

GOVERNING MICROPLASTICS IN THE NORTH-EAST ATLANTIC: THE IMPORTANCE OF REGIONAL FRAMEWORKS IN THE ABSENCE OF A GLOBAL TREATY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Microplastic pollution constitutes a transboundary challenge for marine governance, particularly as negotiations towards a Global Plastics Treaty remain uncertain. This study examines the role of regional governance frameworks in addressing marine microplastics of five overlapping frameworks in the North-East Atlantic: The European Union (EU), OSPAR, HELCOM, the Barcelona Convention, and the Arctic Council. Using four analytical criteria, namely governance ambition, legal enforceability, monitoring arrangements, and regional coordination, we assess how these frameworks structure policy responses to microplastic pollution and how they may contribute to global governance objectives. The analysis reveals a connected governance architecture in which binding EU regulation establishes common standards, Regional Seas Conventions operationalize these through basin-specific action plans and monitoring systems, and the Arctic Council provides scientific coordination and knowledge integration despite its non-binding mandate. While these frameworks collectively offer important regulatory and institutional capacity, persistent challenges remain related to uneven enforcement, fragmented implementation, and limited integration across the plastic life cycle. The findings highlight both the potential and the structural limits of regional frameworks as intermediary governance layers between global ambition and national policy execution.



KEYWORDS

- Microplastic pollution
- Marine governance
- Regional seas conventions
- North-East Atlantic
- Global Plastic Treaty



RESEARCH RELEVANCE

- Five major governance frameworks address the microplastics in the North-East Atlantic
- EU law provides binding lifecycle-based controls on microplastic pollution
- Regional seas conventions adapt microplastic measures to basin-specific conditions
- Monitoring of microplastics has expanded, but harmonization remains uneven
- Regional frameworks can bridge gaps left by a stalled global plastics treaty

BIBLIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Flick, H. M., Farhan R. K., Bokor, B., de Vries, F. P., Garrard, S. L., Abate, T. G., & Beaumont, N. J. (2026). Governing microplastics in the North-East Atlantic: The importance of regional frameworks in the absence of a global treaty. *Marine Policy*, 191, Article 107173. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2026.107173>

“Regional governance frameworks in the North-East Atlantic offer real but bounded capacity to tackle marine microplastic pollution — they can bridge the gap between global aspirations and national action, yet uneven enforcement and fragmented implementation can constrain their effectiveness.”

