – especially in addressing marine litter, contaminants, and underwater noise – persistent challenges remain.

For instance, only about 8% of the initial Good Environmental Status (GES) definitions were deemed sufficiently robust for effective monitoring. Additionally, only two legally binding thresholds are quantified (seafloor integrity and underwater noise), with other targets depending on later policy actions, which weakens overall accountability. These issues are compounded by fragmented cross-border monitoring and persistent data gaps, which hinder a comprehensive evaluation of environmental improvements.

Moreover, a disconnect between the MSFD and other EU policies – such as fisheries management and maritime spatial planning (MSP) – further challenges the Directive's effectiveness. While the MSFD aspires to achieve GES of EU marine waters, it lacks a specific descriptor addressing climate change, resulting in many Programmes of Measures largely overlooking critical issues such as coastal adaptation. On the implementation side, despite high-level commitments to ecosystem-based management, many maritime spatial plans fail to translate MSFD objectives into concrete, spatially explicit measures. Even in cases where the MSFD and MSP timelines align, it remains unclear whether data generated under the MSFD – such as spatial distributions of species and habitats, and assessments of their environmental status – are effectively used in spatial planning decisions. Moreover, spatially concrete measures proposed in the Programmes of Measures are not always adequately reflected or enforced in the corresponding maritime spatial plans.

What's on the Revision Agenda?

The European Commission's DG Environment is working on a proposal to revise the MSFD. Delivering the Directive's ambition to achieve healthy, resilient and productive EU seas



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requires equipping Member States with better tools to enforce and streamline our shared vision for marine protection.

WWF key priorities:

- **Raise the level of ambition** and accelerate the implementation to ensure the MSFD is fit-for-purpose and delivers on its GES objective.
- Provide stronger legal clarity through **precise, quantitative targets and binding thresholds** that make progress measurable and hold Member States accountable.
- **Increase investments** and **secure adequate funding** to ensure the effective implementation of the MSFD and the achievement of its goals.
- Establish **governance mechanisms**, via regional sea conventions for example, that support the design and delivery of ambitious, coherent, coordinated, fair and effective Programmes of Measures.
- **Streamline implementation**, monitoring, and reporting processes to reduce administrative burdens while improving effectiveness.
- **Enhance data management** and harmonise cross-border monitoring to address persistent data gaps and ensure coordinated action across regions.
- **Align the MSFD with other EU policies** – including maritime spatial planning, the Habitats Directive and the Nature Restoration Law – to build a coherent, well-connected and managed network of marine protected areas that deliver on the EU's pledge to protect 30% of its seas by 2030.

For more information

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