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Countries agree new actions on marine litter, habitat recovery and ocean assessment

Ostend, Belgium, 25 June 2026 – Countries and the European Union working together under the OSPAR Convention have agreed a series of new actions to strengthen the protection and conservation of the marine environment of the North-East Atlantic.

Opening the meeting, Belgium's Minister of the Sea, Annelies Verlinden, noted the importance of international cooperation in preventing and reducing the impacts of human activities on our shared marine environment highlighting OSPAR's global leadership on decommissioning of offshore wind installations, and Belgium's nature restoration initiatives, including active oyster reef restoration.

Progress made this week advances implementation of the North-East Atlantic Environment Strategy 2030 and supports OSPAR's vision of a clean, healthy and biologically diverse ocean that is productive, sustainably used, and resilient to climate change and ocean acidification.

Key outcomes included:

Action to reduce the impact of marine litter from fisheries

OSPAR agreed a measure aimed at phasing out the use of dolly ropes as chafing gear in fisheries. Dolly ropes are bundles of synthetic threads, typically polyethylene, attached to fishing gear to reduce wear and tear. However, they are a recognised source of marine litter and plastic pollution.

The measure encourages Contracting Parties and relevant stakeholders to phase out the use of dolly ropes and promote technically and economically feasible alternatives that do not contribute to plastic pollution or harm marine species and habitats.

The measure forms part of OSPAR's wider efforts to prevent and substantially reduce marine litter across the North-East Atlantic.

Regional Action Plan for Benthic Habitats in the North-East Atlantic

The Regional Action Plan for Benthic Habitats (RAP-Benthic) aims to address benthic habitats in need of recovery, conservation or restoration on the continental shelf and slope down to a depth of 800 metres, including relevant OSPAR listed 'Threatened and/or Declining' habitats. It includes actions to respond to the issues identified in OSPAR's Quality Status Report 2023. The RAP-Benthic focuses on regional/subregional scale actions where OSPAR Contracting Parties working together can add most value.

The RAP-Benthic will support the achievement of the North-East Atlantic Environment Strategy 2030 Strategic Objective S5.04 to "take appropriate actions to prevent or reduce pressures to enable the recovery of marine species and benthic and pelagic habitats in order to reach and maintain good environmental status as reflected in relevant OSPAR status assessments [...]"

Progress towards OSPAR's next holistic assessment of the North-East Atlantic

Preparations for OSPAR's Intermediate Assessment 2029 advanced significantly, with climate change and ocean acidification considerations integrated across all assessments for the first time. Two new indicator assessments were approved:

Composition and Spatial Distribution of Litter on the Seafloor

The assessment found that seafloor litter was widespread across the North-East Atlantic between 2012 and 2023, with plastics, including fisheries-related items, accounting for the majority of recorded litter.

Plastic Particles in Fulmar Stomachs

Plastic ingestion by fulmars is widely recognised as an indicator of floating marine litter and its impacts on marine wildlife. The assessment showed that plastic ingestion levels in North Sea fulmars have not changed significantly between 2014 and 2023, highlighting the need for continued action.

New Reports and Scientific Evidence

The Commission also welcomed several reports contributing to Intermediate Assessment 2029, including reports on the Production and consumption of plastics; Marine geoengineering; Offshore renewable energy developments; and Aquaculture. Status assessments were also approved for species and habitats identified as threatened and/or declining: cod, *Saballeria spinulosa*, Azorean limpet and maerl beds.

These reports will help strengthen the evidence base supporting future policy and management decisions across the North-East Atlantic.

New Observer Organisations

OSPAR welcomed four new observer organisations:

- The Nordic EPS Alliance (NEPSA) <https://nordiceps.org/>
- The European Anglers Alliance <https://www.eaa-europe.eu/>
- The Atlantic International Research Centre - <https://www.aircentre.org/homepage/>
- The Bellona Environmental Foundation - <https://bellona.org/about-bellona>

Their participation will contribute additional expertise and stakeholder engagement in support of OSPAR's work.

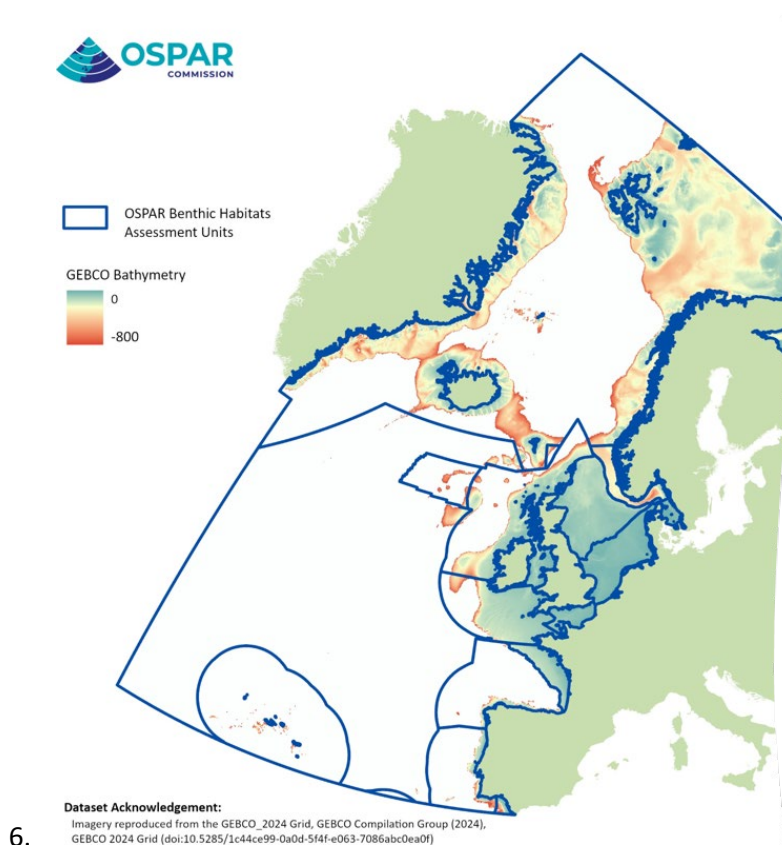
Chair's Statement

Commenting on the outcomes of the meeting, OSPAR Chair **Jorge Ureta Maeso (Spain)** said *“Cooperation lies at the heart of OSPAR’s success in protecting the North-East Atlantic. The recent Ostend meeting showcased how collective action drives progress, with 15 countries and the EU agreeing to phase out dolly ropes in fisheries—a key step to reduce plastic pollution and protect marine ecosystems. This decision, alongside the Regional Action Plan for Benthic Habitats, demonstrates OSPAR’s ability to address complex challenges through coordinated, science-based strategies. By working together, OSPAR Parties address immediate threats like marine litter while building resilience against long-term challenges such as climate change. In a fragmented world, OSPAR proves that unity and shared purpose turn vision into reality.”*

ENDS

Note for editors

1. The OSPAR Commission was set up by the 1992 OSPAR Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-East Atlantic, which unified and updated the 1972 Oslo and 1974 Paris Conventions. It brings together the governments of Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom, together with the European Union.
2. OSPAR adopted its North-East Atlantic Environment Strategy 2030 at a Ministerial meeting in Cascais (Portugal) and revised in 2025. Full text <https://www.ospar.org/convention/strategy>
3. Article 2 of the OSPAR Convention https://www.ospar.org/site/assets/files/1169/ospar_convention.pdf states that “The Contracting Parties shall, in accordance with the provisions of the Convention, take all possible steps to prevent and eliminate pollution and shall take the necessary measures to protect the maritime area against the adverse effects of human activities so as to safeguard human health and to conserve marine ecosystems and, when practicable, restore marine areas which have been adversely affected. To this end Contracting Parties shall, individually and jointly, adopt programmes and measures and shall harmonise their policies and strategies.
4. OSPAR measures can be found on the OSPAR website <https://www.ospar.org/convention/agreements> Measures adopted at the meeting will be prepared for publication on the OSPAR website over the summer. Further communications will be provided when these are available.
5. Figure below: The RAP-Benthic covers all benthic habitats requiring recovery or restoration across the continental shelf and slope within the OSPAR Maritime Area, down to a depth of 800 m. The plan includes shelf-slope systems because pressures and activities on the shelf often extend onto adjacent slopes; these areas therefore need to be considered functional extensions of the shelf environment. The assessment units shown in the figure correspond to those used in the OSPAR QSR.



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