Statement on behalf of the European Union and its Member States
2020 UN Ocean Conference Preparatory Meeting
New York, 4-5 February 2020

Elements for the Declaration

Co-Chairs,

The inclusion of SDG14 in Agenda 2030 recognises the importance of conservation and sustainable use of oceans, seas and their resources for sustainable development.

Unfortunately, we have to start by noting that, as pointed out in the Secretary General's background note 'existing actions for the implementation of SDG14 are insufficient and that the four SDG14 targets due this year will not be achieved.

Despite repeated commitments, including in the Call for Action adopted in 2017, the latest scientific reports paint a bleak picture of the status of the oceans, climate and biodiversity with negative or worsening trends.

This lack of improvement is of serious concern to the EU and its Member States. As highlighted in the Council Conclusions we adopted in 2019, a clean, healthy and productive ocean is a prerequisite for sustainable ocean-based economies. The decline in the status of marine ecosystems is eroding the resource base on which blue economy depends and on which many countries increasingly depend to meet their legitimate development aspirations and to find solutions for their sustainable development.

Science and new technologies can help to provide solutions and to help us meet our obligations and commitments under different instruments, such as the Paris Agreement, and diminish our impacts on oceans to achieve sustainable development.

This is even more necessary as many countries are developing ocean-based economies which increase pressures on marine space and ecosystems. This requires better decision-making and

planning, including of infrastructure, on the basis of sound scientific advice. The role of a strong science-policy interface in this respect should be stressed.

We would like to provide a few examples of where science and innovation can assist the scaling-up of actions and contribute to the achievement of SDG14:

– Addressing all sources of pollution such as by reducing the use of fertilisers in agriculture and reducing greenhouse gas emissions and noise from shipping;
– Supporting the transition to a Circular Economy and addressing the full life cycle of plastics to prevent further marine plastic litter such as through new materials that are biodegradable under natural conditions;
– Supporting the achievement of climate neutrality including by diminishing emissions such as through renewable ocean energies;
– Halting biodiversity loss in the context of Post-2020 Biodiversity Framework by providing qualitative assessments of the areas which are or need to be restored and protected, and ensuring that ecologically representative and interconnected MPAs as well as the other effective conservation measures and tools are effective;
– Ensuring more sustainable fisheries and aquaculture, including from an ecosystem perspective, including by better monitoring and tracking of catches, by-catch and products along the whole market chain.

Achieving these outcomes will provide synergistic benefits, both between objectives of different Goals, as well as among the SDG 14 targets. For example:

- Tackling pollution will not only improve ocean health but will also improve its productivity, increasing economic returns, and with positive impacts on human health and seafood safety;

- Climate change mitigation, adaptation and nature-based solutions such as the restoration of coastal ecosystems will benefit biodiversity conservation and fisheries objectives, will increase coastal resilience to the impacts of climate change and provide economic opportunities such as through tourism;

- Well-identified, managed and enforced marine protected areas can provide benefits by increasing fish biomass and biodiversity, with greater economic benefits from fisheries and tourism;
- Achieving MSY targets will improve economic returns for fishers and also improve the status of the marine environment;
- Climate change, ocean degradation and biodiversity loss are strongly interconnected. Climate change is a direct and existential threat to life on earth including in oceans and seas. Meeting commitments under the Paris Agreement, would have beneficial impacts on the oceans and also reduce impacts from extreme weather events.

Urgent and collaborative action, based on sound science is required to tackle these challenges and improve the implementation of SDG14, and obtain the resulting synergistic benefits. This necessitates holistic management of ocean space and activities practised therein, in line with the ecosystem-based approach and taking into account the precautionary principle, which in turn requires greater interdisciplinary research that can provide:

– A better understanding of basic oceans' processes, functioning, interlinkages of ecosystems including the ocean-climate nexus and the land-sea interface through enhanced ocean observation;

– Better understanding of patterns and trends, including developments over time, of stressors, socio-economic drivers, impacts in particular cumulative impacts on oceans, ecosystems and biodiversity as well as on human health.

For this purpose, data-collection, including socio-economic data, should be improved and expanded. It is also necessary to harmonize standards and protocols for the collection of data and to improve interoperability of data-bases so that more effective use can be made of on-going efforts while avoiding duplication.

In addition, improved monitoring and the quality status assessment can ensure that actions are effective and can enhance prediction of future scenarios and inform policy and management decisions, and will allow us to adapt our management in response to improving knowledge and developing circumstances.

In addition to interdisciplinary science approaches, this requires strong science-policy interface with adaptive policies in place to address the assessment findings and emerging challenges.

New technologies such as satellite monitoring and computer modelling, which are becoming progressively cheaper, have a useful role to play in this respect.

The importance of data-collection, monitoring, assessment and measures at the regional level through bodies such as Regional Seas Conventions and Regional Fisheries Bodies is also crucial.

The EU and its Member States recognise the capacity constraints faced by many developing countries to participate and benefit from the science and innovations, which can help them meet their obligations and development aspirations. Means of improving participation of developing countries in ocean science and their access to benefits from knowledge and innovation should be highlighted in the declaration. It should also address the need for capacity building and technology transfer and highlight actions to be taken.

We acknowledge that there are still gaps in our knowledge, which need to be filled as quickly as possible to allow for transformative action to meet agreed commitments. In this respect, the forthcoming UN Decade of Ocean Science should raise awareness of the importance of oceans and their resources and the challenges they face, as well as the need for more science. We need to draw on science and technology to improve our knowledge base so that we can take better management decisions. This also requires strengthening of the science-policy interface so that scientists and policy makers can better fulfil their respective roles. Raising the level of ocean literacy and encouraging stakeholders' engagement to act on issues related to ocean conservation and management is instrumental to improve stewardship of the oceans and seas.

The scientific knowledge should be incorporated in all the actions that are already agreed and in place and in those that are now on discussion in all relevant fora. This is the case of mitigation and adaptation measures arising from the Paris Agreement, Biodiversity Strategic Plan and its future post-2020 framework, the Regional Seas Conventions work, the Regional Fisheries organisations activities, the IMO work on more sustainable shipping, among others. These actions should be reinforced and empowered with a sound and more efficient use of science and innovation to accelerate the change that is needed to achieve SDG14.

In line with the precautionary principle, we reiterate that the lack of scientific knowledge should not be used as an excuse to postpone or avoid necessary conservation or management actions. This is particularly important with regard to the main challenges where the gravity of the situation requires our collective and immediate action.

In conclusion, while science and innovation can certainly provide solutions to the challenges we face, political will is required to take on board and implement such scientific advice. The EU expresses its full commitment in this respect.

Thank you.