

The EU Ocean Act

Position paper - 9th February 2026

How can the EU Ocean Act effectively address marine plastic pollution?

1. Pollution prevention must be a key principle in the EU Ocean Act

Ocean pollution arises from multiple sources, spanning from maritime and offshore activities as well as from human activities on land, which account for most of the volumes. All those sources need to be addressed with ambitious and complementary legal requirements across the EU:

- Plastic pollution from shipping (chronic container loss, paint releases from vessel coatings, greywater discharges...), offshore platforms and maritime tourism
- Riverine litter
- Microplastic pollution originating from the degradation of marine litter (tyres, textiles, paint, polystyrene, pellets...)
- Chemical pollution of all sorts
- Bacteria release and invasive species,
- Under water noise,
- Cumulative plastic pollution pressure in ports and coastal waters from concentrated maritime activities and land-sea interactions.

Multiple legislative and non-legislative steps have been taken in previous mandates to try and address marine pollution, notably the 2018 Plastics Strategy. However, an overall framework with clear, quantitative and enforceable targets to achieve a plastic pollution free ocean is still missing. The Ocean Act offers a critical opportunity to create a coherent and ambitious ocean protection framework, aligning complementary regulatory tools to tackle all pollution sources in a preventative and coordinated manner.

Mitigation must also be strategic and tailored to different sectors and pollution pathways, recognising that risks and solutions vary across the plastics lifecycle and other pollutant streams. Prevention at source should be prioritised, rather than relying on costly retrieval techniques once pollution has entered the environment. Retrieval may play a minor role in dealing with historical waste hotspots at the end of pipe, provided it can be carried out in an ecologically sensitive manner, but provides no solution to the problem.

2. Sector specific legislation is not enough

Despite the EU having adopted landmark legislation to address marine litter pollution, first with the single-use plastics Directive in 2019 then a Regulation on plastic production pellets last year, marine litter from plastics remain a problem with 14 million tonnes still entering the EU seas every year. Pollution prevention must be tackled upstream with strong requirements on product design, resource reduction and non-toxic products.

Effective implementation of EU legislative measures requires dedicated EU funding to support delivery on the ground. The EU Single-Use Plastic Directive illustrates this challenge. While it requires awareness-raising measures at national level without providing any dedicated source of funding, leading to some Member States delegating their responsibility on awareness measures to national packaging industry awareness schemes, which were only aiming at securing high collection rates and therefore not fulfilling the expected awareness goals of the SUP Directive.



As far as funding of pollution prevention is concerned, too much focus has been put on de-pollution and clean-up technological developments through R&D programmes such as Horizon Europe. Although such funding is relevant to support scientific research, it is not intended to provide funding for prevention activities and the upscaling of best practices at the local level.

The Ocean Act offers a key opportunity to close these gaps by aligning EU and national prevention activities, with dedicated EU funding beyond R&D Horizon funding and the EU legislation for sustainable product and zero-pollution.

3. What are the challenges and main solution to invisible microplastic pollution?

Microplastic pollution, being largely invisible to the naked eye, has been overlooked for decades despite becoming widespread, stemming from a diversity of economic sectors including textile manufacturing, road transport, building and construction, shipping, tourism, as well as the fragmentation of larger plastic items with ageing or once left in the open environment.

The main challenge of microplastic pollution is that it cannot be effectively removed once released into the environment. Recent plastic pellet spills in Spain and the UK illustrate the scale, complexity and astronomical cost of clean-up operations, reinforcing the need for prevention at source rather than attempting to clean up the contaminated environment.

Another challenge has been making this largely invisible threat visible to policymakers and the public. Environmental and marine NGOs have played a key role in through dedicated events, film screenings, exhibitions, awareness activities and scientific literature reviews such as the one conducted by Seas At Risk in 2021 on the impacts of microplastics on the marine environment.

In 2022, Rethink Plastic alliance members jointly published in 2022 a detailed briefing on How EU policy can tackle microplastic pollution, which is available on our website and provides recommendations to reduce the various related pollution sources at their origin.

4. Quantitative EU targets on marine plastic pollution

The Ocean Act should include EU-wide, time-bound and quantitative targets for marine plastic pollution, to trigger meaningful prevention activities across Europe:

- Reduction of marine litter by 50% by 2030,
- Reduction of microplastic emissions by 30% by 2030,
- A progressive phasing out of single-use plastics in the revised SUP Directive,
- Quantitative targets for the collection of waste fishing and aquaculture gear by 2030.

These targets must be time-bound, measurable and enforceable.

In addition, we recommend establishing 2040 targets to set a clear medium-term vision towards a plastic-pollution-free ocean by 2050.

Binding EU-wide targets on plastic pollution reduction will set a clear trajectory, guide investment and policymaking and strengthen the effective adoption and implementation of measures needed to achieve these overall goals, alongside sector-specific objectives.



5. Main recommendations:

Marine plastic and microplastic pollution must be addressed across all responsible economic sectors by implementing a common preventative approach to cut the pollution at source.

Clear links should be established between existing legislative measures and available EU funding sources to support implementation and upscaling of effective tools and activities on the ground.

Finally, setting ambitious and timebound quantitative targets at EU level will be essential to drive meaningful and coordinated action across Europe.