Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership

Digitalisation and Innovation for Resilient Marine Ecosystems Businesses, and Communities to Strengthen the EU Blue Economy's Competitiveness

Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership

Third Joint Transnational Co-funded Call

SBEP Call 2025

Call launch: 15 September 2025
Submission platform (EPSS): https://proposals.etag.ee/sustainable-blue/2025
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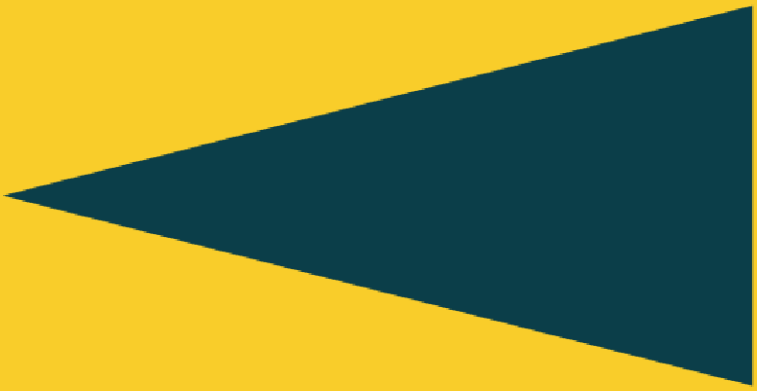

2025 Joint Transnational Co-Funded Call

Title: Digitalisation and Innovation for Resilient Marine Ecosystems, Businesses, and Communities to Strengthen the EU Blue Economy's Competitiveness

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ACRONYMS

PFO	Participant funding organisations
CSC	Call Steering Committee
COIs	Conflict of Interest
IEC	International Evaluation Committee
EC	European Commission
ER	Evaluation Report
ESR	Evaluation Summary Report
GVA	Gross Value Added
JCS	Joint Call Secretariat
SRIA	Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda
HE	Horizon Europe

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1.0 PREAMBLE

1.1 Background

«Oceans and seas play an important role for Europe's prosperity, sustainability and security, including in their unique ability to regulate the climate as the planet's largest carbon sink. Action to preserve our oceans is vital, both today and for future generations» (COM(2025) 45 final[1]).

The EU Blue Economy report (2025)[2] highlights that «The Blue Economy sectors play an increasingly important role in achieving the European Commission's key priorities to make the EU more competitive, sustainable, resilient and secure». According to this report, the EU Blue Economy sectors[3] in 2022 employed about 4.82 million people, produced a turnover of €890.6 billion and a gross value added of €250.7 billion. Importantly to note, offshore wind is identified as one the fastest growing sectors in the EU economy as a whole whilst coastal tourism remains the largest sector in the blue economy; in 2022 it represents 53% of total EU Blue Economy's employment and 33% of its total GVA. The report also highlights that the blue economy and its growth has however been recently impacted by external factors e.g. geopolitical context (e.g. Brexit, Ukraine war, energy crisis, Middle East crisis, trade disruptions in the Red Sea, recent protectionist measures by trading partners), environmental disasters (e.g. coastal floodings), COVID-19 pandemic, in a context of cumulative pressures including accelerating climate change, environmental degradation, anthropogenic activities etc.

1 COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS Commission work programme 2025 Moving forward together: A Bolder, Simpler, Faster Union. COM/2025/45 final.
2 European Commission: Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, Borriello, A., Calvo Santos, A., Feyen, L., Ghiani, M. et al., The EU blue economy report 2025, Publications Office of the European Union, 2025, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2771/2333701
3 The following sectors are considered: Marine living resources, Marine non-living resources, Marine renewable energy, Port activities, Shipbuilding and repair, Maritime transport and Coastal tourism.

This Blue Economy report (2024)[4] emphasises the need for a sustainable approach, adaptation to climate change, and integration of marine ecosystem services in the management of our marine resources, with a focus on nature-based solutions and sustainable blue growth'; it also highlights a key sector i.e. the 'ocean energy' in which 'the EU is leader in technology development (i.e. energy development from waves, tides, offshore wind) with the goal of integrating these renewable sources into the broader energy landscape to meet its renewable energy targets and climate objectives'. Yet, the Blue Economy report (2025) emphasizes the structural weaknesses in the EU economy to be addressed, the slow innovation and lack of business dynamism[5] and named the key focus areas of the new European Commission: competitiveness, security and climate.

In that context, «the European Ocean Pact» will allow Europe to leverage its vast maritime area and coastline to boost innovation through new blue technologies, regenerative blue economy, clean energy production and food security»[6], and «*will create a unified framework for ocean policies, aiming to preserve ocean health and boost the EU blue economy»*[7].

1.2 Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership

The Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership (SBEP, hereafter 'the Partnership') is a Research and Innovation (R&I) Partnership started in 2022 under the Horizon Europe Programme, and is part of the Cluster 6 (Food, Bioeconomy, Natural Resources, Agriculture and Environment).

4 European Commission: Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, Borriello, A., Calvo Santos, A., Codina López, L., Feyen, L. et al., The EU blue economy report 2024, Publications Office of the European Union, 2024, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2771/186064

5 5 Autumn 2024 Economic Forecast: A gradual rebound in an adverse environment - European Commission

6 COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS A Competitiveness Compass for the EU, Brussels, 29.1.2025 COM(2025) 30 final

7 European Commission – Press release. A bolder, simpler, faster Union: the 2025 Commission work programme Brussels, 12 February 2025. https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/document/print/en/ip_25_466/IP_25_466_EN.pdf&ved=2ahUKEwi18Ln_xqKMAxUDfKQEHWCINEYQFnoECA8QAQ&usg=AOvVaw0QyiIg96jR1LX8lSxnGGHT

The vision of the Partnership, defined in the Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda 2024[8] is to:

- *"Design, steer and support a just and inclusive transition to a regenerative, resilient, and sustainable blue economy.*
- *Boost the transformation needed towards a climate-neutral, sustainable, productive, and competitive blue economy by 2030*
- *Create, enhance and sustain ocean health and the social, environmental and economic well-being of the people by 2050".*

The Partnership, composed by 30 countries, pledges to leverage sustainable solutions to boost the green and digital transitions of economic activities related to the ocean, seas and coasts. It aims to strengthen European Union (EU) Blue Economy through national, regional, and EU R&I priorities alignment, pooling efforts (in-kind/in-cash contributions), together with the European Commission, to jointly enable R&I cooperation, and to bring together multi-sector stakeholders across Europe and beyond, in science, industry, policy, and civil society to ultimately co-deliver impact-oriented solutions including cutting-edge, disruptive, market-oriented innovations (technological, nature-based, social, economic and cultural), to achieve a healthy ocean, a sustainable and productive blue economy and the well-being of citizens. It also fully embraces the ambitions of the European Commission as described in the COM(2021)249 final[9], is linked to the objectives of the EU Mission "Restore our Ocean and Waters by 2030"[10], and falls into the strategic priorities of the OECD (2025) [11] to help achieve a productive and environmentally sustainable ocean economy i.e. Strengthening ocean governance and regulatory frameworks, promoting technological innovation and digital transformation, enhancing

[8] Benjamin Kürten, Margherita Cappelletto, Margherita Zorgno, Giorgio Carpino, Anne Magnussøn, Jon Flæten, Marianne Areng (2024) Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership – Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda 2024.DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14243414
9 https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM%3A2021%3A240%3AFIN
10 https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe/eu-missions-horizon-europe/restore-our-ocean-and-waters_en
11 OECD (2025), The Ocean Economy to 2050, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/a9096fb1-en.

ocean observation data collection and scientific research, and ensuring the inclusion of developing countries in global value chains.

Perceived as 'The Blue Arm of the Green Deal', the Partnership responds to the goals of EU Policies e.g. the European Green Deal[12], Digital Europe[13], the Marine Strategy Framework Directive[14] and it adheres to the transformation of Europe's blue economy towards climate-neutral status by 2050, the Zero Pollution vision for 2050: a Healthy planet for All[15], and the 2030 Climate Target Plan[16]. It stands to strengthen the EU and international science-policy interfaces in marine- and maritime-related domains of other EU Policies (e.g. European Climate Law[17], EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030[18], Farm to Fork Strategy[19], Next Generation EU[20], the Circular Economy Action Plan[21], the Eighth Environment Action Programme[22]), and marine regulatory legislations (e.g. Marine

12European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Social and Economic Committee and the Committee of the Regions: The European Green Deal, COM(2019) 640 final.
https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52019DC0640
13Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: 2030 Digital Compass - the European way for the Digital Decade, COM/2021/118 final. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:12e835e2-81af-11eb-9ac9-01aa75ed71a1.0001.02/DOC_1&format=PDF
14 Consolidated text: Directive 2008/56/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 June 2008 establishing a framework for community action in the field of marine environmental policy (Marine Strategy Framework Directive) (Text with EEA relevance) ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2008/56/2017-06-07
15 Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Pathway to a Healthy Planet for All EU Action Plan: 'Towards Zero Pollution for Air, Water and Soil' COM/2021/400 final https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52021DC0400
16 Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Stepping up Europe's 2030 climate ambition Investing in a climate-neutral future for the benefit of our people
COM/2020/562 final
17 Proposal for a Regulation establishing the framework for achieving climate neutrality and amending Regulation (EU) 2018/1999 (European Climate Law). COM(2020) 80 final. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020PC0080
18 Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 Bringing nature back into our lives COM/2020/380 final https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0380
19 https://food.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2020-05/f2f_action-plan_2020_strategy-info_en.pdf
20 Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: The EU budget powering the recovery plan for Europe, COM/2020/442 final. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM%3A2020%3A442%3AFIN
21 https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1583933814386&uri=COM:2020:98:FIN
22 Decision (EU) 2022/591 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 6 April 2022 on a General Union Environment Action Programme to 2030. http://data.europa.eu/eli/dec/2022/591/oj

Strategy Framework Directive[23], Nature Restoration Regulation[24], Common Fisheries Policy[25]). The Partnership also aims to connect, build synergies and create complementarities with others EU Partnerships (e.g. Animal Health and Welfare, Rescuing biodiversity to safeguard life on Earth (Biodiversa+), Clean Energy Transitions (CETP), Driving Urban Transitions (DUT), FutureFoodS, Water Security for the Planet (Water4All), Zero Emission Waterborne Transport (ZEWT), key initiatives (e.g. JPI Oceans) and others Horizon Europe programmes, including the EU Mission Restore our Ocean and Waters, and its area-based Mission 'lighthouses'.

The 2025 Joint Call is the third Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership call, bringing together financial resources at both national and regional levels, facilitated by 38 Participating Funding Organisations (PFOs) from 28 countries, with combined contribution from the European Union. These PFOs play a crucial role in funding research and innovation initiatives related to the blue economy.

The Intervention Areas of the Partnership link the high-level SRIA and the practical implementation through R&I calls and other activities. They provide actionable routes and concrete steps to approach the range of challenges, tensions, and opportunities that the Blue Economy is facing. Five Intervention areas were defined as the basis for Partnership activities for 2025[26].

1. *Digital Twins- development and use*
2. *Transitioning Blue Economy Sectors*
3. *Managing Sea Uses*
4. *Blue Bioresources*
5. *Resilient Coastal Communities and Businesses*

[23] Directive 2008/56/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 June 2008 establishing a framework for community action in the field of marine environmental policy (Marine Strategy Framework Directive) (Text with EEA relevance) https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32008L0056

24 https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/nature-and-biodiversity/nature-restoration-law_and and Nature restoration: Council and Parliament reach agreement on new rules to restore and preserve degraded habitats in the EU - Consilium (europa.eu)

25 https://oceans-and-fisheries.ec.europa.eu/policy/common-fisheries-policy-cfp_en

26 Intervention Areas - 2025: https://www.bluepartnership.eu/about

These intervention areas point to the need for R&I activities and investments that, each in their own way, support the necessary transition into a green and digital ocean economy.

The Partnership supports and contributes to the vision and ambitions of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Sustainable Development Goals[27], primarily to SDG 14 (Life Below Water), and to the challenges of the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development[28].

This R&I call is co-branded as part of the UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development, which is coordinated by UNESCO's Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC/UNESCO) on behalf of the UN system, with the aim that the selected funded research and innovation projects are endorsed as Ocean Decade projects. The UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (the Ocean Decade) is calling for a transformation in the generation and use of ocean research. To reverse the cycle of decline in ocean health, the Ocean Decade strives for an increased understanding and sustainable management of the ocean, seas, and coasts. To that effect, it provides a convening framework for scientists and stakeholders from diverse sectors to co-design and co-deliver the scientific knowledge and the partnerships needed to accelerate advances in ocean science. The Ocean Decade has a focus on inclusive and transformative science and aims to ensure that no one is left behind.

The development of the knowledge and solutions needed to underpin a transition to a sustainable ocean economy is one of ten Ocean Decade Challenges that the Decade aims to achieve by 2030. The UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development is co-branding this call as a means of stimulating new initiatives in co-designed and co-delivered knowledge and solutions for a sustainable ocean economy as part of the Ocean Decade Action Framework.

The co-branding of this call with the Ocean Decade will ensure that funded projects that are endorsed as Decade Actions form part of a highly visible, shared, global effort that

27 UN General Assembly (2015) Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, A/RES/70/1. https://www.refworld.org/legal/resolution/unga/2015/en/111816.
28 https://oceandecade.org/challenges/

opens up opportunities to create new collaborations across disciplines, geographies and generations, and to establish access to new sources of support.

Evaluation of applications to this call will involve, as observer(s), representative(s) of the Decade Coordination Unit that is housed within IOC/UNESCO, the UN agency leading implementation of the Decade. The involvement of the DCU representative(s) will allow to estimate if the selected research projects align with the endorsement criteria for Decade Actions.

Proponents of endorsed Decade Actions will be able to use the Ocean Decade branding in their communications and awareness-raising activities in accordance with Decade Brand Guidelines keeping in mind that the beneficiaries must respect the obligation to put the EU emblem and the other logos of the national funding agencies which are funding the project. Furthermore, proponents of the successful proposals will be invited to become members of the Ocean Decade Network. DCU will take care during the evaluation process to evaluate and attribute the endorsement as UN Ocean Decade Actions. Projects proposed for funding should contribute to the following endorsement criteria of the UN Ocean Decade which are shared with the objectives of the EU SBEP Initiative:

- Contribute to one or more Decade Challenges and one or more Decade objectives;
- Accelerate the generation or use of knowledge and understanding of the ocean, with a specific focus on knowledge that will contribute to the achievement of the SDGs and complementary policy frameworks and initiatives;
- Are co-designed and/or co-delivered by knowledge generators and users, and thus facilitating the uptake of science and ocean knowledge for policy, decision-making, management and/or innovation;
- Ensure that all data and resulting knowledge are provided in an open access, shared, discoverable manner;
- Strengthen existing or creates new partnerships across nations and/or between diverse ocean actors, including users of ocean science;
- Overcome barriers to diversity and equity, including gender, generational and geographic diversity;
- Collaborate with and engage local and indigenous knowledge holders.

Further information on the Ocean Decade and the endorsement process can be found here: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000377082.locale=en

All endorsed projects under the Ocean Decade are asked to report on their progress to demonstrate impact, foster accountability, and drive adaptive management. By

systematically tracking progress the reporting helps identify gaps, inform strategic priorities, and mobilize resources ensuring that the Decade remains responsive to emerging needs and continues to drive transformative change in ocean science and sustainability. The reporting is done once a year from January to April/May and is responsibility of the focal points of Decade Actions.

2.0 JOINT CALL DESCRIPTION

2.1 Requirements

Projects submitted under this call must carefully consider the following elements:

2.1.1 Impact-driven and Theory of Change

Projects in this call must be impact-driven contributions to the transformation into a blue economy for a more resilient future and towards carbon neutrality targets, following an impact pathway approach. Applicants are required to propose an impact plan under the theory of change (see section 2.3 – Impact of the proposals, and Annex A).

2.1.2 Connectivity and synergies

Multi-stakeholders engagement & Inter- and trans-transdisciplinary

Under this call, the direct involvement of stakeholders from all relevant scientific disciplines to favour inter- and multi-disciplinary approaches, industry partners, society, and policy stakeholders, in the projects to be funded, is required. Each consortium should have at least one partner from the quadruple-helix[29] and a description of how their proposal meets this ambition. Stakeholder engagement will be positively evaluated to enhance innovation, policy, and societal relevance and ultimately, to increase the impact of the projects.

[29] A quadruple-helix collaboration ('QHC') is a form of collaboration in research and development between the four major sectors of society: industry, government, research institutes, and the public. For more information, please consult the report entitled 'Quadruple Helix Collaborations in Practice: Stakeholder Interaction, Responsibility and Governance' from RICONFIGURE (https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/documents/downloadPublic?documentIds=080166e5e4d98f00&appId=PPGMS)

Citizen Participation and Ocean Literacy

Transitioning to a sustainable blue economy requires that those working in or entering blue economy sectors have the knowledge and skills to make informed and responsible decisions that balance economic development with ocean health. Promoting ocean literacy through the lens of the Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership aims to ensure that researchers, industry professionals, entrepreneurs, policymakers and students understand their role in the sustainable blue economy.

Recognised as a cross-cutting enabler in the Partnership's Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda, ocean literacy plays a crucial role for bridging research and innovation and practical implementation, with tangible societal benefits. Engaging key stakeholders through effective communication and participatory approaches strengthens the uptake of sustainable solutions and ensures that findings resonate beyond the scientific community.

To maximise the impact of funded projects, applicants are strongly encouraged to integrate ocean literacy and citizen participation activities to communicate around the importance of their activities and involving relevant stakeholders. Such projects will benefit from stronger societal impact and enhanced visibility. Applicants are encouraged to include activities such as:

- *Public and industry-focused outreach campaigns to promote sustainable practices and engage sector-specific stakeholders (e.g., workshops, social media engagement, storytelling initiatives);*
- *Citizen science initiatives, where researchers, policymakers and industry actors collaborate to improve e.g., data collection and monitoring;*
- *Educational programmes targeting students and emerging professionals in relevant blue economy sectors;*
- *Partnerships with industry, NGOs, local authorities, and media to ensure research findings inform blue economy policies and business models.*

To support applicants in integrating these elements, the Partnership has developed an Ocean Literacy toolkit [30], offering insights and resources on ocean literacy and public engagement in the blue economy.

Links to EU policies and other EU initiatives

Applications should describe how they relate to the different EU policies described in the context and objectives of the Joint Call. The Partnership develops a cross-sectoral and transdisciplinary approach, it is thus expected that projects will connect and complement other EU initiatives. For instance, at the regional or sea basin level, complementarities, and synergies with the EU Mission 'Restore our Oceans and Waters by 2030 and its lighthouses will be requested as well as joint possible valorisation of the outcomes, tools and solutions

[30] The Ocean Literacy Toolkit

being developed by the projects. The users of the outcomes should be identified in the application and involved from the outset of the project. Applicants are also required to interact and collaborate with projects from other EU Partnerships and funding programmes (e.g. Horizon Europe Cluster 6 and others), and to EU initiatives and organisations related to ocean observations, data management or marine research (e.g. EU Copernicus Marine Service, European Marine Observation and Data Network –EMODnet-, European Global Ocean Observation System –EuroGOOS-, Wise Marine, etc.).

Involvement in the Partnership's others activities

Applicants are expected to get involved in the relevant Partnership's activities: training, communication and dissemination (symposium, conferences, etc.) and must foresee the costs in their budget (see further details in 5.3). Notably, the Partnership aims to build Portfolios of projects which address similar thematic, and/or in the same regional area, regardless of the source of funding, in order to create synergies, foster networking and increase cooperation between ongoing projects and to enhance the collective impacts and accelerate the co-design of marine solutions and innovations to reach carbon neutrality.

2.1.3 Human Capacity Enhancement

Enhancing human capacity in the sustainable blue economy is essential for driving its long-term success. Human capacity enhancement aims to strengthen the skills, abilities and resources needed to adapt and thrive in specific sectors and to address challenges, and is identified as a cross-cutting enabler supporting the transition to a sustainable blue economy in the Partnership's Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda. In the scope of the Partnership's activities, human capacity enhancement can create sustainable employment opportunities through training, reskilling and upskilling of people in emerging blue economy sectors and align higher-education curricula with blue economy needs and goals. More broadly, it contributes to fostering interdisciplinary collaboration and promoting knowledge exchange that will not only benefit individual projects but also ensure that research outcomes translate into impact.

To maximise the effectiveness of funded projects, applicants are strongly encouraged to integrate human capacity-enhancing activities into their proposals. Examples of such activities include:

- *Academic and professional training programmes, workshops, and online courses to build expertise in sustainable blue economy practices;*
- *Staff exchanges and mobility schemes between academia, industry and policy institutions to foster cross-sectoral knowledge transfer;*
- *Targeted activities for underrepresented groups and regions, ensuring equitable participation across sea basins;*
- *Knowledge transfer activities to maximise the impact of project results;*
- *Partnerships with industry, NGOs and policymakers to facilitate real-world application of research results and promote career development.*

By embedding these elements into project design, applicants will increase stakeholder engagement, enhance project scalability, and contribute to a skilled workforce that can sustain and expand the impact of blue economy innovations. To support applications, the Partnership provides a list of activities here: link to the annex on activities in Deliverable 7.5 if published

2.1.4 Geographical reach

As an HE instrument, the Partnership's geographical reach spans EU and adjacent waters in the regional sea basins bordering the EU, namely the Atlantic and Arctic Ocean, Baltic Sea, Black Sea, Mediterranean Sea, and North Sea.

To bridge the sea-basins, enhance regional connectivity, and increase the R&I impacts, the proposals are strongly recommended to consider a minimum of two EU sea basins which are: the Atlantic Ocean, Baltic Sea, Black Sea, Mediterranean Sea, and North Sea, and to assess the project proposal's impact and potential replication/scalability on various sea basins. Proposals can target European regional seas such as Adriatic Sea, Aegean Sea, the Arctic, Barents Sea, Celtic Sea, etc. but they must be from a minimum of 2 different EU Sea basins.

2.1.5 EU taxonomy compliance

As this partnership falls under Horizon Europe Programme, all proposals must be aligned accordingly with the EU Taxonomy[31]. Research and Innovation (R&I) produces the technologies and solutions of tomorrow and will therefore play an important role to help economic actors reach or go beyond the standards and thresholds set in the EU Taxonomy and help keeping the Taxonomy criteria up to date and consistent with the European Green Deal objectives. The EU Taxonomy sets performance thresholds (referred to as 'technical screening criteria') for economic activities that:

- Make a substantial contribution to at least one of six environmental objectives
- Do no significant harm (DNSH) to the other five objectives, and;

31 The EU Taxonomy Regulation adopted in June 2020 is a tool that will help investors, industry and researchers to navigate the transition to a sustainable economy by providing a science-based classification system to determine whether an economic activity is environmentally sustainable. https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/news/all-research-and-innovation-news/research-and-innovation-heart-eu-taxonomy-2021-04-21_en and https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-04/ec_rtd_research-innovation-eu-taxonomy.pdf

- Meet minimum social safeguards such as the OECD Guidelines on Multinational Enterprises and the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

2.2 Priority areas

The third Joint Co-funded Call within the Partnership is entitled **"Digitalisation and Innovation for Resilient Marine Ecosystems, Businesses, and Communities to Strengthen the EU Blue Economy Competitiveness**" and encompasses all the five Intervention Areas converted for this call into five priority areas as follows:

- ***Priority area 1:*** *Digital Twins of the Ocean (DTOs) at sub-basin scale*
- ***Priority area 2:*** *Transitioning the blue economy sectors, and the development of the coexistence and the marine multi-use infrastructures*
- ***Priority area 3:*** *Climate-Smart Planning and managing sea-uses at the regional level*
- ***Priority area 4:*** *Blue Bioresources; sustainable fisheries and aquaculture, and new bio-based products*
- ***Priority area 5:*** *Resilient Coastal Communities and Businesses*

Each of these areas contributes directly to one or more of the Ocean Decade Challenges, supporting actionable knowledge generation, policy uptake, capacity development, and inclusive innovation in the blue economy context.

2.2.1 Digital Twins of the Ocean (DTOs) at sub-basin scale

Under this priority area, projects will contribute to improve the ocean knowledge through the digitalisation of the ocean in the framework of the new approach for a sustainable blue economy in the EU (COM(2021)249 final). Projects funded under the Partnership will specifically focus upon the development, validation, or use of digital twin Ocean applications on spatially limited areas, at local scale, within the EU sub-sea-basins covered by the Partnership.

The overall objective is to develop holistic types of DTOs that offer realistic and interactive digital representations based on data-driven models and observations of all relevant processes/systems using a multidisciplinary perspective (*e.g.* physics, biochemistry, socio-economy environmental ecology) that will provide answers to "what-if" questions in

the context of ocean development, sustainable blue economy activities and effective maritime spatial planning under climate, natural and anthopogenic-induced changes.

User expectations shall be understood to co-develop DTO applications, as intelligent decision-support systems (DSS), that respond to the needs and requirements from a multi-stakeholders/end-users perspective at local level (civil society, entrepreneurs, industries, researchers, and policymakers). Stakeholder engagement, and inputs from the relevant communities are hence expected for-co-building user-driven models that will turn data into knowledge to make science-based and informed decisions to tackle common challenges such as the development of mitigation and adaptation measures in coastal regions to climate change.

The tools must be user-friendly, provide rapid analysis, and dynamic visualisation of the data and forecasts. Their limitations (e.g. risks and uncertainties) must also be investigated to ensure a responsible usage of the tools to make informed management decisions in order to ensure a safe, healthy, and productive ocean.

Reliable, high-quality, harmonised, interoperable and accessible ocean data are the prerequisite for a sustainable transformation of the blue economy **(**COM(2021)249 final)**.** Projects will thus have to address the multiple challenges related to the datasets acquired through monitoring, observation, research in regards to their collection, treatment, availability, storage, quality check, dissemination, gaps, analysis, that will feed the DTOs through artificial intelligence and/or data assimilation.

Projects must clearly justify the sub-basin chosen for their study case, the forecasting periods considering the existing high-resolution, transdisciplinary data accuracy and availability of the targeted systems.

The following targeted research directions, to be considered in the proposal formulation, are presented hereafter. Projects need to develop AI data driven and/or physics-based models' solutions and to address one or more of the following topics including a multi-actor approach:

- *To transform data into knowledge, and ultimately build DTOs, real-time and historical data must be used for scenarios models.* ***A mapping and analysis of the relevant, existing, available traceable, and reliable multi-dimensional data from several sources in the targeted sub-basin is necessary. This will allow to identify data gaps and to evaluate data uncertainties.*** *In addition, the holistic DTO-approach implies an understanding of the trade-offs and risks associated to the holistic management of the sub-basing study case, that will allow identifying needs for advancing fit-for-purpose observations and models where existing models do not apply.*
- *To fill critical data gaps, missing models, and alleviate the risks of uncertainties,* ***innovative methods aiming to acquire quality-controlled data through newly implemented fit-for-purpose monitoring and/or observation systems can be proposed.*** *In that perspective,* ***new sensors, digital systems and high technical developments can be envisaged in R&I proposals.***
- *A step further consists in developing and combining process -driven and (new or existing) data-driven dynamic models relevant to the sub-basin. For that purpose,* ***general frameworks for exchanging information between models are expected.***
- *Test and validation of model's predictions should be addressed, and the development of DTO tools for the end-users can be foreseen by the applicants.*

Projects submitted under this priority area must support and help achieve the objectives of the EU Digital strategy, the EU Green Deal, the European Ocean Pact[32], the Water Resilience Stategy, the Marine Strategy Framework Directive and other EU policies in all relevant areas including environment, climate, energy, fisheries, transport. Applicants are expected to clearly explain how they plan to build synergies, and to develop close scientific and expert cooperation and coordination with other ongoing and planned DTO initiatives under Horizon Europe actions (Cluster 6), notably under the EU Mission "Restore our Ocean and Waters" and relevant lighthouses, , and other EU and national/international projects and activities as detailed on European DTO (e.g. Blue-Cloud 2026[33]), to ensure appropriate timing, complementarities, convergence, and interoperability. Proposals are

[32] COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS The European Ocean Pact COM/2025/281 final, EUR-Lex - 52025DC0281 - EN - EUR-Lex

33 https://blue-cloud.org/

strongly encouraged to use and contribute with their outcomes to the developments of European Digital Twin of the Ocean, EU DTO[34] (and of Destination Earth[35] when relevant).

Applicants are also encouraged to make connection with previous projects funded under this partnership, and with the other partnership Water4All to consider inputs from the watershed and to be connected to their data sharing tools.

Applicants must describe how they will apply the FAIR (findable, accessible, interoperable, reusable) principles and notably ensure that their data (from in-situ observations, monitoring etc.) will follow common standards, avoid duplication and be made openly available to the relevant EU DTO core data infrastructures, services like the European Marine Observation and Data network, e.g. EMODnet[36], Copernicus Marine Service[37], ocean related ESFRI research infrastructures, and contribute to improving the EU observing system under European Ocean Observing Systems (EOOS[38]) framework.

2.2.2 Transitioning the blue economy sectors and the development of marine multi-use infrastructures

In 2023, the employment of the EU blue economy of established sectors is estimated to 4.89 million people [39], whilst GVA reached 263 €billion [40]. The blue economy is expected to evolve, grow and develop cross-sectoral technological innovations to ensure its ongoing green and digital transition and its sustainability, circularity and carbon neutrality, but also its safety in operation. At the same time, the resilience of the blue economy is challenged by the cumulative impact on the environment of economic activities (e.g. pollution, over exploitation of resources etc.), climate change effects and associated major threats like biodiversity loss (COM(2021) 240 final). As complex multi-actor social-ecological systems, blue economy activities, especially in the context of the development of coexisting multi-use of the sea/ocean and marine/maritime infrastructures, also face challenges related to

34 https://www.edito.eu/
35 https://destination-earth.eu/
36 EMODnet Ingestion (emodnet-ingestion.eu)
37 https://www.mercator-ocean.eu/digital-twin-ocean/
38 https://www.eoos-ocean.eu/
39 European Commission: Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, Borriello, A., Calvo Santos, A., Feyen, L., Ghiani, M. et al., The EU blue economy report 2025, Publications Office of the European Union, 2025, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2771/2333701

regulatory/legal, social, economic, security and risk management aspects. The European Ocean Pact also acknowledges that Multi-use practices are promising avenues for the future and highlights the need for nature-based solutions and carbon-negative products to preserve or restore ocean ecosystems and biodiversity. In addition, one of the actions under the Water Resilience Strategy is to "significantly scale up investment in nature-based solutions in infrastructures or in conjunction with infrastructures".

In this broad landscape, R&I activities will involve multiple domains including mathematics/physics, maritime, marine and aquaculture and fisheries sciences, science diplomacy, economics, legal studies, political sciences, social sciences and humanities and extend to research infrastructures and their authorities responsible at national level, and NGOs. Projects funded under this priority area are thus expected to directly engage with stakeholders, including industries, adopting a cross-disciplinary approach with a specific focus upon sustainable innovations for boosting the green and digital transition of the blue economy sectors and the development of the coexistence and the multi-use of infrastructures. Various types of innovations are expected (e.g. digital technology, materials, processes and concepts, social innovations, business models) to mitigate the environmental impacts (e.g. increased ecosystem resilience), and maximise social (e.g. increased social acceptance of novel infrastructure multi-use) and economic impacts (e.g. emergence of new business models of multi-use installations) of R&I activities covering the entire blue economy sectors. Applicants should build on and connect with relevant projects, including those funded (and to be funded in future Work Programmes) under Horizon Europe and under the EU Mission Restore our Ocean and Waters.

The following targeted research directions, to be considered in the proposal formulation, are presented hereafter. A project needs to address one or more of the following topics including a multi-actor approach.

2.2.2.1 Innovations to boost the transition of the Blue Economy

Applicants are strongly encouraged to target of the established blue-economy sectors (and associated sub-sectors) as defined in The EU Blue Economy Report (2025) of the European Commission[41] which are considered as priorities for the Sustainable Blue

41 European Commission: Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, Borriello, A., Calvo Santos, A., Feyen, L., Ghiani, M. et al., The EU blue economy report 2025, Publications Office of the European Union, 2025, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2771/2333701

Economy Partnership, namely: marine living resources, marine renewable energy, port activities and coastal tourism, to avoid duplication with other EU Partnerships. Applicants are also encouraged to develop R&I activities in emerging and innovative marine and maritime sectors (e.g. Blue Biotechnology).

Projects are expected to develop innovative solutions to transition existing and upcoming sea-based activities and support science-based regenerative blue economy with an emphasis on technology and process development, adopting co-designed integrated approaches with clear path (e.g. value chain perspective) from new knowledge to innovative services and/or products in the context of climate change, biodiversity crisis and other anthropogenically-induced environmental and natural hazards challenges. Projects can also address innovative solutions that ensure safe and acceptable possibilities for the sequestration of carbon in a biotic or abiotic form in the marine domain and explore innovative ways for building new business models for coastal communities that benefit both nature and people including European blue carbon reserves (as highlight in the European Ocean Pact (COM(2025) 281 final).

R&I Projects are particularly expected to:

- - ***Pave the way of the new solutions towards a sustainable blue economy and markets uptake in line with stakeholders and consumer's rights*** *through e.g. socio-economic studies including markets opportunities and business models e.g. marine renewable energy farms, maritime communications (ports&logistics), marine bio-based products, considering social acceptance related to e.g. improved and new uses of ocean structures, legal barriers (e.g. introduction into the EU legislation the allocation of areas devoted to renewable energy production) etc. and studies towards standardisation and procurement processes requirements to scale up the innovations to markets level (high TRL).*
- - ***Investigate Nature-based Solutions***[42] ***focusing upon compatibilities and incompatibilities of material use(s)*** *in view of enhancing natural functions using a combination of approaches, in relation to sectors like ports&logistics/platforms for energy production/stocks regeneration etc.*

[42] See definition in Nature-based solutions - European Commission

- *- I**nvestigate innovative solutions for curbing greenhouse gas emissions** of blue economy activities in relation to carbon sequestration, e.g. Ocean-Based Carbon Dioxide Removal.*

Projects recommended for funding under this call are expected to build synergies with the projects funded under the "Restore our Ocean and Waters Mission" 2025 Calls, such as HORIZON-MISS-2025-03-OCEAN-05: Restoring Ocean and Waters in waterfront Cities and their Ports (see in [43]), and under Horizon Europe – Work Programme 2025, Cluster 6, such as HORIZON-CL6-2025-02-CLIMATE-01: The ocean-climate-biodiversity nexus and marine carbon dioxide removal (mCDR).

2.2.2.2 Innovations to improve co-existence and multi-use offshore infrastructures

Projects are expected to address respective and cumulative socio-economic and environmental barriers and impacts related to the complexity of multi-use of installations or space, considering the synergistic benefits for associated sectors including industry and the risk of conflicts and negative environmental effects. Projects must adopt a multi-skakeholders perspective to propose solutions to solve competition or conflicts between the different users of a certain areas of the sea space or their surroundings that are important components to succeed in the multi-use's offshore platform developments.

Note that coastal infrastructures are specifically addressed under priority area 5.

In that framework, the R&I projects are expected to cover at least one of the following sub-topics:

- ***To develop intelligent, faster, and more reliable control systems** for remote intervention, including simulation of potential accidents and spills, efficient strategies for prevention/containment, and consequent environmental remediation approaches, **in order to cope with increased challenges for operations and platforms, especially management and monitoring of operations, and for piloting multi-use structures***
- ***To study mechanisms that ensure sustainable, safe and secure coexistence of several spatial functions and activities within the Blue Economy** (e.g., energy*

[43] wp-12-missions_horizon-2025_en.pdf

production from different sources (wind-wave) / storage and habitat protection, or energy production / storage and sustainable integrated aquaculture, fisheries) considering the legal, economic, social, management, and policy context.

Connection with projects from the 'Mission Restore our Oceans and Waters' and Water4All or Biodiversa+ partnerships, as well as the Northern European Sea Basins project must be established to avoid duplication. The projects will be complementary to the Clean Energy Transition Partnership (CETP) that focuses on higher TRL (Technology Readiness Level) than the Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership. Synergies are also expected with Zero Emission Waterborne Transport Co-Programmed Partnership. The results of the project should feed in the European multi-use compendium[44]

2.2.3 Climate-Smart Planning and managing sea-uses at the regional scale

Under this priority area, R&I projects will address Ecosystems-Based management (EBM) of human activities through Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP), to improve biodiversity protection and restoration[45], extension and management of the blue economy sectors.

R&I projects will address knowledge gaps, develop innovative solutions and tools for decision-making that combine data from various sectors and models from different disciplines, including aspects related to the achievements of the Good Environmental Status (GES). R&I projects are also expected to incorporate climate considerations and develop climate-smart MSP, identified as one of the key priority areas of the IOC/UNESCO and the EC in their updated Joint roadmap to accelerate marine/maritime spatial planning processes worldwide[46]. R&I projects shall adopt a regional perspective and support cross-border cooperation on the above topics. As such, the R&I needs identified in this priority

[44] https://maritime-spatial-planning.ec.europa.eu/msp-resources/co-existence-and-multi-use-activities
[45] Regulation (EU) 2024/1991 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2024 on nature restoration and amending Regulation (EU) 2022/869 (Text with EEA relevance) PE/74/2023/REV/1 http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2024/1991/oj
[46] IOC-UNESCO/European Commission. 2022. Updated Joint Roadmap to accelerate Marine/Maritime Spatial Planning processes worldwide – MSProadmap (2022–2027). Paris, UNESCO. (IOC Technical Series, 182).

area and related solutions will contribute to the coherent implementation, monitoring and adaptation of the MSP Directive[47], the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD)[48] and the related achievement of good environmental status, and of others connected directives/policies (Common Fisheries Policy (CFP)[49], Birds and Habitats Directives[50], EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, EU Restoration Regulation), and the European Climate Law[51].

R&I projects will also contribute to relevant regional policies and to the Ocean Decade's Vision 2030 process, and the objectives of the sustainable ocean planning (SOP)[52] identified as "*an umbrella framework for the governance of the entire national marine space through a unified strategy and vision built on sustainable development*».

Within the European Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD), Ecosystem-Based Marine/maritime Spatial Planning (EBM-MSP) plays a crucial role in achieving Europe's objectives of decarbonisation and biodiversity protection by supporting the more efficient use of marine space and resources, while reducing conflicting uses and enhancing synergies (EC COM (2021)240 final). MSP plays a crucial role in defining suitable space for Blue Economy sectors to operate, while assessing and mitigating their cumulative impacts and promoting coexistence with other sea uses.MSP is identified by the Integrated Maritime Policy for the European Union as "a cross-cutting policy tool enabling public authorities and stakeholders to apply a coordinated, integrated and trans-boundary approach. The application of an ecosystem-based approach will contribute to promoting the sustainable development and growth of the maritime and coastal economies and the sustainable use of marine and coastal resources." (MSP Directive 2014/89/EU). Furthermore, as highlighted in the MSProadmap (2022-2027)[53] climate-smart MSP

[47] Directive 2009/147/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 30 November 2009 on the conservation of wild birds http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2009/147/2019-06-26 - Directive 2014/89/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 July 2014 establishing a framework for maritime spatial planning; http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2014/89/oj

[48] Implementation of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive - European Commission

[49] https://oceans-and-fisheries.ec.europa.eu/policy/common-fisheries-policy-cfp_en

[50] Council Directive 92/43/EEC of 21 May 1992 on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora. http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/1992/43/2013-07-01

[51] Regulation (EU) 2021/1119 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 30 June 2021 establishing the framework for achieving climate neutrality and amending Regulations (EC) No 401/2009 and (EU) 2018/1999 ('European Climate Law') http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2021/1119/oj

[52] https://www.ioc.unesco.org/en/sustainable-ocean-planning

[53] IOC-UNESCO/European Commission. 2022. Updated Joint Roadmap to accelerate Marine/Maritime Spatial Planning processes worldwide – MSProadmap (2022–2027). Paris, UNESCO. (IOC Technical Series, 182).

appears critical to tackle the climate crisis through the integration of adaptation and mitigation measures into MSP to limit climate warming, solutions to build the resilience of marine ecosystems, communities and businesses to climate change impacts, like the protection and restoration of blue carbon ecosystems and the promotion of offshore renewable energy.

The overarching goal of this priority area is to support science-based decision-making in EBM-MSP, considering the maintenance and improvement of the environmental status, the legacy of human impacts, climate change trends, and future scenarios, and therefore addressing the multitude of pressures from the different uses of the marine space and marine resources and related cumulative impacts. Applicants will have to co-design, co-develop innovative solutions and tools to facilitate decision-making in EBM-MSP with competent authorities and other relevant stakeholders at the local/regional/ national level (within the EU sea-basins which are: the Atlantic Ocean, Baltic Sea, Black Sea, Mediterranean Sea, and North Sea) to ensure direct capitalisation of results. This co-creation process should widen the information basis and the tools available to MSP authorities and stakeholders, particularly including socio-economic ones. Cross-border cooperation between different countries and close interaction with all relevant sectors at the regional and national levels will be mandatory to obtain a consensual integrated MSP at the basin or sub-basin scale. The projects will need to build and reflect on previous MSP projects and initiatives developed in the area. It will feed in the revision processes of the MSFD and MSPD.

The following targeted research directions, to be explored in the proposal formulation, are presented hereafter. A project needs to address one or more of the following topics, providing knowledge for effective management and conservation of marine systems and developing innovative Decision Support Tools, while adopting a multi-actor approach:

2.2.3.1 Scientific knowledge, data and innovations for effective management and conservation of complex socioecological systems

Projects are expected to produce scientific knowledge, that provides innovative tools, methods, strategies, to obtain, disseminate and analyse essential data considered as prerequisite for the assessment of ecosystem health, for implementing effective ecosystem-based management and conservation of complex socioecological systems at the land-ocean interface where intense human-derived pressures (nutrients, pollutants,

sound, etc) derived from urbanization, agriculture or industrial activities occur, in close interaction with the Water Framework Directive. This includes socio-economic models which would allow enhance the knowledge about ecosystem services and ocean accounts.

Ecosystem based management, including MSP, requires high resolution mapping of marine underwater morphology and marine uses and quantification of indicators describing ecosystem status and pressures caused by human uses. The temporal evolution of the monitored variables, either abiotic (seafloor morphology, sediment dynamics, etc.) or biotic (community structure and function) are relevant for MSP, and other marine policies, notably the MSFD. Innovative strategies of repeated bathymetric surveys should be adopted in dynamic coastal and nearshore areas characterized by consistent sediment transport and consequent modification of the sea floor morphology. Scientific knowledge will provide essential tools for the evaluation of ecosystem services and for the maintenance or restoration of their supply. The assessment of the carbon capture capacity of coastal blue carbon ecosystems will contribute to ecologically viable carbon sequestration management strategies within the EU Green Deal policy and will provide the needed knowledge to implement the EU Carbon Removals and Carbon Farming (CRCF) regulation[54], as well as the Renewable Energy Directive[55] and the Hydrogen Strategy[56].

Issues such linked to climate-change such as sustainable desalination should be investigated. The Water Resilience Strategy committed to promote further research and innovation to promote sustainable desalination.

While there have been important advances on measuring terrestrial ecosystem services, the knowledge about marine ecosystems is much more nascent. This is for instance reflected in Regulation (EU) 2024/3024 on new environmental economic account

[54] Regulation (EU) 2024/3012 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 November 2024 establishing a Union certification framework for permanent carbon removals, carbon farming and carbon storage in products, http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2024/3012/oj
[55] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.L_.2018.328.01.0082.01.ENG&toc=OJ:L:2018:328:TOC
[56] COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS A hydrogen strategy for a climate-neutral Europe COM/2020/301 final

modules, which covers quite extensively terrestrial ecosystems, but barely marine ecosystems. Further research to enhance the measurement of the services provided by the variety of marine ecosystems is required to reach a comprehensive view of all ecosystems.

In that framework, the R&I projects are expected to cover several of the following sub-topics:

- ***To implement integrated economical, ecological, and social ocean health indicators into marine ecosystem management tools, in accordance with MSFD Descriptors[57].***
- ***To provide essential data for enhanced understanding of marine ecosystems and effective environmental management and conservation*** *and supporting the identification of suitable areas for different uses, minimizing conflicts, and maximizing sustainable development.*
- ***To perform intelligent seafloor sampling surveys*** *to assessing seafloor ecosystem integrity and the damage/degradation of marine habitats (sensu Habitat directive****) to support restoration measures.***
- ***To generate knowledge and tools for improving currently available risk assessment procedures and management strategies for extreme events in the coastal areas,*** *as well as specific needs such as sustainable desalination.*
- ***To develop*** *innovative tools for ocean health assessment and for the implementation of management strategies at highly anthropized land-ocean interface ecosystems, including those affected by large inputs from intensive agriculture, highly urbanized areas or industrial activities*
- ***To assess the spatial extent, carbon reservoir size and resilience and development of effective conservation and restoration strategies for coastal blue carbon ecosystems***

[57] Descriptors under the Marine Strategy Framework Directive - European Commission

2.2.3.2 Development of innovative Decision Support Tools (DSTs)

Projects are expected to develop sophisticated innovative Decision Support Tools (DSTs) to analyse and visualise data, assess potential conflicts, and identify optimal solutions, to significantly enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of EBM-MSP processes. By integrating multiple data sources and modelling techniques, DST are relevant for decision-makers *e.g.* MSP competent authorities at national and regional level, and many organizations and initiatives at global and sea-basin scale involved in promoting and implementing MSP, including from United Nations to the UNESCO/IOC to executing authorities of the Regional Sea Conventions (e.g. RFMOs[58]) to national governments implementing relevant European directives, to evaluate different scenarios and provide for a better-informed decision-making by considering the broader impacts and interdependencies among different sea-uses. Projection of developed DSTs towards MSP-oriented DTO applications is highly recommended. Applicants are strongly encouraged to involve Local and/or Regional and/or National authorities in their consortium, when appropriate.

In that framework, the R&I projects are expected to cover at least one of the following sub-topics:

- ***To explore EMB-MSP-based transboundary scenarios and multi-lateral solutions*** *(e.g., international protected areas (including connectivity aspects); protection of highly mobile species and shared stocks and resources; restoration of marine habitats, spatially-based measures to mitigate conflicts and/or enhance synergies between uses, spatially-based measures to mitigate environmental impacts). As far as possible, National authorities are to be engaged in the consortium, and if "High Seas" i.e. areas beyond national juridiction are targeted, compliance with the terms of the Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ Agreement)[59] is mandatory.*
- ***To develop advanced models for integrating multiple disciplines to create digital intelligent supporting tools*** *(including Artificial Intelligence based) able to consider environmental processes, climate change trends, anthropogenic activities (coastal and sea uses), socio-economic and socio-ecological aspects. These intelligent DSTs could be used to feed MSP-oriented DTO applications. Projects should propose specific case*

[58] Regional fisheries management organisations (RFMOs) - European Commission

[59] BBNJ Agreement | Agreement on Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction

studies and demonstrators, including at transboundary/sea-basin level, of the concrete added value of the developed DSTs for specific area and sector planning demands. Projects are expected to focus on coastal areas and land-sea ecosystems on sectors such as offshore renewable energies, aquaculture, fisheries, maritime transport, coastal and maritime tourism, commercial ports and multi-use of marine space.

Applicants under this priority area should seek synergies and complementarities with relevant projects (funded or to be funded in future Calls) under HE (Cluster 6 Destination 1 topics in particular), EU Missions 'Restore our Ocean and Waters' and 'Adaptation to Climate Change' and the DTO initiative, other European Partnerships (Biodiversa+; Artificial Intelligence (AI), data and robotics, Zero Emission Waterborne Transport, and FutureFoodS), with projects on MSP funded through EMFAF, and also INTERREG and LIFE projects.

2.2.4 Blue Bioresources: Sustainable fisheries and aquaculture, and new bio-based products

Blue bioresources represent an important component of the broader blue economy, delivering food, feed and bio-based products for Europe and export markets. To achieve sustainability, it is important to consider all stages of the bioresources value chain, from harvesting, farming, production (fisheries, aquaculture) to seafood processing, including, biotechnology products, extracting value from waste streams and developing new types of biomasses (from algae, invasive species), and new products enabling innovative processes.

Projects are expected to engage the industry and relevant stakeholder (e.g. citizens, policy makers) and adopt a multi/trans-disciplinary approaches, including by building synergies with the S3 Sustainable Blue Economy platform and its partnerships.

To be noted, the FutureFoodS partnership focuses upon post harvest activities, post-farming and -fishing part of food systems (including seafood processing), **which are not to be addressed under this priority area.**

The following targeted research questions, to be explored in the project proposal formulation, are presented hereafter. A project needs to address one or more of the following topics, including a multi-actor approach:

2.2.4.1 Innovative technologies and practices for sustainable fisheries and harvesting

«Fishing activities continue to adversely affect marine ecosystems, particularly through seabed disturbance, bycatch of sensitive species and effects on marine food webs» (COM(2023) 103 final[60]). Also, climate change, other anthropogenic pressures, and the poor status of marine ecosytems directly threathen the sustainability of fisheries (COM(2023) 103 final).

To continue to bring Europe's fish stocks back to sustainable levels, there are important challenges remaining, such as improvement of management of overfished stocks, reinforced data collection to support decision-making, optimised fishing technologies and practices to reduce bycatch and discards, and increased fishing and harvesting of under valorised species (i.e., zooplankton, other invertebrates, macroalgae). "Making fishing practices more sustainable" is a core element of the COM(2023) 102 final[61] in which the need for *e.g.* "improving gear selectivity and reducing the impact of fisheries on sensitive species», «reducing the impact of fisheries on the seabed» is highlighted.

A forward-looking ecosystem-based management (EBM) approach has to reduce adverse impacts of fishing and harvesting on marine ecosystems, particularly sensitive species, and on vulnerable habitats. New digital tools, ecosystem modelling, and artificial intelligence tools can optimise both small- and large-scale fishing operations with the development of sustainable management practices. Assessments and solution scenarios should consider the impact and social implications of combined drivers such as habitat degradation, warming, water stratification and change of water composition such as acidification or euthrophication, as well as their effects, such as changes in ecosystem composition and modification of spatial migration patterns.

[60] COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL The common fisheries policy today and tomorrow: a Fisheries and Oceans Pact towards sustainable, science-based, innovative and inclusive fisheries management COM/2023/103 final, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52023DC0103

[61] COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS EU Action Plan: Protecting and restoring marine ecosystems for sustainable and resilient fisheries COM/2023/102 final, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52023DC0102

In that framework, the R&I projects are expected to cover at least one of the following sub-topics:

- To study migratory fish stocks *that spend different parts of their life cycle in different jurisdictions to inform policy options and management. This is a critical issue for the EU Common Fisheries Policy and co-management of stocks between EU and third countries.*
- To provide evidence-based support to the application of ecosystem-based management approaches to inshore and small-scale fisheries management.
- To investigat the impacts of climate change and human activities *including pollution and industrial and agricultural runoff on commercial fisheries, fish stocks and species with commercial potential.*
- To gather a better understanding of cross-compliance, alignment and trade-offs between fisheries policy and management with other policy domains *(Marine spatial planning, marine strategy framework directive, The Water Framework Directive) and the implications of measures associated with the EU Nature Restoration Regulation on fishing and fishers.*
- To advance technological innovations aimed at preserving the nutritional value, quality, and integrity of seafood*, including through the use of new catching or harvesting technologies.*
- To enhance understanding of species' roles in marine food webs and their growth potential *within an integrated perspective of sustainability and biodiversity resilience, and to translate this knowledge into practical management solutions, aligned with management needs.*
- To develop new digital tools for monitoring for well-informed and timely decision making and sustainable management *considering the impact and societal costs of stressors such as habitat degradation, pollution, and climate change.*
- To develop more selective and sustainable fishing gears (including material aspects) that reduce environmental impact*, particularly in the bottom-contact fisheries, and for harvesting new species including macroalgae. A focus can also be on improving fish welfare and increasing traceability.*

2.2.4.2 Innovations and diversification for sustainable aquaculture

Production of safe, secure food and sustainable bioproducts through aquaculture, has a margin for improvements in respect of diversification (production methods and farming of new species (COM(2021) 236 final)[62], competitiveness, animal welfare, and environmental performance. Aquaculture production should be adapted to satisfy growing consumer demand for blue food, as well as the need for innovative blue bioproducts, while

[62] COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS. Strategic guidelines for a more sustainable and competitive EU aquaculture for the period 2021 to 2030. COM(2021) 236 final

enhancing the social, economic, and environmental sustainability and carbon neutrality of the production.

This requires targeted technological advancements and diversified production solutions also considering regional and local differences throughout Europe. Integrated multitrophic aquaculture (IMTA), low-trophic aquaculture, off-shore production, closed systems, or land-based infrastructure with use of recirculating aquaculture systems (RAS), are options for farming established and new species. Diversification of species, in particular the expansion and production of organisms of the primary and/or low trophic levels, face several challenges that need technological advancements. For macroalgae, there is a need for R&I that supports spatial considerations as well as new offshore production techniques that require further development and facilities, including larger-scale farms, mechanisation, and methods for further processing after harvest. The new and modified technological and digital systems should favour and promote the health and welfare and quality of the farmed fish.

In that framework, the R&I projects are expected to cover at least one of the following sub-topics:

To develop biologically, technically, and economically feasible onshore recirculating aquaculture systems for fish, shellfish, and seaweed.

- ***To develop innovative and eco-sustainable alternative solutions to produce established and new species,*** *including integrated multitrophic aquaculture, new systems associated with other economic off-shore activities, or closed and land-based systems.*

2.2.4.3 Innovations for a circular blue bioeconomy and new sustainable and high value bio-based products

Transitioning to a circular blue bioeconomy, whereby the entire biomass of fish, shellfish and seaweed sourced from capture fisheries and aquaculture is utilised, presents both challenges and opportunities. Current policy and regulation can be a barrier to developing new bio-products from waste or side streams (by-catch, rest raw materials etc.), and there is a growing body of evidence e.g. BlueBio policy brief "on identified regulatory barriers to

more circularity in the blue bioeconomy"[63] to support policy reform. New, sustainable, high-value products can be developed through a biorefinery approach, by e.g., valorisation of waste streams, and contributes to minimising waste and enhancing the value chain. Further exploration of the synergies between blue (aquatic farming) and green (agriculture) is another opportunity in a fully circular blue bioeconomy. For example, side streams from agriculture could be used in aquaculture or bio stimulants derived from marine sources could be used in agriculture. New solutions are also needed for existing challenges e.g., valorization of emerging invasive species biomass (e.g. algae blooms, blue crabs, round goby) or seaweed as bioplastic.

In that framework, the R&I projects are expected to cover at least one of the following sub-topics:

- ***To develop new low-carbon marine bio-based products*** *i.e. feed/chemical/pharmaceutical/material or services to accelerate the ocean economy and provide solutions to the existing challenges.*
- ***To propose scientific based evidence to support policy reform with respect to regulations on use of fishery waste and bycatch or side streams for a variety of new bio-based products*** *(i.e. feed/chemical/pharmaceutical/nutraceutical/material).*

Applicants under this priority area should seek synergies and complementarities with relevant projects (funded or to be funded in future Calls) under Horizon Europe Cluster 6 Work Programmes, the EU Missions 'Restore our Ocean and Waters', other EU partnerships such as: FutureFoodS for creating links with the post-farming and fishing part of food systems, Animal Health and Welfare, Biodiversa+, Water4All, and also with projects from the Circular Bio-based Europe Joint Undertaking (CBE-JU) and Waterborne platform, and activities from the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES), regional fisheries management organisation (e.g. General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM)).

[63] BlueBio-policy-brief-Jan-2024.pdf

2.2.5 Resilient Coastal Communities and Businesses

«*Coastal communities are the driving human force behind a sustainable and competitive blue economy on the road to regenerative practices and play a crucial role in providing Europeans with healthy and sustainable food, clean and affordable marine renewable energy and in connecting Europe to the rest of the world.*» (The European Ocean Pact).

Coastal communities thus highly contribute to the sustainable development and competitiveness of the EU as a whole. For instance, coastal tourism is the largest sector of the EU Blue Economy in terms of GVA (€82 billion) and employment (2.56 million people in the EU), in 2022 (EU Blue Economy Report 2025).

However, there are significant challenges and opportunities for coastal businesses to achieve a transition from its currently unsustainable model and to manage exposure to environmental, economic and social risks. As stated in The European Ocean Pact, coastal areas are *"at the highest risk of climate change, facing rising sea levels, extreme weather events, coastal erosion, flooding, salt intrusion and the depletion of biodiversity, including fish stocks»*. To boost and support coastal communities that urgely must implement adaptation strategies and planning, the Commission will propose a new EU Coastal Communities Development and Resilience Strategy in 2026, aiming to develop and deploy new sustainable coastal business models, support business diversification, promote regenerative and restoration activities, early warning systems, climate adaptation plans etc

In this context, the goal of this priority area is to support interdisciplinary research across natural sciences, social sciences, humanities, and technology, as well as innovation to enable a just and efficient transition to low-impact, regenerative and sustainable coastal businesses, that increases also the resilience, adaptation and preparedness of the communities in which these businesses are embedded.

The following targeted research questions, to be explored in the proposal ormulation, are presented hereafter. A project needs to address one or more of the following topics, including a multi-actor approach:

2.2.5.1 Knowledge and Innovations to foster coastal businesses/communities resilience and sustainable coastal tourism

Small-scale coastal businesses operate in a continually evolving socio-economic context where seasonality, limited access to labour and tight profit margins are commonplace. Coastal businesses are highly dependent on the quality of the marine and coastal environment and are in the front line of climate and weather impacts. Potential multiple use of the same area is also source of tensions.

Among coastal businesses, coastal tourism, the largest EU Blue Economy sector plays an important role in offering income and employment in coastal communities, especially in areas such as remote coastal areas and islands. Coastal tourism is, however, a sector that recovers from the impacts of the pandemic, and faces substantial opportunities for change and adaptation towards a more sustainable business model to reach a low-impact and regenerative coastal tourism.

In this context, projects are expected to contribute to improve the understanding of the pressures on coastal businesses to inform more effectively policies, planning and product development, to feed strategies to foster resilience in coastal communities, businesses, to support diversification of coastal and marine-based enterprises and a just and efficient transition to a more resilient and sustainable coastal tourism sector.

In that framework, the R&I projects are expected to cover at least one of the following sub-topics:

- ***To identify opportunities for sustainable blue tourism products/services*** *that contribute to preventing negative environmental impact, and support the protection and restoration of degraded marine and coastal habitats or re-vitalise local, traditional culture and heritage.*
- ***To assess the impacts of diverse coastal activities (including small ports and marinas), on marine and coastal environments and co-dependencies between tourism and coastal and marine ecosystem health, and also their role on sustaining livelihood in coastal communities from a socio-economic perspective.***
- ***To provide inputs to strategies for strengthening resilience and preparedness of coastal businesses*** *against extreme climate events and geological and anthropogenic hazards as social and economic risk factors.*
- ***To sustain social innovation to enable diversification of coastal and marine-based enterprises for delivering new economic opportunities and thriving coastal communities.*** *.*
- ***To investigate, promote and showcase the coexistence of coastal and maritime tourism and other coastal businesses with marine protected areas.*** *In particular,*

applicants are encouraged to showcase best practices and available tools and instruments associated to effective management and enforcement of MPAs and best cases and examples of shared management practices considering conservation-restoration/citizens and sectors participation and active management.

2.2.5.2 Resilient coastal infrastructures and nature-based solutions

Coastal economic activities rely on large part on built infrastructures such as small harbours, leisure of fishing ports, piers, sea walls and marinas, that enable access for operators and tourists to the marine environment. These infrastructures are by nature of their location, highly exposed to the impacts of climate change (e.g. sea-level rise, geological hazards, coastal erosion and extreme weather events). Projects are expected to contribute to a better understanding of the risk to existing coastal infrastructures and advancing innovative approaches to design and adaptation of coastal structures is a key component underpinning sectoral resilience. A transition towards Nature-based Solutions (NbS) is an important opportunity to reduce the carbon footprint of activities and foster ecosystem recovery linked coastal economic activities. NbS can promote, for instance, the development of sustainability in coastal areas, including strategies to combat coastal erosion, loss of biodiversity, ecosystem degradation, control the spread of harmful alien species, and potentially ensure the quality of bathing waters.

The sector is highly dependent on the quality of marine and coastal environments but can also impact directly those environments. Many of its activities also depend on coastal infrastructures, including for example small harbors and marinas, that provide an interface between the land and the sea, but are, in themselves, exposed to risks from climate change and extreme weather impacts.

Note that offshore infrastructures are specifically addressed in priority area 2.

In that framework, the R&I projects are expected to cover at least one of the following sub-topics:

- ***To analyse risks posed to coastal infrastructures by climate change and extreme events and strategies to protect /re-design built structures and mitigate against risks*** *that potential damages to such structures may poses to safety and security of coastal communities and businesses.*
- ***To develop embedded technologies in coastal infrastructures*** *that can monitor environmental conditions, deliver early warning of risks/hazards and support long-term data on coastal conditions and environmental change.*

- ***To investigate effective Investment in conservation of natural assets through Nature-based Solutions*** *that benefit both costal tourism and ecosystem services (e.g. through carbon storage, protection from erosion etc).*
- ***To focus upon local/regional scale, when appropriate, to consider the temporal needs (seasonal vs permanent) of infrastructures to support tourism or other economic activities****. Projects should/will address the diversity of the demand per region of the necessary infrastructures (stable or mobile ones) and feedback to policy makers in approaching coastal development for local economic activities.*

Applicants under this priority area should seek synergies and complementarities with relevant projects (funded or to be funded in future Calls) under Horizon Europe Cluster 6 Work Programmes, the EU Missions 'Restore our Ocean and Waters', other EU partnerships such as: Biodiversa+, Water4All, DUT etc. Connections with Partnerships from Cluster 2 can be envisaged (e.g. Resilient Cultural Heritage), as well as the S3 Sustainable Blue Economy platform and its partnerships.

2.3 Impact of the proposals

The ambition of the Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership is to support impact-driven R&I projects and to create significant societal and environmental impacts, contributing also to the UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021-2030). In line with this perspective, it is requested from the applicants to include an Impact plan in their proposal. This Impact plan should describe what impact the research is expected to achieve in the long run and how it contributes to the overall impacts defined for the call:

- *the potential for impact beyond the academic world, such as in societal, technical, environmental, economic, policy-making, or behavioural realms;*
- *how quadruple-helix stakeholders can be involved in, and/or benefit from, the design and achievement of the research project;*
- *to what extent the project promotes the uptake of research findings into decision-making processes and policy-making;*
- *how approaches for achieving impact are integrated into the research design and conducted by the consortium.*

To develop the Impact plan, it is recommended to rely on a methodology of theory of change including a so-called Impact Pathway. The Impact Pathway describes the route

from scientific research towards impact, describing the logical links between well-specified outputs and outcomes. Applicants are invited to refer to the Annex A: Theory of change for more information on how to set up a theory of change with a related Impact Pathway. The workshop *Working with an Impact plan*[64] produced by the Dutch Research Council (NWO) also provides valuable explanation on how to build a theory of change for a research project.

The quality of the Impact plan will be considered in the evaluation of the proposals. In particular, the clarity and credibility of the Impact Pathway will be assessed, as well as the quadruple-helix ambition, i.e. if the Impact plan includes clear activities and an effort to liaise with the different stakeholders. See the Section 4.8.3 for a complete sight of the evaluation criteria and sub-criteria related to impact.

A dedicated session will be organised at the beginning of the funded projects, during the kick-off meeting, to exchange on best practices related to theory of change principles.

3.0 FUNDING

3.1 Participating countries

A total of 38 PFOs from 28 countries (20 Member-States, 5 Associated Countries and 1 Third Country) have agreed to launch the third Joint Call for R&I proposals. The list of countries is as follows: *Belgium, Brazil, Bulgaria, Denmark, Estonia, Faroe Islands, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Montenegro, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Sweden, The Netherlands, Tunisia, Türkiye, Ukraine and Slovakia.*

The following PFOs will participate financially in the Joint Transnational Call 2025 of the SBEP Partnership with the committed budget:

Table 1: Provisional funding commitment for the third call

64 https://impact.nwo.nl/en/working-with-an-impact-plan

		Funded Priority areas					
Country	**PFOs Acronym**	**IA1: Digital Twins of the Oceans at regional sub basin scale**	**IA2: Blue economy sectors, development of marine multi-use infrastructures**	**IA3: Planning and managing sea-uses at the regional level**	**IA4: Blue Bioresources**	**IA5: Resilient Coastal Communities and Businesses**	**Indicative budget in euros**
Belgium	BELSPO	×	×	×	-	-	500 000 (conditional on the approval)
Belgium	FIO/VLAIO	×	×	×	×	×	1 000 000
Belgium	F.R.S. - FNRS	×	×	×	×	×	300 000
Belgium	FWO	×	×	×	×	×	700 000
Brazil[65]	CONFAP	×	×	×	×	×	100 000
Bulgaria	Ministry of Education and Science	×	×	×	×	×	250 000
Denmark	IFD	×	×	×	×	×	2 000 000
Estonia	ETAG	-	-	-	×	×	300 000
Estonia	REM	-	-	-	×	×	100 000
Faroe Islands	RCFI	×	×	×	×	×	135 000
Finland	MMM	-	-	-	X	-	500 000
Finland	AKA	×	X	×	X	X	850 000
France	ANR	×	×	×	×	X	2 000 000
Georgia	SRNSFG	-	-	×	×	-	10 000

[65] The Brazilian State Funding Agencies supporting the call is detailed in the Annex B (funding regulations) of the Call Announcement

Greece	GSRI	×	×	×	×	X	1 000 000
Germany	BMFTR/ PtJ	×	×	×	-	X	1 500 000
Ireland	MI	×	×	×	×	X	900 000
Ireland	Research Ireland	×	-	×	×	X	800 000
Italy	MUR	×	×	×	×	X	3 000 000
Italy	RER	×	X	×	×	X	300 000
Latvia	LZP	×	×	×	×	X	600 000
Lithuania	LMT	×	×	×	×	X	300 000
Malta	XJENZA Malta	×	×	×	×	X	500 000
Montenegro	Ministry of Education, Science and Innovation (MESI)	×	×	×	×	×	200 000
Norway	RCN	-	-	×	×*	×*	2 750 000
Poland	NCBR	×	×	-	×	×	1 000 000
Portugal	FCT	×	×	×	×	X	500 000
Portugal	CCDRC-CENTRO	×	×	×	×	X	400 000
Romania	ANC	×	×	×	×	X	1 000 000
Spain	AEI	×	×	×	×	X	1 200 000
Spain	CDTI	×	×	×	×	X	400 000
Sweden	FORMAS	-	×	×	-	X	1 700 000
Sweden	SNSA	×	-	-	-	-	1 000 000
The Netherlands	LNV, Min I&W, NWO	×	×	×	×	×	2 000 000
Tunisia	MHESR	×	×	×	×	×	500 000
Türkiye	TÜBİTAK	×	×	×	×	×	400 000
Ukraina	Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine	-	×	×	-	×	400 000 *
Slovakia	Slovak Centre of Scientific and Technical Information	×	×	×	×	×	800 000
	Total PFOs					**32.045.000 Euro**	

- *The PFOs agreed to allocate a financial support from EU top-up for Ukraine participation in the 3rd SBEP JTC 2025 Call.*
- *x* Not all subthematics are funded*

3.2 Financial commitment

A total estimated budget of 44,321,429 EUR has been provisionally allocated for this Joint Transnational Call, combining the provisional funding commitments by PFOs (Table 1) and the contribution from the European Union (EU). These funds will be used for R&I activities carried out by researchers, institutions, and companies according to the funding rules and legal frameworks of their respective PFOs (Annex B).

Partners applying in a consortium cannot request more than the maximum amount stated by the PFO from which they seek funding in Annex B of the national/regional regulations to this Call Announcement.

3.3 Funding decision

The choice of transnational projects to be recommended for funding will be taken by the Call Steering Committee (CSC) strictly following the ranking list established by the International Evaluation Committee (IEC), budgetary and ethical clearance considerations. Final funding and granting decisions are made by the respective PFOs.

4.0 PROCEDURES, ELIGIBILITY, AND SELECTION CRITERIA

4.1 Call process

The Joint Call will be advertised online from the following web pages:

- Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership Website: https://www.bluepartnership.eu/funding-opportunities

- PFOs web pages and on the EC Funding & Tenders portal.

To get started, the proposal Coordinator must create an account on the Online Submission Tool, the EPSS at https://proposals.etag.ee/sustainable-blue, create a proposal, invite partners and self-funded partners to join the consortium.

The application process consists of two consecutive steps:

STEP 1

The Consortium Coordinator must submit a pre-proposal on behalf of the consortium, providing key data on the proposed project. The deadline for the submission of the pre-proposal is **17/11/2025, 15.00 CET** (Brussels time). Submission of pre-proposals is mandatory; it is not possible to enter the procedure at a later stage.

STEP 2

The Consortium Coordinator must submit a full proposal (upon invitation) on behalf of the consortium. The deadline for full proposal submission is **17/06/2026, 15.00 CET** (Brussels time). Deadline to be confirmed after Step 1.

4.2 Call timeline

Table 2: Third call timeline

Step 1: Pre-proposal submission, eligibility, evaluation, and selection	
21 July 2025	Pre-announcement
15 September 2025	Official launch – Call Publication EPSS and partner tool opening
24 September 2025, 14.00 CEST	International webinar for the applicants
17 November 2025, 15.00 CET	***Deadline for submission (pre-proposals)***
18 November 2025 to mid-March 2026	Step 1: eligibility checks (JCS, and National Contact Points (NCPs), evaluation by the IEC, selection by the CSC

Mid-March 2026	Communication of the results of the pre-proposal eligibility check and evaluation outcomes to project Coordinators. Invitation to submit full-proposals.
Mid-March to Early April 2026	Period for the redress procedure
Early April to mid-April 2026	Evaluation of the redress requests and communication of decisions to applicants
Step 2: Full proposal submission, eligibility, evaluation, and selection	
17 June 2026, 15:00 CET	***Deadline for submission (full proposals)***
18 June 2026 to end October 2026	Step 2: eligibility checks (JCS, and NCPs), evaluation by the IEC, selection by the CSC
End-October 2026	Communication of the results of the full proposal eligibility check and evaluation outcomes to project Coordinators.
Early-November to Mid-November 2026	Period for the redress procedure
Mid-November to End-November 2026	Evaluation of the redress requests and communication of decisions to applicants
National/regional grant negotiations for the projects recommended for funding	
December 2026 to June 2027	Projects' start
Dec 2029/Jan 2030 to June 2030	Projects' end (at month 36)

4.3 Confidentiality and conflict of interests

The Partnership PFOs are committed to avoiding any Conflict of Interest (COIs) and safeguarding good scientific practice. A Code of Conduct related to Conflict of Interests, confidentiality and non-disclosure is defined and applies to the CSC, the independent observer, the IEC members, the representative(s) from the DCU IOC/UNESCO, and the Ethics Experts. An important aspect of this code is the avoidance of any conflicts between personal interests and the interests of the applicants. The CSC and related National Contact Points (NCPs), the independent observer, and the IEC will perform their work impartially and take all measures to prevent any situation where the impartial and objective implementation of the work is compromised for reasons involving economic interest, political or national affinity, family or emotional ties or any other shared interest ('conflict of interests').

The following situations will automatically be considered as a conflict of interest:

- *Being involved in (the preparation of) any pre- and/or full proposal;*

- *Having submitted a proposal as a principal investigator or a team member, under the call;*
- *Being director, trustee or partner or in any way involved in the management of an applicant;*
- *Being employed or contracted by one of the applicants;*
- *Having close professional proximity, e.g., being a member of the same scientific institution with a hierarchical or department relation or impending change of the IEC member to the institution of the applicant in a position with a hierarchical or department relation or vice versa;*
- *Having close family ties (spouse, domestic or non-domestic partner, child, sibling, parent etc.) or other close personal relationships with the applicants of the proposal;*
- *Having (or have had during the last five years) a close scientific collaboration with an applicant of the proposal;*
- *Having (or have had) a relationship of scientific rivalry or professional hostility with an applicant of the proposal;*
- *Having (or have had), a mentor/mentee relationship with a principal investigator of the proposal;*
- *Having a current or prior (past 5 years) activity in advisory bodies of the applicant's institution, e.g., scientific advisory boards;*
- *Having direct or indirect benefit if any proposal submitted is accepted or rejected;*
- *Having personal economic interests in the funding decision. Other situations preventing the IEC members or reviewers from participating in the evaluation impartially could be considered a conflict of interest and should be reported as such by the IEC members.*

Applicants included in a (pre-)proposal submitted to this call (including all the team members) must not serve as IEC members.

At the implementation level, the Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership Consortium partners that might apply to the co-funded calls are completely excluded from the work of call preparation, selection and project follow-up and monitoring. All related information is kept non-accessible to these Consortium members. In that way, the possibility for research units belonging to these organisations to participate in the Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership calls for proposals is safeguarded. To ensure complete transparency and inform the recipients of calls, the Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership Consortium partners that may apply to the co-funded calls are explicitly listed in Annex C, emphasizing their absolute extraneousness to the process of preparing the calls both in terms of defining the priority areas of the call and the procedures for evaluating and selecting project proposals. Concrete measures to avoid potential Conflicts of Interest or unequal treatment of applicants are ensured.

4.4 Publishable information

A list of the projects recommended for funding will be published at the end of the call process on the Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership Website and on the Ocean Decade website and the Ocean Decade Network (upon DCU (IOC/Unesco) endorsement). Therefore, applicants should be aware that the following information from the proposals may be published by the SBEP, IOC/UNESCO and the PFO for promotional purposes: (1) Project Title and Project Acronym, (2) Publishable abstract, (3) Duration of the project, (4) Total costs and total funding of the research project, (5) Organisation name and country of each partner, (6) Name of the Project Coordinator.

Each of the funding organisations will subsequently handle projects partners recommended for funding. Projects recommended for funding will be governed by the confidentiality rules in the national law of the funding organisations.

4.5 Privacy policy

By applying, the Consortium Coordinator, partners and self-funded partners agree to the use, share (for specific purposes: *e.g.*, evaluation, for the future nomination of experts, Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership-specific communication) and the storage of projects-related information according to the Privacy Policy and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The Online Submission Tool presents further information on the Privacy Policy (https://proposals.etag.ee/sustainable-blue).

4.6 Eligibility criteria

When applying to this call, the applicants must be aware that their (pre-) proposals must meet both (i) general eligibility criteria, summarized in Table 2, and (ii) national/regional eligibility criteria (Annex B).

A (pre-)proposal that does not fulfil all the general eligibility criteria will be declined without any further review.

Each partner involved in the project will be funded by its national/regional funding organisations. The consortium must therefore also comply with all the relevant national/regional eligibility rules (Annex B). It is particularly important to note that some funding organisations may require the submission of national documents in addition to the international (pre-)proposal. Besides, national/regional funding bodies may not fund all types of organisations.

Please note:

- If the partner acting as the consortium coordinator is not eligible, the whole proposal will be considered ineligible and will not be evaluated;

- If any other partner (not applicable to the coordinator) is declared ineligible:

  - *The ineligible partner could participate in the consortium as a self-funded partner; and/or*
  - *The other partners could engage themselves to cover the tasks of the ineligible partner; and/or*
  - *The ineligible partner could be replaced by another partner that will request funds from a PFO with an undersubscription ratio. The list of the PFOs with an undersubscription ratio will be provided to coordinators invited to submit a full proposal at the end of the first step selection process.*
  - *The ineligible partner cannot be replaced by a self-funded partner.*

At Step 2, if the consortium coordinator and/or any other partner is declared ineligible for funding by a PFO, the whole proposal will be considered ineligible and will not be evaluated.

Any change in the consortium composition must conform to the general eligibility criteria defined in 4.6.1 and be validated by the relevant funding organisations.

Before applying, every partner should verify their corresponding national/regional regulations and check their eligibility with their National Contact Points (NCPs). The Consortium Coordinator should verify that all partners of the consortium verified their eligibility. NCPs will provide support about national/regional rules and requirements (Annex B).

(Pre-)proposals that fulfil all requirements *i.e.,* general eligibility criteria and all relevant national/regional eligibility criteria, will enter the evaluation process described in 4.8. The JCS on behalf of the CSC, will communicate the results of the eligibility check and the decisions taken to the coordinator of each consortium.

The case of beneficiaries of Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership' participating in R&I call for proposals:

Research teams of some beneficiaries of the Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership may participate in this co-funded call; the list of the beneficiaries of the SBEP allowed to participate in the projects' consortia is indicated in Annex C. For those beneficiaries, firewall measures have been foreseen to mitigate the risk of, perception of, or de facto conflict of interest or unequal treatment of applicants, including clear segregation of duties. All other beneficiaries of the Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership may not apply for funding under the co-funded call for proposals.

4.6.1 General eligibility criteria

The general eligibility criteria are described in Table 3. (Pre-)proposals that do not meet all these criteria will be considered ineligible and thus will not be considered for funding.

Table 3: General eligibility criteria

Scope	(Pre-)proposals must address one main priority area. It is not compulsory to address all sub-themes within the priority area.

Consortium composition	Each consortium must be composed of eligible partners from at least three different countries participating in the call and requesting financial support from at least three different PFO participating in this call. In addition to the abovementioned condition, the projects must involve at least two independent legal entities from two different EU Member States or Horizon Europe Associated Countries[66] eligible for EU funding for this call for (pre-)proposal (*as recipients of the financial support, at the time of the closing of the call by 17th June 2026, 3PM CET). **Specific requirements regarding self-funded partners, *i.e.* partners that do not require funding:** – *Self-funded partners must demonstrate the willingness to self-fund their activities or show evidence that other partners are willing to fund their activities;* – *A letter of intent/commitment must be submitted with the full proposal at Step 2;* – *A self-funded partner cannot act as the consortium coordinator;* – *Self-funded partners are not counted for the minimum requirement of eligible partners and countries.*
Consortium coordinator	In each (pre-)proposal, one entity must act as the consortium coordinator; – *The consortium coordinator must be eligible for funding by a funding organisation of this call;* – *The consortium coordinator has the responsibility for submitting the (pre-)proposal;* – *The principal investigator (PI) of the entity acting as consortium coordinator must be employed by an eligible organisation in one of the countries participating in the call according to the terms and*

[66] https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/common/guidance/list-3rd-country-participation_horizon-euratom_en.pdf

	conditions of the participating funding organisation from which he/she applies for support; – *A person can act as consortium coordinator only in one proposal.*
Requested funding	Partners from the same country cannot request more than 60% of the total funding requested by a proposal.
Duration	The projects must be 36 months; The start date and end date of the researcher groups within the consortium must be aligned as far as possible.
(Pre-) proposals submission	A two-step process will apply, with a mandatory submission of pre-proposals at the Step 1 and submission of full proposals upon invitation to Step 2. (Pre-) proposals must: – *be written in English* – *be submitted electronically with the Electronic Proposal Submission System (EPSS) before the set deadlines at https://proposals.etag.ee/sustainable-blue* – *Instructions for electronic submission will be available on the Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership website at https://www.bluepartnership.eu/funding-opportunities in September 2025.* – *be complete, respect page limits and the number/type of attachments allowed, including CV templates that are in line with sound principles for research assessment according to the (pre-)proposals forms (Annexes D and E) and information provided in the EPSS.*

4.6.2 National/Regional Eligibility Criteria

In addition to the general eligibility criteria, each project partner must ensure that its contribution to the overall project conforms to:

- *Where applicable, the relevance of the (pre-)proposal to the priority areas funded by national/regional PFOs;*

- *Compliance with national/regional funding eligibility criteria and regulations as reported in the Annex B. The table in Annex B describes important restrictions related to each national/regional regulation;*
- *Compliance with limits to budget requests;*
- *Where requested by the national funding organisation, submission of additional national documents by national rules.*

4.6.3 Recommendations for the applicants

All partners within a consortium should take into consideration the following recommendations for setting up their project (pre-)proposals:

Scope

- *(Pre-)proposals should go beyond the state of the art by providing high-quality R&I and, when appropriate, make use of innovative technologies, approaches, and concepts to do so;*
- *(Pre-) proposals should be scientifically excellent and relevant to policies framed under Blue Economy and consider ongoing research activities funded by other EU Partnerships, EU Missions, instruments, programmes, or projects. Cooperation with these activities is of high importance to avoid redundancy, favour complementarity and increase synergies;*
- *(Pre-)proposals should contribute to cross-cutting themes such as the open data policy, development of capacity-building activities and ocean literacy activities, promote the inclusion of young people in the activities and knowledge transfer, follow partnership communication guidelines using a common visual identity, to promote equal opportunities for participation of women and men in the research consortia and comply with EC ethics self-assessment principles;*
- *(Pre-) proposals are strongly encouraged to cover a broad geographic scale. Projects are strongly recommended to cover at least two EU sea basins among the Atlantic Ocean, Baltic Sea, Black Sea, Mediterranean Sea, and North Sea, to assess the project proposal's impact and potential replication/scalability on various sea basins*

Consortium composition:

- *All (pre-)proposals are encouraged to consider geographical balance and implementation in appropriate geographic settings and according to the objectives of the proposal, including in low- and middle-income countries/regions, and underperforming countries;*
- *Self-funded participation of legal entities from countries (and/or regions) participating in the call, is welcome;*
- *Project partners that are not eligible for funding may participate as self-funded if they have their separate source of funding;*
- *It is strongly encouraged to involve stakeholders from the quadruple-helix (i.e., small, and medium enterprises (SMEs), industries, authorities, public administrations, associations, as well as civil society organisations) as partners or self-funded partners. The modalities of participation of stakeholders are defined in the national/regional eligibility criteria. Stakeholder engagement in the research projects will enhance innovation, policy, and societal relevance and ultimately the impact of the projects;*
- *All proposals should integrate the gender dimension[67] of R&I activities;*
- *Every partner in a (pre-)proposal, including a self-funded partner, needs a Participant Identification Code (PIC) from the EC to be included in the submission. The applicants must check their PIC or ask for the creation of a PIC well in advance of the submission[68]. The same request applies to subcontractors.*

Budget:

- *There is no specific limit to the total budget for proposals;*

[67] https://erc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/document/file/GEPs_in_HE_guidelines.pdf

[68] 9-digit number serving as a unique identifier for organisations (legal entities) participating in EU funding programmes/procurements. If needed, one can apply for a temporary PIC at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/how-to participate/participant-register. A search tool for organisations and their PICs is available at https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/how-to- participate/participant-register-search. We suggest validating the PICs via the public available Partner Search – Organisation Profile service. This allows to fill out some requested data inputs automatically, which is less error-prone and provides a much better user experience. https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/support/apis

- *The requested total budget of proposals is only limited by the number of eligible partners and by the budget of each partner. Please consider the national regulations of each research funding organisation about the specific budget limitations and the general eligibility criteria, the section on Requesting Funding.*

Data management:

Please note that you will be requested to produce data management plans (DMP) and regularly update them during the project. The guide in Annex F "Open access and FAIR data" presents the core requirements for the establishment of a DMP and the expectations at the step of (pre-)proposals and awarded projects.

4.6.4 Ethical issues

The evaluation criteria of this call for (pre-)proposals include the evaluation of compliance with relevant ethical requirements. **Applicants should always describe any relevant ethical aspects in their project plans**. If a research permit or a statement by an ethics committee is required for the implementation of the project, applicants should provide information on the permits or permit proposals.

Researchers are required to adhere to the principles of good scientific practice and to follow the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity by ALLEA[69] (All European Academies) and the Global Code of Conduct for Research in Resource-Poor Settings[70]. **Projects must comply with the "Do no significant harm principle"**[71].

Any proposal which seems to contravene fundamental ethical principles will not be selected and will be excluded from the selection procedure by the IEC, or by the Ethics

[69] https://allea.org/code-of-conduct/
[70] https://www.globalcodeofconduct.org/
[71] https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/support/faq/15485

experts. Judgment of the significance of ethical issues will be made by using the criteria published by the European Commission in its guidelines on 'How to Complete your Ethics Self-Assessment'[72]. Where activities undertaken in non-EU countries raise ethical issues, the applicants must ensure that the research conducted outside the EU is legal in at least one EU Member State.

4.7 Submission procedure

A two-step procedure will apply to this Joint Transnational Call; at Step1 the submission of pre-proposals is mandatory, and at Step 2, applicants must submit full proposals upon invitation.

(Pre-)proposals must be submitted electronically using the Electronic Proposal Submission System (EPSS): https://proposals.etag.ee/sustainable-blue.

Instructions for electronic submission will be available on the Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership website at https://www.bluepartnership.eu/funding-opportunities, in September 2025.

For any technical questions regarding the submission procedure using the EPSS, please contact the SBEP EPSS technical helpdesk: epss.sbep@g.etag.ee.

Please note that:

- *The online system may experience high traffic volumes in the last hours before the submission deadline and it is therefore highly recommended to submit the final version of the pre/full proposal well in advance of the deadline to avoid any last-minute technical problems;*
- *The submission system will close at 15:00 CET of the deadline date set for both Step 1 and Step 2. Please note that the JCS can only ensure responses to email support requests up to noon CET;*
- *Requests for extensions of the deadline due to last-minute technical problems will not be considered. Any proposals not correctly submitted at this moment will be declared ineligible;*

[72] https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/common/guidance/how-to-complete-your-ethics-self-assessment_en.pdf

- *All complete proposals will be submitted automatically when the platform closes, to avoid a situation where an applicant does not have time to click on the submit button. In this situation, the proposal will be evaluated as it stands;*
- *Some partners of the consortia may also be required to submit an application to their respective national/regional funding organisations. Please consult the national/regional regulations (Annex B) and contact the designated NCPs, for further information about the procedures to follow.*

4.7.1 Step 1: submission of a Pre-Proposal (mandatory step)

Applicants must submit pre-proposals in Step 1 as it is not possible to enter the procedure at a later stage. Applicants must also submit any national documentation required by each participating funding organization according to national rules.

A pre-proposal eligibility check will be carried out both at the international level (by the JCS, based on the general eligibility rules) and at the national/regional level (by the NCPs) according to the funding organisations' rules. The eligible pre-proposals will be sent to the scientific evaluation.

Submission on the EPSS:

- *The consortium coordinator (PI) creates an account on the EPSS (https://proposals.etag.ee/sustainable-blue);*
- *The consortium coordinator can enter, edit, and save the electronic forms, add partners and self-funded partners to the consortium, upload the project description (5 pages), the required budget for each partner and submit the proposal. Partners can enter and edit their own data only. Each partner and self-funded partner must connect itself to the EPSS before the submission deadline, to validate its participation with the project consortium;*
- *All information must be written in English. The proposal is a self-contained document. Links and hyperlinks are not allowed;*
- *Information entered or uploaded on the platform can be updated until the submission deadline;*
- *It is very important to note that the information given in the pre-proposals is binding. It is not possible to change the content of the project between step 1 and step 2.*

If applicants have successfully passed the Step 1 (eligibility checks and evaluation), they will be invited to submit a full proposal at Step 2.

4.7.2 Step 2: submission of a Full Proposal (only for invited applicants)

Only invited applicants can submit full proposals: information (in English) on the project consortia, **a 16-page description of the project** and the required budget for each partner must be submitted on the EPSS. All rules described in Step 1 also applies to Step 2.

Applicants should note the important following information:

- *Information on the core data (including Partners details, funding requested, PFO to which financial request is made, cannot be changed in full proposals, unless explicitly requested by evaluators, by a PFO or by the CSC. They, however, must comply with the general rules of the call and the rules of the relevant PFO. Any request for changes must be addressed by email to the JCS and the NCPs and will be reviewed by all PFOs involved in the proposal. The change(s) will have to be declared on the EPSS.*
- *In addition, as indicated in Step 1, the information given in the pre-proposals is binding. No major changes regarding the proposals' content will be allowed by the CSC between the pre-proposals and full proposals;* ***Minor changes may be possible to improve your proposal if the objectives remain unchanged.*** *Applicants must explicitly indicate in their full proposal and into the EPSS the changes made as compared to the pre-proposals;*
- ***Minor changes to the budget*** *must be allowed by the relevant PFO; there is no need to inform the JCS. The change(s) will have to be declared on the EPSS.*
- *Regarding changes in the composition of the consortium i.e. changes (addition, removal or replacement) of Partners and Self-funded Partners (as institutions):* ***no change will be allowed, except in case of force majeure, or if explicitly requested by the CSC*** *for the particular cases of i) ineligibility of a partner and/or ii) invitation to add a partner that will request funds to an undersubscribed PFO; the list of the undersubscribed PFO will be provided to coordinators invited to submit a full proposal at the end of the first step selection process.*
- *No change in the PI of the project Coordinator will be allowed, except in case of force majeure.*

- *In terms of process, the request for the change must be submitted to the JCS, at least one week before the deadline set for the submission of full proposals, it will be discussed on a case-by-case basis by the CSC. Any change in the composition of the consortium must comply with the general eligibility rules of the call, and the national/regional regulations of the relevant PFOs. The eligibility of the new Partners must be verified with the relevant PFOs before submitting the proposal. The change(s) will have to be declared on the EPSS.*

Please indicate the acronym of your project when contacting the JCS and/or your NCP.

4.8 Evaluation of proposals

A two-step evaluation procedure will apply at both Step 1 (for the pre-proposals evaluation) and Step 2 (for the full proposal evaluation).

4.8.1 The International Evaluation Committee (IEC)

The CSC will establish an international evaluation committee (IEC). The composition of evaluation committees will consider the gender and geographical balance.

The IEC will comprise international scientific experts from the relevant research areas covered in this call. The IEC composition should allow covering, as far as possible, the range of priority areas of the present call. Proposals will be accessible to the CSC, the IEC members, the independent observer, the representative(s) of DCU(IOC/UNESCO) as observer(s), and the ethic experts (see 4.8.4. Ethic clearance).

All collected data will be handled in accordance with the GDPR, see also section 4.5.

IEC members, Independent observer, DCU representative(s) (observer(s), Ethics experts will have to sign a confidentiality, non-disclosure and conflict of interest policy and will have to declare all their potential conflicts of interest with submitted pre-proposals at Step 1 and with submitted full proposals at Step 2. The JCS will also check that no conflict of interest exists concerning the proposals evaluated.

IEC members and Ethic experts cannot be applicants in the joint call and cannot evaluate proposals with which they declared a conflict of interest, to ensure a fair evaluation process and equal treatment of applicants. The IEC will be headed by a Chair and a Vice-

Chair. The Chair and the Vice-Chair will be regular members of the IEC with the added duties of moderating the IEC meeting and conveying the results of the discussions to the CSC. The Chair and Vice-Chair of the IEC will be selected from a country not represented within the CSC to avoid as much as possible conflicts of interest. Members take part in the IEC as independent experts and do not represent any organisation, nor can they send any replacements. This means that their work on this Committee does not represent any organisation or nation. The same applies to Ethic Experts. An independent observer is invited to the IEC meeting to assess the conformity of the general procedure with the EU regulation.

All eligible proposals will be subject to a scientific evaluation by IEC members, one of the IEC members will be nominated as a rapporteur. They must assess the proposal and prepare individual written evaluation reports, in advance of the IEC meeting. Details about the assessment criteria and scoring of proposals are detailed in 4.8.3.

During the IEC meeting, the evaluation results for each proposal will be presented by the evaluators. The IEC will discuss the proposals, agree on the final individual score for each criterion and the overall score for each proposal and establish the final ranking of proposals based exclusively on the set of criteria defined.

The decisions of the IEC should be taken collectively, preferably by consensus or by a simple majority of the panel members in case consensus cannot be reached. The IEC will produce a final Evaluation Summary Report for each proposal, which will be transmitted to the applicants (without scores).

4.8.2 Evaluation procedures

Step 1 (pre-proposals)

1. *Eligibility checks*

Pre-proposals will be checked for eligibility at both the international level by the JCS (see criteria defined in 4.6.1) and at the national/regional level by the relevant funding

organisations according to their national/regional criteria (see national/regional regulations; Annex B).

2. Scientific Evaluation

The eligible pre-proposals will be evaluated by a minimum of two independent evaluators of the IEC, and as far as possible, by three independent evaluators of the IEC who will be assigned by matching expert profiles with the need for pre-proposals evaluation. One of the IEC members will be nominated as a Rapporteur.

The evaluation of each pre-proposal will be based on the following criteria:

- **Excellence (Threshold: 3/5)**
- **Impact (Threshold: 3/5)**

During the IEC meeting, the evaluators will present the evaluation results of each pre-proposal. The IEC will discuss pre-proposals and agree on the final scores for each criterion.

The final score will be calculated by summing up the calculated average scores of the two criteria given by the IEC members for each criterion.

A ranking list of pre-proposals will be produced, including only pre-proposals that meet the minimum threshold, *i.e.*, 3 out of 5 in each criterion.

3. Decision

This Step 1 aims to identify the best proposals to proceed to step 2 and to ensure a balance between requested and available funds at the national level.

The ranked eligible pre-proposals will be sent to the CSC and be divided into 3 groups, according to their scores: Group A (highest evaluation scores), Group B (medium evaluation scores), and Group C (under the threshold scores). All pre-proposals in Group A will be invited to Step 2. Among the pre-proposals in Group B, proposals will be selected

for step 2, considering the ranking list, the representativeness of all PFOs, and the funding ratio limits. Group C will be dismissed for their low ranking and unavailability of funding.

Consortium coordinators will be informed of the outcomes by the Joint call secretariat and, if appropriate, invited to submit a full proposal on the EPSS as well as any national documentation required by each PFO according to national rules.

Step 2 (full proposals)

1. Eligibility checks

After the submission deadline for full proposals, the submitted full proposals will be checked (by the JCS, and NCPs) to ensure that they meet the eligibility criteria. Full proposals not meeting the formal conditions will be rejected without further review.

2. Scientific evaluation

All eligible full proposals will be subject to a scientific evaluation by at least three independent reviewers of the IEC who will be assigned by matching expert's profiles with the need for full proposals evaluation. One of the IEC members will be nominated as a rapporteur.

The evaluation of each full proposal will be based on the following criteria:

- ***Excellence (Threshold: 3/5)***
- ***Impact (Threshold: 3/5)***
- ***Quality and efficiency of implementation (Threshold: 3/5)***

During the IEC meeting, the evaluators will present the evaluation results of each proposal. The IEC will discuss full proposals and agree on the final scores for each criterion.

The final scores will be calculated by summing up the calculated average scores of the three criteria given by the IEC members for each criterion.

The threshold on the final score is 10/15: no project with a lower score will be funded.

The final ranking list will be produced based on the final scores, including only full proposals that meet the minimum threshold, *i.e.*, 3 out of 5 in each criterion, and threshold on the final score *i.e.,* 10 out of 15.

3. Decision

The final ranking list will be forwarded to the CSC, which will meet to decide on the projects to be recommended for funding by PFOs.

For this decision, the CSC will strictly follow the order of the ranking list from the IEC and the funding availability.

The projects with the same final scores will be prioritised by the CSC taking into consideration the following principles. The CSC can decide how to use these principles providing that they are used uniformly for all proposals:

- *Maximizing the total number of projects funded and thus optimizing the amount of EU financial support to the Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership call.*
- *Maximizing the number of countries/regions involved in the projects funded;*
- *Ensuring a balance between sea-basins involved in the projects funded;*
- *Assuring a good balance between different priority areas of the call;*
- *Assuring a gender balance in the research activities;*
- *Promoting the allocation of the EU financial support pro rata, based on the actual contributions of the PFOs involved in the proposals.*

4.8.3 Ethic clearance

The full-proposals recommended for funding by the CSC will be subject to a final ethical clearance by ethics experts, for alignment with ethical norms and regulation[73].

Upon demand by the ethics experts, additional documents and tasks may be requested to the concerned consortium. The Ethics experts may suggest additional conditions that will have to be fulfilled during the project implementation.
Only those proposals approved by both the scientific evaluation and ethical clearance will be considered by the CSC for the final decision on projects to be recommended for funding.

Official letters on eligibility and evaluation results will be sent to Consortium coordinators. Evaluation summary reports will be provided to the Coordinators. The Coordinators are responsible for forwarding all of the information to the proposal partners/self-funded partners. Following receipt of the outcome letter, the negotiation for the grants of successful projects will start with each concerned PFO.

4.8.4 Evaluation criteria and scoring system

The evaluation criteria (and sub-criteria) used by the IEC are those used for Horizon Europe proposals[74], as described below.

Note that Projects must comply with ethical principles (including the highest standards of research integrity) and applicable EU, international and national law. Applicants must have

[73] Regulation (EU) 2021/695 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 28 April 2021 establishing Horizon Europe – the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation, laying down its rules for participation and dissemination, and repealing Regulations (EU) No 1290/2013 and (EU) No 1291/2013 (Text with EEA relevance). http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2021/695/2024-03-01; DIRECTIVE 2010/63/EU OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 22 September 2010 on the protection of animals used for scientific purposes

[74] General Annex D of the HE Work Programme: https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/horizon/wp-call/2023-2024/wp-13-general-annexes_horizon-2023-2024_en.pdf

completed the ethics self-assessment as part of their application at Stage 2. For more information, see How to complete your ethics self-assessment.[75] Applicants must also comply with the EU taxonomy.

Excellence (threshold : 3 out of 5)

- Clarity and pertinence of the project's objectives, and the extent to which the proposed work is ambitious and goes beyond the state of the art.

- Soundness of the proposed: overall methodology, including the underlying concepts, models, assumptions, inter-disciplinary approaches, appropriate consideration of the gender dimension in research and innovation content, and the quality of open science practices, including sharing and management of research outputs and engagement of citizens, civil society and end-users where appropriate.

Impact (threshold : 3 out of 5)

- Credibility of the pathways to achieve the expected outcomes and impacts specified in the work programme, and the likely scale and significance of the contributions from the project.

- Suitability and quality of the measures to maximise expected outcomes and impacts, as set out in the dissemination and exploitation plan, including communication activities.

Quality and efficiency of the implementation (threshold: 3 out of 5)

- Quality and effectiveness of the work plan, assessment of risks, and appropriateness of the effort assigned to work packages, and the resources overall.

[75] https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/common/guidance/how-to-complete-your-ethics-self-assessment_en.pdf

- Capacity and role of each participant, and the extent to which the consortium as a whole brings together the necessary expertise.

Individual scores will be attributed only to the three main criteria, even though the IEC experts will evaluate all sub-criteria described below in the scoring system.

Each criterion will be scored out of 5 (no half marks allowed) based on the following scoring system. The threshold for each criterion is 3 out of 5. Any project with a lower score for one of the criteria or an overall score lower than 10 at Step 2 will not be considered for funding.

Evaluators will identify strengths and weaknesses (if any) and provide context for their comments based on the application, *i.e.,* evaluators will be asked to score (pre-) proposals as they were submitted, rather than on their potential if certain changes were to be made. When an evaluator identifies substantial shortcomings, he/she must reflect this by awarding a lower score for the criterion concerned. There should be consistency between the numerical scores and written comments.

Scoring system:

0 – LIMITED - The (pre-)proposal fails to address the criterion or cannot be assessed due to missing or incomplete information.

1 – POOR - The criterion is inadequately addressed, or there are serious inherent weaknesses.

2 – FAIR - The (pre-)proposal broadly addresses the criterion, but there are significant weaknesses.

3 – GOOD - The (pre-)proposal addresses the criterion well, but several shortcomings are present.

4 – VERY GOOD - The (pre-)proposal addresses the criterion very well, but a small number of shortcomings are present.

5 – EXCELLENT - The (pre-)proposal successfully addresses all relevant aspects of the criterion. Any shortcomings are minor.

4.8.5 Redress procedure

A mechanism will be established according to Article 30 of the Regulation (EU) 2021/695 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 28 April 2021[76] to ensure the independent and fair treatment of complaints related to this call. Applicants can challenge the evaluation outcome if they suspect a breach in the application of the evaluation and selection procedures. This redress procedure only covers the procedural aspects of the evaluation and/or eligibility checks, including the national/regional eligibility checks. The redress will not call into question the scientific or technical judgement of appropriately qualified experts of the IEC.

In this case, they shall submit their request for redress to the JCS (sbep.call-secretariat@uefiscdi.ro) via email, up to 14 calendar days after the date of dispatch of the evaluation outcome email by the JCS at the end of each step (first or second step). The (pre-) proposal outcome email containing the results of the evaluation will give information on the redress procedure, which is described below.

Admissibility of request for redress

For a request for redress to be admissible the following conditions must be met:

- *The request for redress must be submitted by the coordinator of the (pre-)proposal to which the request for redress relates*
- *Only one request for redress per (pre-)proposal will be considered*
- *The request for redress must be addressed to the IEC Chair*
- *The request for redress must be submitted via email within the 14 calendar days deadline.*
  - *The request for redress must contain the following minimum information:*
    - *The name of the call for (pre-)proposals;*
    - *The (pre-)proposal number;*
    - *The acronym and the title of the (pre-)proposal;*
    - *A description of the alleged shortcomings of the evaluation procedure.*

[76] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2021/695/oj

The request for redress must demonstrate a procedural irregularity, factual error, manifest error of assessment, misuse of powers, or a conflict of interests. Requests for redress that do not meet the above conditions do not deal with the evaluation of a specific (pre-) proposal or express mere disagreement with the result or the reasoning of the evaluation might be judged as not suitable for redress.

Procedure

Upon receipt of a request for redress, an acknowledgement of receipt will be sent by the JCS within 7 calendar days. The acknowledgement shall report the redress process and the anticipated date by which a decision on the request for redress will be communicated to the coordinator of the (pre-)proposal.

All requests for redress received by the 14 calendar days deadline will be processed together and the decision will be communicated to the coordinator of the (pre-)proposal within 14 calendar days from the deadline for submitting the requests for redress.

The IEC Chair will establish an internal redress committee chaired by the IEC Chair and comprised of the Independent Observer, and one representative of the consortium. The role of the redress committee is to evaluate the requests for redress according to the procedure, ensuring fair and equal treatment of applicants, with the support of the JCS (or the Chair of the CSC) and one representative per research funding organisation concerned by the proposal requesting a redress procedure, if needed. The Committee will provide its opinion on the implementation of the evaluation procedure, based on the available information related to the proposal and its evaluation, and will make a recommendation to the IEC Chair, who is in charge of deciding, except for national eligibility.

A negative national eligibility check of a PFO cannot be overruled by the IEC Chair. Requests for redress on national eligibility decisions will be assessed by the PFO responsible for the national eligibility check, which will justify its decision to the Chair, to prove that national funding rules listed in the call text have been applied correctly.

For Step 1: Only the proposals eligible at national level will be allowed to participate in Step 2

For Step 2: The redress procedure may lead to a re-evaluation of all or part of the proposal by independent experts not involved in the previous evaluation or to the confirmation of the initial evaluation.

A re-evaluation will only be carried out if the request for redress shows that the selection procedure was flawed by a breach which affects the evaluation outcome and the final decision on whether to fund a proposal. This means, for example, that a problem relating to one evaluation criterion will not lead to a re-evaluation if the proposal has failed anyway on another criterion or if even by adding the maximum points for this criterion, the final score remains below the funding threshold.

The score following any re-evaluation will be regarded as definitive. It may be lower than the original score. All requests for redress will be treated in confidence and will not prejudice future applications.

5.0 PROJECT'S IMPLEMENTATION

5.1 Contractual relationships

This partnership call is a collaboration between funding organisations with the aim of establishing transnational research collaboration. The contracts with project partners are the responsibility of the national/regional PFOs. Formal funding decisions are made by the PFOs and funding will be provided according to applicable national/ regional funding regulations. Once the Coordinators have been informed of the evaluation outcome, the partners within the projects recommended for funding will either be contacted by the PFOs or will need to contact the PFOs of their respective countries/regions themselves. This in accordance to the applicable regulations and practices, in order to start the contract negotiation process and accomplish the remaining steps until the project can start.

Because of the fragmented nature of the funding, care will be taken to ensure that the individual contracts are synchronised both in time and content so that the project consortium can deliver transnational outputs as described in the project proposal. The national/regional PFOs must ensure that common SBEP conditions are met (*e.g.*, the common start date of a given project, reporting requirements, etc.). All project partners/self-funded partners within the projects recommended for funding shall start no

later than June 2027. Please be aware that applicable European regulations on all aspects of funding must also be respected, e.g., state aid regulations.

For the whole duration of the contract, it is the responsibility of the Project Coordinator to inform the Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership consortium about any changes in the project, *i.e.*, modifications of the work plan, the project consortium, or the contract. The communication should be transmitted through the Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership Monitoring Group.

Any financial issue is under the responsibility of each national/regional PFO involved in the approved project.

5.2 Contractual requirements

In this call for proposals, being co-funded by the European Union, project partners are considered as third parties of PFOs. All project partners commit to the following articles of the Horizon Europe Annotated Grant Agreement[77] and related regulations of Annex 5:

- *Conflicts of interest (Article 12)*
- *Confidentiality and security (Article 13)*
- *Ethics and values (Article 14)*
- *Visibility (Article 17)*
- *Specific rules for carrying out the action (Article 18)*
- *Information obligations (Article 19)*
- *Record-keeping (Article 20)*

Recipients of the grants should include clauses ensuring the rights of the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) and other bodies mentioned in Article 25 (e.g. granting authority, the European Court of Auditors (ECA) as per Articles 22 and 23 of the Grant Agreement) i.e. the right to carry out checks, reviews, audits and investigations on the project partners, and in particular to audit the payments received. If access is denied by the project partners, the costs will be rejected.

[77] https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/common/guidance/aga_en.pdf

5.3 Consortium Agreement

All project partners including self-funded partners are required to sign a Consortium Agreement (CA) before the official project starts or in any case no later than three months after the project starts. The CA should address matters on the management of project activities, finances, IPR and how to avoid and solve disputes which might be detrimental to the completion of the project. It will be the responsibility of the project coordinators to draw up a CA suitable for their own group.

Upon request, the CA must be made available to the national or regional PFOs, together with any other information required by national or regional regulations. Funding organisations might require the CA to release the funds. Support for the preparation of a consortium agreement can be found on the DESCA webpage[78].

5.4 Project monitoring and reporting

Funded projects will be required to submit via the Project Coordinator a mid-term report and a final report on research and activity progress (submission procedure will be specified at the kick-off of the projects). Some PFOs may request additional specific reports.

The funded projects must be completed within three years and are part of an international research programme (SBEP) for which some joint activities will be organised, in particular:

- *a Kick-Off meeting, at the beginning of the funding period (mid 2027), to explain objectives and expected results;*
- *a mid-term meeting (October 2028), to present and discuss the mid-term reports, preliminary results, and future work;*
- *a final meeting (April 2030), to present and disseminate the project results and main outcomes.*

[78] DESCA Model Consortium Agreement - DESCA 2020 Model Consortium Agreement

The coordinators of the funded projects are expected to actively engage in these three joint activities. Accordingly, the cost of attendance at the physical meetings should be foreseen in their proposals´ budget.

The objectives of these joint activities are the monitoring of the projects funded through the SBEP and the provision of networking and future collaboration opportunities. When possible, the meetings will be organised back-to-back with other relevant workshops/events. The coordinators of the funded projects are expected to get involved in other relevant Partnership 's activities: training, communication and dissemination (symposium, conferences, portfolio etc.) and must foresee the costs in their budget.

Besides this, on behalf of the consortium, the Project Coordinator will be required to submit two written progress reports (mid-term and final). All consortium partners will have to deliver input for these reports. The Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership will provide a template for this task.

Funding recipients must ensure that all outcomes (publications, etc.) of transnational SBEP projects include a proper acknowledgement of the SBEP. All the publications resulting from funded projects must be published in adherence to the EC Open Science Policy (see Annex F).

5.5 Dissemination requirements

Dissemination of project outputs is obligatory and is the responsibility of the funded project partners. Detailed plans for dissemination of the results must be described in the proposals and are considered in the evaluation procedure. This can be organised in the form of various communication routes such as scientific papers, posters, course or training material, web-based tools, stakeholder involvement, workshops, or direct intervention towards end users. Dissemination to national end-users is necessary for all partner countries. A dissemination plan will be requested for the full proposal and should specify how the planned activities will contribute to the impact of the project.

Further, the project partners must acknowledge the transnational funding of the SBEP under Horizon Europe and the individual national/regional funding organisations in any document that is published (in written, oral, or electronic form) within the research project

sbep.call-secretariat@uefiscdi.ro

www.bluepartnership.eu

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