On 29 August 2012, the European Commission launched a Green Paper consultation on its "Marine Knowledge 2020" initiative. The purpose was to learn more about stakeholders' opinions on options for future governance of the initiative and on the possible involvement of the private sector. The consultation was closed on 15 December 2012.

A total of 244 replies were received (29 from civil society, 43 from the private sector, 95 from the public sector and 77 from the research community) from 30 countries, including some from outside the EU whose waters touch those of Member States. Many of the submissions, especially those from national governments, had endured an extensive internal consultation process and, therefore, represented the balanced views of many organisations. This was considered a representative sample. The consultation provided many detailed nuances on legal and technical issues that will be extremely useful for the next phase of “Marine Knowledge 2020” but the main messages were:

(1) All user groups agreed on the need for open access to marine data, in both its raw and aggregated forms. The civil society consortium believes that the oceans are a common resource and, therefore, marine data should be made available without restriction, especially if collected using public funds. The private sector was largely in favour of free access except where commercial sensitivities could be exposed or the incentive to collect data in the first place destroyed. Public authorities felt it would lower the cost of monitoring the state of the environment. In particular, nearly all believed that it should be easier to obtain data from research projects.

(2) A few exceptions were noted relating to: national security; damage to heritage sites and endangered ecosystems; commercial sensitivity; the need to allow scientists time to publish; and safety and liability issues due to data misinterpretation.

(3) The general consensus was that a shared platform for disseminating fisheries data with other marine data, including that distributed through the EU's Copernicus space programme, should be a long-term aim. The eventual integration of these systems should enable seamless mapping of cross-cutting themes over different timescales. Interoperability of data and implementation of adequate quality control measures are key to achieving this.

(4) The architecture of the current European Marine Observation and Data Network (EMODnet) -
particular the division into seven thematic groups – geology, bathymetry, physics, chemistry, biology, physical habitats and human activity – was considered sound.

(5) The potential for the EMODnet initiative to assist with environmental or fisheries reporting was highlighted. Over time, the "push" process, whereby marine environment or fisheries reports are delivered by public authorities to satisfy a legal obligation, could be replaced by a "pull" process, whereby data are made available through the internet and harvested by the competent authority using common technology. This would reduce administrative burden.

(6) There was overwhelming consensus on the need for mechanism to advise Member States and the EU on the most cost-effective sampling, surveying and observation programme for each sea-basin. The participation of science bodies, regional sea conventions, regional hydrographic commissions and those collecting the data was suggested. A regular process should take into account evolving needs and technology.

(7) The private sector is keen to become more involved with data sharing initiatives such as EMODnet. Representatives of industrial sectors were broadly in favour of using their offshore facilities or vessels for wider monitoring of the oceans. However, they would prefer a non-legislative approach.

(8) A number of observation technologies were suggested as requiring further research. Of these, novel sensors that can measure parameters automatically without the need to bring samples back to the laboratory were considered as being of high priority

All the replies are available through DG-MARE's website, as well as a summary report. Respondents were asked to check that the draft summary accurately reflected their views. Based on their feedback, a small number of minor corrections have been made. The final report will be the primary input for an impact assessment to determine how best to move forward and achieve the "Marine Knowledge 2020" of increased productivity for public authorities, private bodies and the research community, more innovation and reduced uncertainty in knowledge of the behaviour of the sea.

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