

President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen

Rue de la Loi / Wetstraat 200

1049 Brussels

cc: European Parliament (EP) Conference of Presidents

EP Conference of Committee Chairs

EP Coordinators for ENVI and PECH

Brussels, 29 October 2024,

Subject: The Ocean in the structure of the new Commission

Dear President von der Leyen,

We are writing to express our concerns regarding the proposed structure of the new Commission, specifically concerning the Fisheries and Oceans Commissioner, the scope of his portfolio, and his positioning within the wider Commission architecture.

In September, you proposed a new structure for the College of Commissioners, under which the Commissioner-designate for Fisheries and Oceans, Costas Kadis, will work under the guidance of the Vice-President for Cohesion and Reforms.

The EU's maritime territory is larger than its entire landmass, and the ocean is an increasingly important geopolitical as well as economic asset. The ocean acts as an essential carbon sink, mitigates climate change, regulates weather patterns, produces oxygen and hosts 80% of the planet's biodiversity. It is vital for food security, health, well-being, and livelihoods. Given the importance of the ocean for Europe and our prosperity, we are deeply concerned by the decision to separate the ocean from the environment portfolio, dividing these crucial areas not only into two distinct Commissioner portfolios, but also into two distinct teams within the College. Placing the ocean portfolio under the purview of the Vice-President for Cohesion and Reforms breaks the essential links between the ocean and the water, energy and climate portfolios.

This restructuring also undermines the continuity established during the previous two mandates, where environment, fisheries, and oceans were part of a single portfolio. We have learned valuable lessons from the past, and it is concerning to see these insights dismissed at the start of this mandate. Before the integration of these portfolios, a siloed approach to fisheries which disregarded its reliance on a healthy marine environment resulted in only 5 EU fish stocks being sustainably exploited, and the profitability of the fishing fleet was, on average, negative. For the past decade, the European Commission has been key in rebalancing discussions around ocean issues, which extend far beyond any single economic sector.

It is proposed amid an unprecedented crisis for the Ocean, which jeopardises its resilience and the livelihoods of many Europeans. European citizens have high expectations, and the EU holds big responsibilities: thriving blue communities and a robust blue economy depend on a healthy, abundant, and biodiverse ocean. We are concerned that the proposed structure does not adequately address the challenges we face nor the concerns they expressed. According to a recent Eurobarometer survey, environmental issues and climate change rank as the third most significant challenges facing the EU (35%)¹, following the war in Ukraine and migration. Additionally, 84% of respondents believe that environmental legislation is necessary to protect their country's environment, and 78% acknowledge that environmental issues directly impact their daily lives and health².

Of course, as you rightly noted in your mission letters to the new members of the College, no standalone priorities can be effectively addressed in isolation and dealt with by a single Commissioner. And in your mission letter to Costas Kadis, you emphasised the need for a European Oceans Pact to ensure coherence among all ocean-related policies, an initiative we wholeheartedly support and advocated for in the months leading up to the elections. However, we firmly believe that this initiative can only succeed with a dedicated Commissioner for the Ocean, collaborating closely with the Commissioners for Climate, Net-Zero and Clean Growth, for Environment, Water Resilience and Competitive Circular Economy, and for Energy.

For these reasons, we urge you to reconsider the positioning of the Ocean Commissioner within the overall architecture of the College and to place him under the guidance of the Executive Vice President for Clean, Just, and Competitive Transition.

We look forward to a constructive dialogue with you to ensure a healthy ocean that supports life and the livelihoods of many Europeans. We hope to meet with you to discuss the content of the Oceans Pact at your earliest convenience.

Yours sincerely,

Ariel BRUNNER
Regional Director

Birdlife Europe & Central Asia

Anaïs BERTHIER
Head of Brussels

ClientEarth

Pascale MOEHRLE
Vice-President

Oceana in Europe

Dr Monica VERBEEK
Executive Director

Seas At Risk

Antidia CITORES
Head of Lobbying

Surfrider Foundation Europe

Ester ASIN
Director

WWF European Policy Office



ClientEarth

OCEANA

SEAS AT RISK

SURFRIDER
FOUNDATION EUROPE



¹ <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3232>

² <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3173>