

Restoring Mediterranean wetlands for water security, climate resilience and biodiversity

DECEMBER 2025

A JOINT POLICY BRIEF DRAFTED BY TOUR DU VALAT AND
WETLANDS INTERNATIONAL EUROPE BASED ON THE KEY
FINDINGS OF THE MEDITERRANEAN WETLANDS
OUTLOOK 3 (MWO-3)

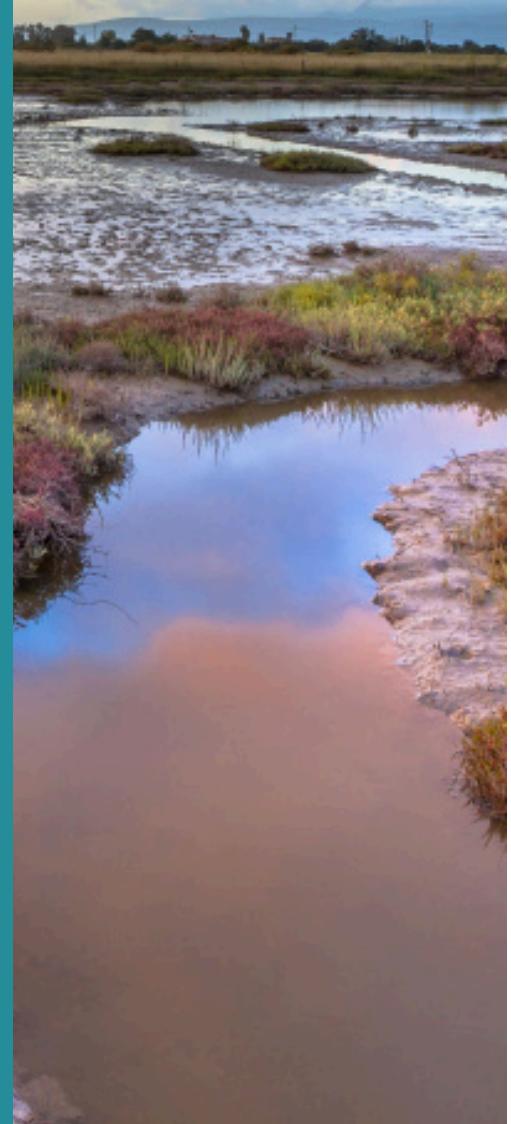




Table of contents

<i>Executive summary</i>	p 03
<hr/>	
1. <i>Introduction: a Mediterranean system under pressure</i>	p 05
<hr/>	
2. <i>A new political moment: domestic policy cycles and the Pact for the Mediterranean</i>	p 06
<hr/>	
3. <i>Beyond deregulation: empowering environmental governance and nature-based solutions in the Mediterranean</i>	p 07
<hr/>	
4. <i>The case for wetlands in the Pact for the Mediterranean</i>	p 08
<hr/>	
5. <i>Policy recommendations</i>	p 09
<hr/>	
6. <i>Conclusions</i>	p 11
<hr/>	



Executive summary

Mediterranean wetlands are among the world's most valuable and vulnerable ecosystems. Despite their critical role in regulating water flows, buffering droughts and floods, sustaining biodiversity, and supporting economies, they continue to decline at an alarming rate. The MWO-3 identifies key drivers of wetland loss: land conversion, water over-abstraction, pollution, loss of hydrological connectivity, and coastal squeeze. These pressures threaten water security, food systems, and migratory pathways for millions of birds and aquatic species, undermining EU and international commitments (Birds and Habitats Directives, Biodiversity Strategy 2030, Ramsar Convention, AEWA).

Yet the MWO also demonstrates that wetlands recover quickly and are a cost-effectively solution when ecological flows are secured, hydrology restored, and governance and financing sustained. Restoration is a high-impact investment in natural infrastructure that strengthens climate adaptation and mitigation, biodiversity recovery, and socio-economic development.

This brief calls on the EU and its member states to seize the opportunity presented by the simultaneous development of the 4th River Basin Management Plans, National Nature Restoration Plans, the Water Resilience Strategy flagship actions and to scale up action region-wide via the Pact for the Mediterranean. Recommendations include securing ecological flows, restoring connectivity, strengthening governance, ensuring financing, integrating Nature-based Solutions (NbS) into EU strategies, and investing in monitoring systems.

Our 5 main policy requests

We call on the European Commission and its Member States to

01

Develop ambitious river basin management plans by December 2027.

02

Deliver national nature restoration plans (NNRP) that restore wetlands at scale.

03

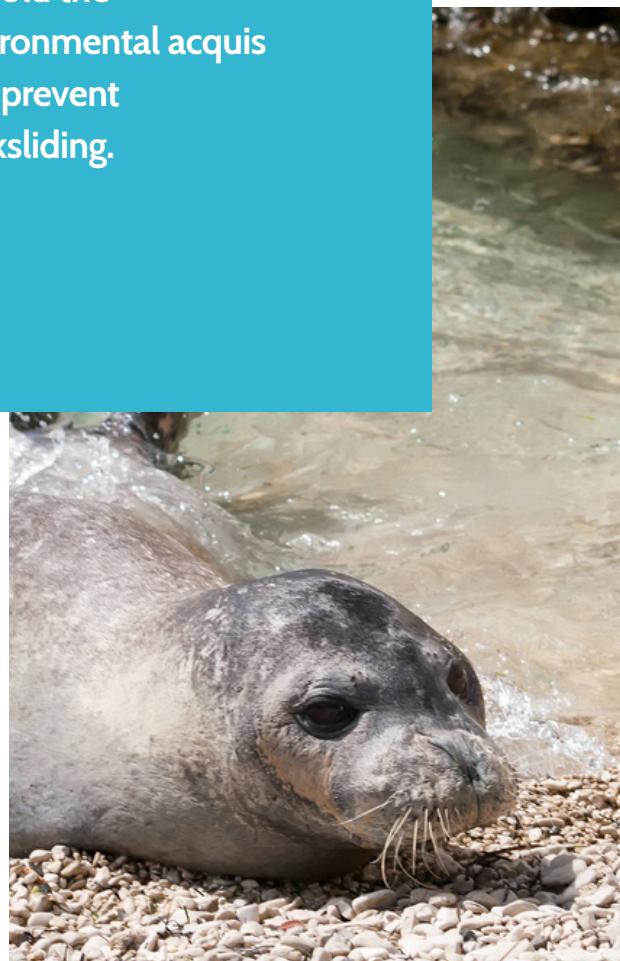
Implement the Water Resilience Strategy with wetlands as the backbone of NbS.

04

Align the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) with EU water and nature law through NbS.

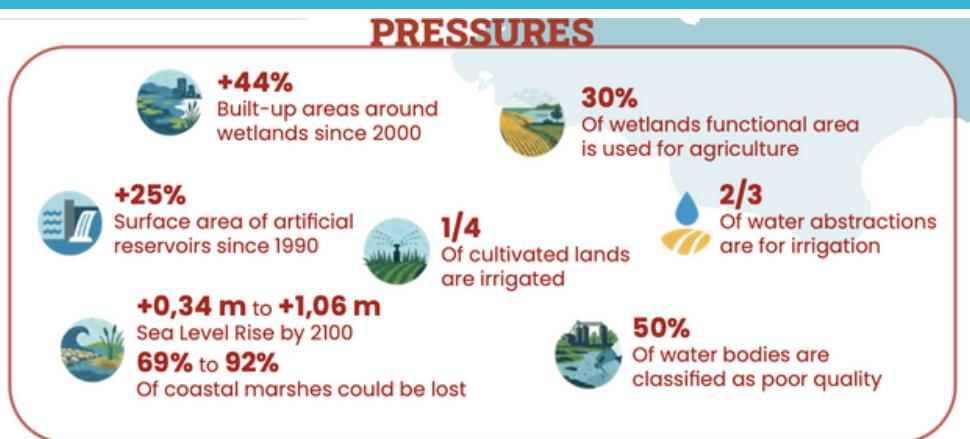
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Uphold the environmental acquis and prevent backsliding.



1. Introduction: a Mediterranean system under pressure

The Mediterranean region is experiencing intensified climate impacts, water scarcity, accelerating biodiversity loss and growing socio-economic pressures, challenges that threaten stability, livelihoods and long-term development. The *Mediterranean Wetlands Outlook* (MWO-3) is the most comprehensive assessment produced by the Mediterranean Wetlands Observatory (MWO). Its findings highlight wetlands as one of the Mediterranean's most powerful nature-based solutions to tackle the issues the region faces, yet they continue to decline in extent, ecological quality and hydrological integrity despite their proven value. These ecosystems regulate water flows, buffer droughts and floods, recharge aquifers, filter pollutants, stabilise coasts, support fisheries and agriculture, safeguard migratory bird routes and sustain local economies.



The MWO-3 shows that wetland loss is driven by land conversion, water over-abstraction, pollution, loss of hydrological connectivity and coastal squeeze, threatening the region's water security, climate resilience and biodiversity. Many of the most affected sites are essential hubs along the African–Eurasian flyways, supporting millions of migratory birds, and include many Ramsar Sites whose ecological integrity is now at risk. Their decline undermines EU commitments under the Birds and Habitats Directives, the Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, the Nature Restoration Regulation, the Water Framework Directive and international agreements such as Ramsar and AEWA.

At the same time, MWO-3 provides compelling evidence that wetlands recover quickly and cost-effectively when ecological water needs are secured, hydrology is restored and financing is sustained for effective management. Restoring wetlands is therefore not only an environmental imperative but a high-impact investment in natural infrastructure that simultaneously strengthens water resilience, climate mitigation and adaptation, coastal protection, biodiversity recovery and socio-economic development.

2. A new political moment: domestic policy cycles and the Pact for the Mediterranean

With the simultaneous development of the 4th River Basin Management Plans (RBMP), National Nature Restoration Plans (NNRP) and the Water Resilience Strategy, the EU has a unique opportunity to respond directly to the degradation patterns identified in MWO-3 in a homogenised, coordinated fashion. These domestic policy cycles can address precisely the pressures highlighted in the Outlook: insufficient ecological flows, inadequate protection and management of Ramsar and flyway sites, harmful subsidies and fragmented governance.

Because the Mediterranean is an interconnected ecological system, the insights of MWO-3 must also guide the EU's external engagement. The Pact for the Mediterranean and its forthcoming Action Plan should scale up wetland-based NbS across the wider region, strengthen cooperation under Ramsar and the Barcelona Convention, and align investment in partner countries with EU domestic standards.

Grounded in MWO-3, the following recommendations set out how the EU can integrate wetland-based NbS into its domestic legislation and build a strong foundation for ambitious action under the Pact for the Mediterranean.



3. Beyond deregulation: empowering environmental governance and nature-based solutions in the Mediterranean

The MWO-3 shows that the Mediterranean's water and wetland systems are under extreme pressure at a time when political momentum in the EU is shifting toward deregulation. Rolling back the environmental *acquis* would directly undermine water security, biodiversity, climate resilience and long-term economic stability. Many Member States still struggle to implement EU laws, but this is an argument for strengthening support and enforcement, not weakening standards.

Deregulation undermines legal certainty, penalises innovators who have already adapted, and encourages industries to delay investment in green transitions. It contradicts the Water Resilience Strategy, which clearly prioritises reduced consumption, ecological flows and NbS over further exploitation of water resources. Weakening the *acquis* would also erode the EU's credibility in promoting resilience and environmental cooperation across the Mediterranean.

Environmental institutions, water agencies, basin authorities, regional administrations, often lack the political weight and resources needed to enforce ecosystem limits. Strengthening them, ensuring cross-sectoral coordination, defending the *acquis* and resisting pressure for exemptions or rollbacks are essential prerequisites for any successful wetland strategy.

Civil society organisations (CSOs) must also be empowered as required by the Aarhus Directives; they ensure transparency, accountability and local engagement. Their full participation is indispensable in RBMPs, NNRPs, spatial planning processes and in the Pact's governance architecture.

Taken together, these governance weaknesses reinforce the urgency of maintaining and strengthening the EU's environmental policy framework before launching new commitments under the Pact.

4. The case for wetlands in the Pact for the Mediterranean

The challenges highlighted in MWO-3 do not stop at EU borders: wetland degradation, water scarcity, and biodiversity loss form a single Mediterranean-wide crisis. MWO-3 demonstrates why wetlands must be central to the Pact's Action Plan. Their decline affects water security, food systems, coastal resilience, biodiversity and socio-economic stability across the region. Restoration increases water availability, supports livelihoods, reduces disaster risks and strengthens regional cooperation, all priorities of the Pact and the Council Conclusions.

Mediterranean wetlands are also essential for international commitments: Ramsar, AEWA, the Global Biodiversity Framework and the Barcelona Convention. Their restoration will be central to next year's CBD COP17 reporting cycle, as well as to follow-up processes from the UN Water Conference calling for stronger integration of freshwater ecosystems into climate, development and peace agendas.

Because many pressures identified in MWO-3 are transboundary, the Pact's success depends on strong EU domestic implementation, which enables credible dialogue with international partners on harmonizing standards. Through NDICI–Global Europe, EFSD+, the Blue Mediterranean Partnership and Global Gateway, the Pact can scale up investments in wetland restoration, biodiversity recovery and water resilience, addressing the current shortage of mature projects highlighted by MWO-3. Strengthening monitoring, data and early-warning systems, including through the Mediterranean Wetlands Observatory, would support coordinated regional action in line with the Council Conclusions.



5. Policy recommendations

The (MWO-3) delivers a powerful message: despite mounting pressures, Mediterranean wetlands remain one of the region's most effective and scalable nature-based solutions, capable of restoring water security, buffering climate impacts, protecting coasts and supporting local economies. But this potential can only be realised if the EU uses its domestic policy cycles to act decisively. With the 4th River Basin Management Plans, the first National Nature Restoration Plans and the Water Resilience Strategy all coming into force, the EU stands at a critical turning point. These instruments provide a unique opportunity to correct past shortcomings and finally embed wetland-based NbS at the core of Europe's water, climate and nature governance. To seize this moment, Wetlands International Europe and the Tour du Valat put forward the following priority recommendations.

We call on the European Commission and its Member States to

1. Develop ambitious River Basin Management Plans by December 2027 that:

- Legally secure ecological water needs of all wetlands identified by MWO-3
- Integrate wetland restoration as primary NbS for drought and flood management
- Accelerate the development and enforcement of management plans for all protected sites
- Close the implementation funding gap in the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF)
- Ensure full coherence with NNRPs and the Water Resilience Strategy
- Institutionalise CSO participation across the RBMP cycle
- Strengthen transboundary basin management through binding ecological connectivity measures.

2. Deliver National Nature Restoration Plans (NNRP) that restore wetlands at scale.

By September 2026, Member States must:

- Include all priority wetland sites identified by MWO-3, with detailed hydrological restoration measures
- Allocate long-term financing through the next MFF
- Align NNRPs with RBMPs and the Water Resilience Strategy, no more parallel, inconsistent planning
- Embed CSOs, local actors and scientific bodies in planning, implementation and monitoring
- Plan cross-border restoration where wetlands span national boundaries.

5. Policy recommendations

3. Implement the Water Resilience Strategy with wetlands as the backbone of NbS

The Water Resilience Strategy must be operationalised through:

- Deepened engagement with the Union for the Mediterranean and the Blue Mediterranean Partnership
- A major “Blue & Green Corridors” initiative to restore rivers, wetlands and coasts as NbS from source to sea
- Earmarked MFF funding for each flagship action
- A strengthened Water Reuse Regulation, aligned with the 10% efficiency target
- A fully empowered Sponge Facility as the knowledge and coordination hub for wetland-based NbS.

4. Align the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) with EU water and nature law through NbS.

The CAP must shift from water-intensive practices to wetland-friendly NbS. The EU must:

- Stop subsidising over-abstraction and irrigation expansion in water-stressed basins
- Redirect payments and eco-schemes to agroecology and wetland-compatible farming
- Phase out harmful subsidies, as flagged by the European Court of Auditors.

5. Uphold the environmental *acquis* and prevent backsliding.

Wetland-based NbS can only succeed if EU law is respected.

The Commission must:

- Strengthen enforcement of the WFD, Birds and Habitats Directives, NRL and Floods Directive
- Resist attempts to weaken or delay environmental obligations
- Initiate infringement procedures where necessary

Guarantee structured CSO engagement as guardians of public interest and ecological integrity.

6. Conclusions

The Mediterranean is entering a decade in which water scarcity, climate impacts and biodiversity decline will fundamentally shape the region's stability and development. MWO-3 makes it clear that wetlands, long recognised under Ramsar and central to the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, are indispensable in addressing these challenges. Their degradation is accelerating, but they remain among the most effective and scalable nature-based solutions if ecological flows, hydrology and effective governance are ensured.

For the EU, this is a moment of strategic choice. The Pact for the Mediterranean and the recent Council conclusions call for a more integrated, resilience-driven approach to regional cooperation. Placing wetlands at the core of this agenda is essential: they secure water supplies, support food systems, sustain migratory routes critical to biodiversity, protect coasts, and strengthen climate adaptation. Their restoration directly contributes to the objectives that the EU will be accountable for at CBD COP17, the UN Water Conference follow-up, and under multiple international agreements.

But external action can only be credible if the EU also acts at home. Fully implementing the Water Framework Directive, the Water Resilience Strategy, the Nature Restoration Regulation and the CAP is fundamental to maintaining ecological coherence across a shared Mediterranean system. Strong domestic governance allows the EU to promote consistent standards region-wide, mobilise investment and support partners in building a pipeline of high-impact restoration projects.

The science is clear, the political frameworks are aligned, and the tools are available. What is needed now is commitment: to defend the environmental *acquis*, to operate within planetary boundaries, and to scale up wetland-based nature-based solutions across the Mediterranean.

Wetlands International Europe and Tour du Valat stand ready to work with EU institutions, Member States and Mediterranean partners to ensure wetlands are not treated as an environmental afterthought, but as essential natural infrastructure for resilience, cooperation and long-term stability across the region.



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