

## EPP GROUP POSITION PAPER ON

# THE EUROPEAN OCEAN PACT

21 May 2025

The EPP Group welcomes the initiative of the European Ocean Pact, as it is time for the EU, which has the world's largest Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), to assume its maritime leadership. This leadership goes hand in hand with the responsibilities in terms of management and conservation. The EPP will support an ambitious Ocean Pact that stands for a comprehensive EU maritime strategy. This strategy will be key for food sovereignty, security and defence, environment, energy, trade, economy, transport, and communications, enhancing strong and resilient domestic fisheries and aquaculture sectors in line with sustainable development.

## 1. An Ocean Pact benefiting the Blue Economy

### a) A balanced approach for a competitive Blue Economy

The three pillars of sustainability must be respected for every activity at sea to reconcile economic activity, social cohesion and environmental protection. The Blue Economy creates direct and indirect jobs and is the backbone of coastal communities, particularly small-scale fisheries; it plays a cultural and identity role, contributing to regional cohesion, and preserving the European way of life.

> The EPP Group welcomes the inclusion of the Ocean Pact in the Competitiveness Compass and stands alongside stakeholders of the Blue Economy who are simultaneously facing overregulation and bureaucracy, unfair competition, shortage of skills, challenges of gene-

ration renewal, the ageing of the fleet and reduced employment opportunities.

> The EPP Group calls on the European Commission and Member States to increase competitiveness and modernisation of the fleet. To achieve this, the EPP Group advocates to reshape the concept of the EU fishing capacity ceiling in kilowatts (kW) and gross tonnage (GT) established for each EU country and to adapt it to the new technologies and requirements for safety, decarbonisation or working conditions (the so-called 'social tonnage'). More generally, the EPP Group urges the European Commission to immediately remove the regulatory obstacles and financial limits in the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) to decarbonise and renew the fleet, particularly for the ORs (Outermost Regions) fishing fleet and reduce administrative burdens.

> While not opposing high-seas and small-scale fisheries, the EPP considers that the Ocean Pact should recognise specifically small-scale fisheries and promote multiannual fixation and fair distribution of quotas to ensure predictability for both fishers and processors;

> In the context of the Ocean Pact, the EPP advocates for promoting jobs and career opportunities in fisheries and aquaculture throughout the EU. This initiative should be accompanied by a fleet renewal plan aimed at enhancing the performance, image and attractiveness of the sector. Additionally, a generational renewal plan should be implemented to recognise certificates, facilitate mobility, and organise training programmes by transposing the STCW-F into EU legislation.

- > The EPP Group stresses that fisheries are more than an economic sector for many remote and rural coastal communities — they represent a lifeline for social resilience, cultural continuity, and economic survival. The Ocean Pact must support place-based strategies to enhance local employment, prevent depopulation, and maintain traditional knowledge systems in fishing communities.

### **b) Oceans are strategic assets for economic power**

80% of Europe's external trade and 40% of its internal trade are carried by sea. Critical infrastructures in the seas surrounding the EU possess strategic value, particularly in the current tense geopolitical context. Maritime technologies are also critical for Europe's defence and security, playing a key role in Europe's strategic autonomy.

- > The EPP Group emphasises the growing importance of the maritime dimension in the EU's security. We support all actions that aim to defend the freedom of the seas, to protect lawful maritime trade, and to secure the legal movement of goods and persons, as well as to protect the EU's strategic assets, particularly the security of companies and infrastructures involved in the blue economy, such as ports and marine cables. Submarine digital and energy cables are crucial for global connectivity and economic stability, carrying the majority of international communications. Increased investment is needed to bolster security and resilience, including through the establishment of rapid-response repair fleets and enhanced repair capabilities to ensure swift recovery and uninterrupted services, while fostering international cooperation and EU-led initiatives to support infrastructure maintenance, redundancy, and regulatory measures for secure and fair access.
- > Considering EU ports are increasingly misused by criminal organisations as entry points for illicit drugs, we must step up efforts and implement robust measures to effectively guarantee the safety of our ports.
- > Additionally, the EU must defend its strategic infrastructure against sabotage or digital interference, as illustrated by the presence of the Russian shadow fleet, circumventing EU sanctions and posing significant safety, security, and environmental risks.

- > The EPP Group calls for introducing a "maritime reflex" into all EU policies and creating a maritime dimension to the Clean Industrial Deal.
- > The EPP Group supports a European Maritime Industrial Alliance, recognising that all maritime sectors are interdependent in terms of competitiveness, employment, transition and use of the Ocean based on the example of Maritime Spatial Planning.
- > The EPP Group also calls for a simplification of environmental laws, a reduction of bureaucracy and the speed-up of procedures to balance the competing interests of sectors like aquaculture, fishing and energy production; therefore, the EPP Group asks for a review of the Maritime Spatial Planning and for an investigation whether blanket exemptions of grid projects from assessments under Art.4 Water Framework Directive and Art.1 and Art.5 Marine Strategy Framework Directive could help to expedite grid projects, respecting the traditional fishing grounds.

## **2. Food security and strategic food autonomy at the heart of the Ocean Pact**

### **a) Seafood products: a strategic role in food security**

The ocean provides a source of healthy, nutritious, and low-carbon proteins, which many communities rely on for their food. As the world's second-largest market for seafood products, the EU depends on imports for over 70% of its seafood products, limiting our food security and autonomy.

- > The EPP Group calls on the European Commission and the Member States to adopt measures to boost competitiveness, modernise the fleet, and strengthen Europe's maritime economic sovereignty.
- > The EPP Group stresses that a drastic reduction in the activity of European fishers in the name of conservation would increase dependence on imports from third countries that do not adhere to the same social and environmental standards.
- > The EPP Group proposes to set up a "Blue Food Action Plan" that strengthens

fisheries and aquaculture with the EU vision for Agriculture and Food, and to develop labels on a European and global scale, bringing more transparency to the supply chain, particularly in restaurants.

- > The EPP Group supports raising awareness about seafood's benefits for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially those related to hunger, nutrition, and sustainability for millions of livelihoods.
- > Especially in this context of high geopolitical tensions, the EPP Group calls for an Ocean Pact that strengthens EU domestic seafood production through fisheries, aquaculture and its processing industry, which must be recognised as strategic sectors.
- > At the EU level, the Ocean Pact must be key to reversing the declining consumption trend of European seafood by promoting the consumption of sustainable and/or certified European products, including European processed products. To achieve this, we urge the Commission to actively involve the sector in the EU simplification packages to reduce regulatory burdens.

#### **b) Boost EU Aquaculture**

Aquaculture holds significant untapped potential and faces several constraints and barriers to growth. These challenges include sector fragmentation, higher production costs compared to other countries, strict regulations, limited space, difficulties in accessing water, challenges in obtaining licences, and restricted access to finance.

- > The EPP Group urges the European Commission to establish a Common Aquaculture Policy on the same footing as the CFP, and adopt quantified targets for the development of aquaculture to ensure it is adequately considered in the necessary arbitration of the Maritime Spatial Planning, including shellfish and algae production;
- > In the framework of the Ocean Pact, the EPP Group calls on the European Commission and Member States to take swift measures for sustainable and competitive aquaculture in Europe, to reduce bureaucracy, speed up administrative processes, expedite legal appeals for projects benefiting food security, allow access to water (i.e. seawater, freshwater, brackish water) and coastal areas by simplifying and

supporting access to land with the EIB and local authorities, as well as improve water quality.

- > The EPP Group encourages Member States to coordinate aquaculture projects with cross-border aspects within the EU and to develop aquaculture production, promoting diversification, efficiency and reduced environmental impact.
- > Taking into account the impact of climate change, the EPP Group proposes to raise awareness among the public about new predators or invasive species in the aquaculture farms, which can be suitable for human consumption and involve all stakeholders in these campaigns, from the fishers to the chef.

### **3. External dimensions of the Ocean Pact**

---

#### **a) Level playing field**

The zero-tolerance approach to IUU (Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated) fishing remains a priority for the EU. Proof is that European fishing is the most virtuous and the most regulated in the world. However, unfair competition remains unbearable for our fishers, legitimately demanding a level playing field with imported products and consistency between the EU's various actions.

- > The EPP Group asks the European Commission to use the Ocean Pact to promote our European standards internationally as well as in RFMOs, SFPAs, FTAs and international fora, while actively defending European players, ensuring the same level-playing field and protecting our fisheries chain from unfair global competition.
- > The EPP Group urges strengthening controls in ports and customs, making full use of a new EU Customs Agency to reinforce traceability, particularly through the eCatch system outlined in the new Control Regulation. Additionally, it is crucial to register all imports of fisheries products from non-cooperative countries and, in case of an investigation, to allow the collection of retroactive duties and tariffs.
- > The EPP Group calls for the firm inclusion of "oceanic reciprocity"

clauses or mirror measures on seafood products in trade agreements, ensuring that imported products comply with the same standards of sustainability, food safety, and environmental protection as European products., as well as sustainability criteria in all trade instruments, including autonomous tariff quotas.

- > The EPP Group continues to support the development of RFMOs, which the EU and Member States should be part of, and asks the Commission to limit the reduction of quotas in RFMOs to the benefit of third countries.
- > The EPP Group also supports massive counter-measures towards third countries whose fishing vessels or official fleet act provocatively or violently against EU fishing vessels, especially in the Mediterranean or ORs where modern piracy exists.
- > The EPP Group highlights with concern the presence of illegal fishing activities by third-country vessels operating within or near EU waters, particularly in economically sensitive fishing grounds that are vital to local communities. The Ocean Pact must include stronger joint surveillance mechanisms and responsive enforcement tools to deter unauthorised or non-compliant access by third-country fleets.
- > More generally, the EPP Group calls for ensuring the safety and economic security of the European Union by establishing a maritime security strategy under the Ocean Pact, addressing threats across all maritime domains through integrated civilian, military, and commercial cooperation.
- > The EPP Group calls for an Ocean Pact that involves third countries in the EU carding system to push them to take the same measures as the EU consecutively to a red card. In line with that, the EPP Group asks to strengthen DG Mare's actions against IUU and even strengthen EU military missions to control and fight IUU.
- > The EPP Group supports the gathering of information using innovative technologies (like AI tools and the use of satellite data - Copernicus -) to cover the surveillance of oceans, including in cooperation with fishers and NGOs on the practices of third-country vessels, but also in organising a

network of "Vigilant Fishers" collecting and transmitting data of IUU fishing or vessels navigating without VMS.

- > Finally, the EPP Group calls for maritime security as a core part of the EU's external action and suggests involving the EEAS in raising awareness of the strategic role of the Ocean Pact and calls for dedicated officials in the EU representations having expertise in Ocean policies.

## **b) The need for strong governance**

The Ocean Pact will need strong governance to be fully implemented internationally.

- > The EPP Group calls for a bottom-up approach to all maritime European policies and for greater cooperation and ongoing dialogue with the sector and key players to ensure that legislation is consistent and has broad support. We also consider reshaping the EU's integrated Maritime Policy and revising the European Maritime Spatial Planning Directive to better integrate and balance the various uses of maritime space, which is becoming increasingly competitive.
- > The EPP Group advocates for regular consultations on legislative proposals with all relevant stakeholders, including small-scale fisheries, and proposes to create a mechanism to regroup key public, private and institutional stakeholders to assess the Ocean Pact's developments and ensure that it embraces an ecosystem-based approach and a holistic vision. Furthermore, the EPP Group proposes to organise "Oceans Summits" twice a year at the European level with all the concerned ministers for the concrete implementation of the Ocean Pact, and to create "maritime working parties" on ocean governance within the EU institutions and to develop a strong and dynamic Ocean Diplomacy.
- > Improved cooperation between the European agencies, such as EMSA, Frontex, EFCA, and EUSPA, is key for the EPP Group to ensure interoperability and efficient governance of the Ocean Pact, as well as a deepening of cooperation with regional and international partners to strengthen maritime border control and counter transnational threats.

## 4. Healthy oceans - encouraging and developing marine scientific knowledge

### a) Ambitious and concrete environmental protection of oceans

Healthy oceans are vital to humanity and to the resilience of the communities that depend on them. The EU is a pioneer in protecting marine ecosystems through the environmental regulations it has put in place and the ambitious targets it has already set: climate neutrality by 2050, reduction of plastic pollution, measures to protect ecosystems, and adaptation of industry to these targets.

- > The EPP Group supports a balanced approach for the EU to continue its efforts without jeopardising its competitiveness. To do this, the emphasis must be on encouraging commitments from other stakeholders on a global scale. The EU cannot reverse the trend alone, and the Ocean Pact is an opportunity to convince all our partners and interlocutors in international fora.
- > The EPP Group encourages the ratification of the BBNJ Treaty while ensuring that this treaty does not undermine the RFMOs, concludes the plastics treaty (UN) and continues efforts to find an agreement on harmful fishing subsidies (WTO).
- > The EPP Group advocates moving forward in the fight against land-based pollution discharged into the sea and pollution of coastal waters, and pushes for the adoption of worldwide coherent circular economy legislation adapted to the oceans.
- > The EPP Group supports Commissioner Costas Kadić's declarations on a case-by-case approach (based on science, with impact assessments) for conservation and management measures in the MPAs to the concrete needs of ecosystems. The EPP insists that these measures be developed in cooperation with stakeholders on the ground, particularly fishers, in order to avoid disproportionate regulations that could severely affect local sectors. The EPP Group calls for special attention to fight invasive species; for instance, through biosecurity measures and cross-border cooperation. The EPP Group advocates applying environmental standards uniformly across all sectors, not

only to primary producers, in accordance with international commitments.

- > The EPP believes it is essential that nature restoration objectives must be compatible with the continuity of sustainable economic activities and calls for flexible criteria in their implementation.

### b) Scientific knowledge is key to fill the knowledge gap

We know less about the deep sea than we do about the surface of the Moon: we need to fill the knowledge gap about marine and coastal ecosystems. Scientific research should help avoid arbitrary decisions in managing human activities, particularly in fishing, and boost innovation and the development of marine biotech.

- > The EPP Group proposes to create a European Ocean Observatory and a European Deep-sea Observatory to foster cooperation in EU research and innovation, to strengthen marine scientific cooperation and reinforce European oceanography initiatives (Mercator, Starfish 2030, Digital Ocean Twin, etc.).
- > Taking into account the EU's needs for scientific projects, anticipating the changing migration patterns of species due to climate change, as well as the challenge of coastal erosion on an international level. Therefore, the EPP Group urges Member States and the Commission to facilitate the hiring of top scientists who have been dismissed by the US administration, allowing them to contribute their expertise to the EU.
- > On the international stage, the EPP Group supports an Ocean Pact that promotes the Convention on Biological Diversity, encourages research on the seabed, and upholds the moratorium on deep-sea mining and exploitation. This moratorium should remain in effect until the impacts of deep-sea mining on the marine environment, biodiversity, and human activities at sea have been studied thoroughly. Deep seabed mining must be managed to ensure no loss of marine biodiversity or degradation of marine ecosystems. The EPP Group insists on close oversight by all EU delegations in coastal third countries, ensuring that these delegations possess adequate expertise in fisheries and maritime affairs.
- > The EPP Group encourages Member States that are in a position to extend their continental shelf to work with



the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf, as several Member States have already done.

- > The EPP Group also calls for promoting ocean literacy and educating citizens about the role of the ocean (for example, with “Blue Schools” and “Blue Erasmus” initiatives).

## 5. Marine ambitions for the resilience of coastal communities

### a) Ensuring financial resources for people

Proper financing is important to match its ambitions and undertake its maritime leadership.

- > The EPP Group calls on the European Commission to conduct a comprehensive analysis of all existing ocean-related measures and funds with the aim to strengthen and simplify access to EMFAF funds, as well as to increase funds, particularly for investment in research and scientific cooperation as well as to enhance public support for fisheries policies and public funds, such as the Innovation Fund, Horizon Europe, ESF, STEP, EMFAF, Competitiveness Fund, and POSEI for fisheries in the ORs. These funds represent a critical lever and guarantee.
- > The EPP Group calls on the European Commission to facilitate access to EMFAF funds for SMEs and to ensure that appropriate resources are allocated to fishing and aquaculture.
- > Another priority for the EPP Group is to offer investment facilities to attract the private capital needed to face new sector challenges while considering Foreign Direct Investments (FDIs) in sensitive and strategic EU companies and essential infrastructures such as ports to be screened via the EU FDI screening mechanism.
- > The EPP Group insists on involving the European Investment Bank as an investment facilitator in projects linked to the Blue Economy, decarbonisation or aquaculture.
- > The EPP Group calls for tailored financial support schemes that prioritise the resilience of vulnerable fishing-dependent

communities, including transitional support for those impacted by quota redistribution or structural decline. This should include social innovation, training, and the development of community-led local development strategies focused on retaining young people and enhancing social infrastructure.

### b) Bolstering the Outermost Regions

The EU's EEZ largely relies on the Outermost Regions (ORs), which give the EU a presence in all the world's oceans.

- > The EPP Group considers ORs essential to the EU's maritime dimension and must be valued at their true worth and stands by their side as they face specific challenges, as referred to in Article 349 TFEU.
- > The EPP Group supports the creation of a programme of options specifically relating to remoteness and insularity (POSEI) for fisheries and aquaculture, similar to that of agriculture.
- > In order to ensure the survival of the fisheries sector in the ORs and in compliance with the principles of differential treatment for small islands and territories mentioned in SDG 14, the EPP Group supports the renewal of the ORs fishing fleet, which contributes to local sustainable development.