**Ocean Meets Regions**

**Highlights of the NAT Conference**

On Tuesday 21st November the Commission for Natural Resources of the Committee of the Regions hosted a conference aiming to involve stakeholders from the regional and local level to discuss the achievements, the problems, best practices and the way ahead for the European maritime economy, its sustainable development on regional and local level and sustainable ocean governance. After the successful "Our Ocean" world conference hosted by the European Union in Malta in October 2017, the event aimed to provide additional follow up on local and regional level in Europe. The participants were representatives of local and regional authorities, staff from Brussels regional offices, representations and associations, and members of the European Committee of the Regions

In the high level opening panel, moderated by Mr. MARTIKAINEN, Chair of the CoR commission for Natural Resources, Commissioner VELLA intervened on the state of play of the European Blue Growth Project and the role of European regions. During "Our Ocean" the European Commission has announced 36 tangible commitments worth over 550 million euros in all six conference areas of action. He called for new synergies between different public actors, scientists, investors etc. to "keep the ocean clean", alongside fostering a sustainable and profitable Blue Economy. Commissioner Vella announced that the EU is working to set up a "blue-green investment platform". This platform would channel private and public money to blue economy projects that promise both economic profit and environmental gains, but that are generally too small or too risky to rely on the financial markets alone. Werner SCHMIDT, Director for Environment and Sustainable Territorial Development at the European Investment Bank, spoke on the EIB's role in financing Blue Economy Projects: especially in the aftermath of the conferences in Malta and the latest COP 23 in Bonn, he confirmed that the EIB is even more committed in supporting EU policy objectives that are economically and environmentally sound. 25% of its finances will be devoted to Climate Change projects, both on the mitigation and the adaptation sectors. Jannik LINBAEK, Vice President STATOIL, further presented the case for sustainable value creation in ground-breaking projects undertaken by his company. The last speaker in the session, Rémi GRUET, CEO Ocean Energy Europe, touched upon the opportunities and challenges for renewable ocean energy, an industry that is currently on the route to industrialisation.

In the first thematic session **“A new stage in the European policy on Blue Growth”** moderated by Mr. PERISSÈ, CRPM Director for Maritime Affairs, Mr. CLERGEAU, CoR Rapporteur of the PES, pointed out that relying only on public funding and grants to scale-up meaningful projects on industrial scale is not possible. He ended by quoting Junker in stressing the importance of delivery, thus inviting all public actors to play their role, and regions to take leadership given the closeness to people, even more so an area such as the Marine policy. After that Mrs. ELORZA, General Secretary for External Action of the Basque Government, Mr. KOKKALIS, Councillor of the Greek Piraeus Municipality, and Mrs. STROOBANT, from the Liguria Cluster for Marine/Maritime Technologies, provided example of regional best-case examples and valuable ideas on how to manage projects and receive funding. Lastly Mr Heitze SIEMERS from DG MARE stressed the challenges for the international ocean community, which his DG is trying to overcome by performing data collection (so to enhance marine knowledge), marine spatial planning and constant surveillance.

In the second thematic session **“The Regional Aspects of Ocean Governance”** moderated by Mr. BUCHANAN CoR Rapporteur of the EA, ocean governance was at stake. The interventions from Ms. Wood, JPI Oceans, Ms. EPARKHINA from European Global Ocean Observing System, Ms. DONATI from Copernicus Marine Environment Monitoring Service, and Mr. Pascal Derycke of EMODnet, demonstrated that there are several advanced tools that can be used to enhance information sharing and data collection which are mostly freely available and can be deployed by cities and regions In the field of sustainable ocean governance, we need to consider carefully all environmental aspects, possibilities for spatial planning, vulnerable ecosystems, and existing human activities at sea. Due to this complexity, scientific evidence and ocean observation is pivotal in order to take informed decisions.

During the wrap-up session, Mr. Jerry LUNDY, member of Sligo City Council (IE) and CoR rapporteur on the Atlantic Action Plan underlined in his conclusions the importance of linking public policies with a concrete impact on coastal communities.