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NOTE

From:	General Secretariat of the Council
To:	Delegations
Subject:	The Greater North Sea Basin Initiative (GNSBI) - Information from the Dutch and French delegations

Delegations will find in the Annex an information note from the NL and FR delegations on the above subject, to be dealt with under ‘Any other business’ at the Council (Environment) meeting on 18 December 2023.

The Greater North Sea Basin Initiative (GNSBI)**- Information from the Dutch and French delegations -**

The Greater North Sea basin is one of the most heavily used seas in the world. The sea is intrinsically connected, both in ecological and economic terms. The policy ambitions and legal obligations of the Greater North Sea countries are high and there are several interrelated transitions such as:

- climate change mitigation, geopolitical tensions and the need for strategic independence relating to the energy transition
- countering biodiversity loss and strengthening the marine ecosystem
- sustainable food production (fishing, aqua/marine culture)
- clean and safe operations at sea (shipping, and more widely the sustainable blue economy)

To facilitate these transitions, the spatial claims of countries and sectors in the Greater North Sea are increasing. However, both physical and ecological space is limited. At the same time, multiple uses of space can be challenging. National and sectoral approaches can lead to suboptimal use of our shared Greater North Sea basin and hamper the achievement of policy objectives. All North Sea countries use maritime spatial processes and plans, or integrated management plans, to coordinate the use and protection of their marine space. Current cooperation between North Sea countries either has a sectoral focus or is limited in terms of geographical decision-making.

For this reason, the Netherlands and France have started the Greater North Sea Basin Initiative (GNSBI), which explores enhanced and strategic cross-sectoral international cooperation on the interlinked transitions for the marine environment, energy, food, and transport. The nine Greater North Sea countries (Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, United Kingdom) are all part of the initiative. The initiative is intended to build on current cooperative frameworks, such as the North Seas Maritime Spatial Planning collaboration group, the North Seas Energy Cooperation (NSEC), and the Oslo-Paris (OSPAR) conventions, to reinforce these, and to create synergies for optimal alignment of the ongoing work. It also builds upon the current legislative frameworks in place for fisheries, energy, nature and transport, and takes into account the different responsibilities of the actors involved. Along with this, the GNSBI intends to explore whether additional policy and cooperation is needed.

Activities of the Greater North Sea Basin Initiative

The GNSBI is currently in a phase of development and exploration. In May 2023, the Netherlands and France organised a DG meeting where Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, United Kingdom, and the European Commission explored the challenges of the Greater North Sea. Important outcomes were:

- The exploration of enhanced integral and international cooperation is necessary.
- There are many technical opportunities to cooperate, such as the multiple uses of space, nature restoration, ensuring a clear long-term perspective for fisheries and developing a cumulative impact assessment framework.
- The GNSBI should work towards a proposal for strengthened governance of cross-sectoral North Sea cooperation, allowing opportunities for analysis of cross-sectoral cooperation and proactive optimisation of the various marine spatial plans on a North Sea scale.
- The GNSBI should explore the implementation of a regional sea strategy/sea basin strategy.
- The GNSBI should be elevated to the level of a ministerial department.

The next step for the GNSBI was a ministerial MSP meeting on 21 November in The Hague. This meeting was prepared at a technical GNSBI session in Hamburg, where GNSBI countries kicked off the internal working structure of ‘work tracks’: nature restoration, multiple use of space, governance, cumulative impacts, long-term perspective of fisheries, and knowledge-sharing.

MSP Ministerial Conference 21 November

During the Marine Spatial Planning ministerial conference on 21 November, Greater North Sea Basin Initiative countries came together to discuss spatial integration of all uses of the Greater North Sea. All countries signed ministerial conclusions¹ that stated, among other points:

- All nine Greater North Sea countries face similar challenges and share similar objectives regarding the use and environmental protection of the Greater North Sea.
- The GNSBI is a cross-sectoral and international response to achieve our shared ambitions.
- The GNSBI provides a regional platform for spatial integration of all uses by making proposals for aligning maritime spatial planning to ensure better integration of all uses, efficient management processes and coordination of sectoral interests across boundaries, taking an ecosystem-based approach.
- The participating countries have agreed to set up six voluntary work tracks, focusing on governance, multi-use and co-use, nature conservation, cumulative impacts, long-term prospects for fisheries, and knowledge sharing.
- The GNSBI will liaise and coordinate between existing fora and organisations for international cooperation on environment, fisheries, shipping, nature, and energy, including North Sea Energy Cooperation (NSEC) and OSPAR.

¹ [Greater North Sea Basin Initiative - Ministerial conclusions | Government.nl](#)

Next steps

The GNSBI member countries are committed to steering the dialogue between sectors, countries, relevant stakeholders, and citizens. In autumn 2024, the GNSBI intends to organise a full intersectoral summit, where ministers of fisheries, nature, energy and maritime spatial planning will be invited and will most probably be prepared during a technical session. Our hope is that the environment ministers of the North Sea will accept this invitation.
