

Dear Excellencies,

It is an honor to represent Belgium at this OSPAR Ministerial Meeting. We want to thank our Spanish hosts for the fantastic organization of the event in this beautiful city of Vigo, *La Puerta del Atlántico*, the gate to the Atlantic. But... Vigo has also another cognomen: *La Ciudad olívica*, the city of the olives.

There is quite some symbolism in having our Meeting here today.

An olive tree can live for 500 years or more and often remains green, even in harsh conditions. Today, we celebrate the 33th anniversary of OSPAR, and you can make it the 53th anniversary, if you go back all the way to the Oslo Convention against dumping in 1972. And look at OSPAR today, anno 2025. We are an *organization in good shape, more relevant than ever*, to tackle the triple planetary crisis. Belgium is convinced that we will make OSPAR even more fit for purpose today.

An olive tree also emanates, care and purity, two values being important drivers for our cooperation in OSPAR. By updating our *North-East Atlantic Environmental Strategy* today, we will reconfirm and strengthen our commitment to aim for a clean, healthy and biologically diverse North-East Atlantic Ocean, which is productive, used sustainably and resilient to climate change and ocean acidification. And if all goes well, we will also decide to *amend the OSPAR Convention*, expanding the impact of our cooperation to the Macaronesia region and potentially also to some new and emerging activities affecting the OSPAR Maritime Area.

Of particular importance for Belgium is the point on the *Exhaust Gas Cleaning Systems*. OSPAR has the mandate, complementary to IMO, and the policy opportunity to regulate the use of scrubbers. Scrubbers should have their role in shipping to clean the exhaust gases, but we should avoid converting the air emission problem into a water pollution problem. [We welcome the compromise that has been forged on this during the Commission meeting this week and will be happy to lend our support.]

At UNOC3, two weeks ago, Belgium was one of the States that has ratified the Agreement on Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction ("*the BBNJ Agreement*"). This speedy ratification aligns with the Belgian bid for Brussels to host the headquarters of a BBNJ Secretariat. Belgium is content to see, throughout the deliverables of this Ministerial meeting, so many attention for the role of OSPAR, a leading Regional Seas Convention, as the nexus between the BBNJ Agreement and the national governments around the North-East Atlantic.

But even an olive tree has to be taken care of, and should get the right (sustainable) fertilizers. Indeed, as a complement to the Belgian priorities mentioned above, OSPAR should also be *properly funded* and work under an *optimized governance*. On the budget, Belgium stands ready to contribute to initiatives exploring a more sustainable resourcing of the OSPAR work, with a particularly interested gaze towards external funding mechanisms, such as some EU funds, where synergies may be found. [Pertaining to governance, we are happy to adopt today the new

operational objective to review the current OSPAR structures and ways of working, in combination with the revival of the Governance group.]

To conclude, an olive tree is also associable to the mother of all virtues: wisdom. Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom, offered the olive tree to Athens. I wish the entire OSPAR family the **knowledge, insight and prudent judgment** to continue its good cooperation, to achieve our common aim of a clean, healthy and biologically diverse North-East Atlantic Ocean, which is productive, used sustainably and resilient to climate change and ocean acidification.

Viva OSPAR, viva Vigo!

I thank you.