Coalition 2030 Opening Statement for Joint Oireachtas Committee on Fisheries and Maritime Affairs

Re: Pre-legislative scrutiny of the Maritime Area Planning (Marine Protected Areas) (Amendment) Bill 2026.

Tuesday 10th November at 11 a.m. in Committee Room CR2, LH 2000, Leinster House

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Coalition 2030 Attendees

1. Niall McGuirk, Coordinator Coalition 2030
2. Jenny Bortoluzzi, Environmental Pillar, MAREIRE Project Coordinator
3. Grace Carr, Irish Wildlife Trust, Marine Policy Officer

Nial McGuirk, Coordinator Coalition 2030

Chairperson and Members of the Committee,

We wish to thank members of the Committee and the Secretariat for the opportunity to speak today. Coalition 2030 is an alliance of more than 75 civil society organisations and trade unions, working together to hold Ireland accountable for its commitment to achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030.

Coalition 2030 welcomes the publication of the General Scheme of the Maritime Area Planning (Marine Protected Areas) (Amendment) Bill 2026.

Ireland's maritime territory is vast, and yet, it faces significant threats from overfishing, habitat destruction, and the impacts of climate change.

Coalition 2030's vision is for Ireland to fully implement the SDGs at home and to contribute to their achievement internationally. The SDGs present an interconnected social and environmental policy roadmap, setting out guiding principles which, if enacted, would ensure that we stayed on course towards a sustainable future. While Ireland has taken meaningful steps towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, progress remains uneven[1] and as Minister O'Brien stated at the United Nations High Level Political Forum in July of this year that the Government[2] is committed to redoubling its efforts in an attempt to

[1] 2026 Sustainable Progress Index
[2] National Statement by Minister Darragh O'Brien at the UN High-Level Political Forum 2026

speed up the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. Sustainable Development Goal 14 calls for the conservation and sustainable use of our oceans and the MPA Bill can assist with the implementation of this Goal.

Coalition 2030 has stated that any policy commitments in Ireland should include mandatory SDG conditions to ensure progress across all sectors in Irish society, enabling Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development and ensuring that new policy measures are aligned with the Goals. These commitments can subsequently be measured and reported against.

Our member organisation colleagues will give a more detailed analysis of specific aspects of the bill.

The European Commission's strategy on intergenerational fairness expresses the Commission's ambition to ensure that today's choices contribute positively also to tomorrow's opportunities. Coalition 2030's Call To Action on Future Generations Report[3] calls for decisions to be made for those born and those yet to be born. Important decisions in the MPA will affect people for generations to come and we need to ensure we make the correct decisions for all.

Jenny Bortoluzzi representing the MAREIRE project (for the Environmental Pillar)

Chair, members of the Committee,

MAREIRE is a project within the Environmental Pillar whose aim is to help find a balance between mitigating the climate crisis and protecting marine biodiversity through research and advocacy in the process of offshore renewable energy development in Ireland.

State of the Marine environment

Our marine environment is currently in an unhealthy state. The latest Article 17 Habitats Directive report[4] on the status of protected habitats and species in Ireland showed that 12 out of 14 marine habitats were not in good condition. Just under 10% of Ireland's maritime area is designated as a protected area but how we are currently managing them is not working beneficially for nature or for people.

In fact, a European Court of Auditors' report[5] has found the EU is unlikely to meet its 2030 targets to protect 30% of its seas and that simply expanding the network of protected areas will not be enough without effective restrictions on the activities that damage marine environments. They find that many sites lack adequate conservation measures and climate adaptation planning, and report problems with staff and funding. Ireland was one of three countries selected for close examination and was found to have no management plans in place for the 15 Natura 2000 sites which were analysed and could not provide any data on pressures or conservation outcomes for 10 of those areas.

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[3] A Call To Action for Future Generations
[4] NPWS Article 17 report on the Status of EU protected habitats and species in Ireland
[5] Special report 25/2026: Marine protected areas

We do generally know however that pollution and nutrient enrichment from agricultural and other types of land run-off; habitat disturbance and degradation; destructive fishing and aquaculture practices; invasive species; infrastructure construction; dredging and geophysical seismic exploration; and climate change are all pressure factors which impact significantly and cumulatively on our marine habitats and species.

Benefits for Climate Change and the economy

On the topic of climate change, ocean conservation and restoration goes beyond international treaties and agreements. SDG 13 calls on member states to take urgent action to combat Climate Change, which, itself, has resulted in devastating impacts on the environment, people and the economy. The ocean is our most important asset in fighting climate change. It has absorbed around a quarter of human carbon dioxide emissions and more than 90% of excess heat, but it can only keep doing so if it is healthy. For Ireland, whose maritime area is roughly seven times its land mass, protecting blue carbon habitats such as seagrass meadows, saltmarshes and seabed sediments (which store large amounts of carbon) is a climate measure in its own right, and a well-managed network of Marine Protected Areas is one of the most cost-effective tools the State has.

As DCEE is currently advancing plans to develop the National Designated Maritime Area Plan (NDMAP) for Offshore Renewable Energy operating under the MAP Act, an essential step towards fighting the climate crisis, it is crucial that the delay in legislation for MPAs does not result in a missed opportunity for proper marine spatial planning which is ecosystem-based and follows international best practice. Areas likely to become MPAs, that are ecologically important, or important blue carbon habitats, which are already helping to mitigate the climate crisis, must be taken into account early in this process and these different sectors and interests should be planned simultaneously, if not together. This is essential to reduce environmental impacts of ORE but will also result in reduced risks to developers, and improved social licenses for these projects, which are essential to meeting our climate targets.

Additionally, having effective MPAs that identify the pressures to the environment, and manage them appropriately, is vital if we are to reach our legal obligations under the EU Nature Restoration Law. This will not only benefit the habitats we are restoring, we will see benefits ranging across society in different ecosystem services. It has been shown that for every 1 euro invested in nature, benefits ranging from 8 to 38 euros are returned.

Stakeholder engagement and Democratic Participation

We are particularly happy to be here today as the voice and input of Civil Society are particularly important. Shrinking civic space and reduced opportunities for dialogue are growing concerns across Europe. It has also been encouraging to see DCEE's efforts to engage with ourselves and other sectors and communities in the different processes underway currently.

The MPA LIFE team have already been running consultations and workshops relating to the ecological sensitivity analysis, and the NDMAP team has also been carrying out extensive consultation with stakeholders to identify suitable areas for ORE development. But public and community engagement has to go beyond consultation, particularly in the context of MPAs which will require ongoing management, monitoring, and enforcement, potentially indefinitely, and legislation must enshrine meaningful engagement and participation at every stage as a requirement, which is currently lacking in the bill.

There must also be cross- and intra- departmental coordination if we are to see the benefits of MPAs including the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and the Marine which has responsibility for managing fishing activities. Without all departments on board and up to speed with the process and objectives, we will not protect and restore our marine environment or ensure a sustainable livelihood for fishing communities into the future.

Thank you for your attention, go raibh mile maith agaibh.