Briefing Note (November 2026)
Proposal for the Theme of the Euro-Mediterranean Water Forum 2026

Convergence of Water & Ocean Policies

Mobilizing Water Actors for the Protection of the Mediterranean Ecosystem

Preamble
For the past two years, the Mediterranean Water Institute (IME) has been developing projects that connect water management with oceanography and marine ecology. In this spirit, and as a follow-up to UNOC 2025, IME proposes to launch a structured approach to mainstream these links.

The Mediterranean Sea's ecology under pressure

The Mediterranean ecosystem is subject to strong pressures linked to:

i) population growth around the basin, rising from roughly 500 to 600 million people;

ii) climate change, which has triggered severe sea-surface temperature anomalies (up to +5°C reported in 2025); and

iii) ever-increasing pollutant releases, notably plastics, with estimates of about 230,000 tonnes per year discharged into the sea.

As a result, biodiversity is heavily affected. Between 1993 and 2016, The Living Planet Index estimated a decline in abundance of more than 50% for marine species and 20% for vertebrate populations across the ecosystem. Coastal eutrophication hotspots and cases of harmful algal blooms are increasingly frequent.

Recent research also shows that many pollutants have entered the water cycle via atmospheric circulation (micro- and nanoplastics, POPs and CECs including numerous pesticides), and this at alarming levels.

These elements imply that the Mediterranean constitutes a single, integrated ecosystem with a single regional water cycle. We therefore propose to work under the concept of "One Regional Water Cycle."

Water actors and the protection of the marine ecosystem

The Mediterranean ecosystem is affected by many human impacts. The water actor's contribution to mitigating these impacts is immense. However, territorial depollution is, in part, synonymous with transfers to the marine space (paradoxically, the depolluter of land can become a polluter of the sea). It is therefore necessary to

valorise this contribution and to identify the gaps to be filled.

Water actors interact with the marine space through four main flows: runoff, wastewater, urban stormwater, and desalination. Our approach therefore sets aside activities related to fisheries resources, maritime traffic, or the introduction of non-indigenous species, and focuses on actors influencing freshwater.

Since the 1980s, the 21 Mediterranean rim countries have built between 11,000 to 12,000 wastewater treatment plants. Tertiary treatments are becoming widespread, especially where water REUSE is expanding. As a result, wastewater flows are increasingly controlled. Nonetheless, significant gaps remain. While EU countries treat almost all of their wastewater, this is not the case on the southern and eastern shores. Beyond the absence of plants, many existing facilities face operational shortcomings.

While the treatment gap remains acute, recent research raises growing concern about declining nutrient inputs to the Mediterranean marine environment (oligotrophication). In a context of reduced freshwater inflows, estimated at more than 20% over the last 60 years, these studies call into question the extent of nutrient removal in treatment systems as well as dam operations.

Although substantial efforts are underway to reduce pollutant loads discharged to the sea through stormwater systems (construction of first-flush storm tanks as well as trash-capture nets at outfalls), many flood-management systems in practice act as gigantic conveyors of urban pollution to the sea.

Industrial effluents also play an important role in chemical pollution at sea. Many industrial clusters, ports, or military zones are equipped with dedicated treatment systems, but many others collect and treat little or none of their effluents. Regulation and enforcement vary widely around the Mediterranean.

Desalination is expanding rapidly and at large scale on Mediterranean coasts, with significant discharges, both brines and biocidal chemicals.
Water actors are organizing in many places for coastal management through dedicated policies and governance tools (e.g., ICZM approaches, such as the Marseille Bay Contract), but much remains to be done to scale these sustainable models.
NGOs and research centers are also mobilized on these issues and have a significant role to play in improving the situation.
Scientific work on Mediterranean ecology constantly highlights data gaps. Water actors also have a crucial role to play in feeding data systems, notably by better linking hydrology and oceanography.

A Call to Mobilize Water Actors for the Protection of the Mediterranean Ecosystem

IME launches a call to mobilize water actors for the protection of the Mediterranean ecosystem, under the banner:
#WaterManagersAreOceanGuardian
This call is fully aligned with the Barcelona Convention and its LBS Protocol (Land-Based Sources). It builds on the momentum generated by the United Nations through the Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development and UNOC 2025. The aim is to build bridges between SDG 6.6 (protect and restore water-related ecosystems) and SDG 14.1 (prevent and significantly reduce marine pollution).
This approach was successfully presented at the Kick-off Meeting of the Euro-Mediterranean Water Forum 2026, in Barcelona on 7 November 2025.
The approach seeks political, scientific, and technical mobilization. The primary intention is to build a

partnership platform, for which a scoping study must clarify the framework. This study will pave the way for formulating new cooperation projects and mobilizing finance, including EU instruments and international donors.