Subject: **The EEA Management Board response to the European Commission Evaluation of EEA and Eionet 2017 - 2021**

FOR INFORMATION AND ADOPTION

The Management Board is invited to:

Note the finalised Management Board response to the evaluation of EEA and Eionet 2017 - 2021, incl. the Scientific Committee opinion in Annex 1.

Endorse the Management Board response with recommendations.

BACKGROUND

At its 97th meeting on December 2022, the Board decided to establish a Management Board Advisory Committee (MBAC) to follow the EEA and Eionet Evaluation 2017 - 2021 and lead the preparation of the Management Board response to the final evaluation outcome. At its constituting meeting on 29 June 2023, the MBAC selected Julia Werner as Chair and agreed on the purpose and organisation of its work[1].

As the evaluation of EEA and its Eionet network 2017 – 2021 was selected for scrutiny by the Regulatory Scrutiny Board (RSB), the finalisation of the Staff Working Document took longer than initially foreseen. The Management Board and the EEA thus received the Staff Working document (SWD (2024) 204 final), its executive summary, and the opinion of the RSB on 30 July 2024. The MB Secretariat shared these documents with all Management Board members for them to provide input to the MBAC preparation of the MB response, by 10 September.

In preparation of the 106th Bureau meeting of 10 October 2024, the MBAC chair provided a first draft of the Management Board response to the evaluation[2], taking into account input from the EEA management, Management Board members and NFP Eionet representatives. Based on the guidance provided by the Bureau, the opinion by the Scientific Committee and a written consultation with Management Board members[3], the MBAC finalised the Management Board draft response to the evaluation.

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[1] Doc. EEA/2023/2023/MBAC_Evaluation_01/summary
[2] Doc. EEA/BU/106/03
[3] The Management Board Secretariat received written comments from two members of the Management Board, i.e. Greece and Portugal.

ENCLOSED
Draft Management Board response to the European Commission Evaluation of EEA and Eionet for the period 2017-2021, including in Annex 1 – the Opinion by the EEA Scientific Committee on the Evaluation of the European Environment Agency (EEA) and its European Environment Information and Observation Network (Eionet) for the period 2017-2021

NEXT STEPS
The adopted EEA Management Board response to the EEA/Eionet evaluation and the Scientific Committee opinion to the EEA/Eionet evaluation will be communicated to the European Parliament, European Commission and published on the EEA website.

Following the adoption of the MB response to the evaluation, the MB may wish to ask the EEA to put in place an overview of actions needed to address the evaluation recommendations, with the aim of facilitating Management Board provision of strategic guidance.

DRAFT

MANAGEMENT BOARD RESPONSE TO THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION EVALUATION OF EEA AND EIONET FOR THE PERIOD 2017 – 2021

The EEA Management Board welcomes the Commission Staff Working Document (2024) 204 final of 30 July 2024 on the Evaluation of the European Environment Agency (EEA) and its European Environment Information and Observation Network (Eionet) for the period 2017-2021. The EEA Management Board would like to thank all actors contributing to it.

The EEA Management Board fully endorses the conclusion that the EEA-Eionet **Regulation is still fit for purpose** and does not need to be adapted.

The EEA Management Board **strongly supports the positive conclusions** of the evaluation that the performance of EEA and Eionet has overall been good across four out of the five evaluation criteria – Effectiveness, Coherence, Relevance and EU added value. The EEA Management Board suggests that recommendations of future evaluations also mention activities that were well done and should be continued.

The EEA Management Board is especially pleased with the assessment that the EEA successfully accomplished the following three central tasks:
- The EEA and Eionet have effectively contributed to the development and implementation of EU environmental and climate policies.
- Their data collection and data management efforts provided input for policy development, monitoring, and international commitments, with notably the State and Outlook of Europe's Environment Report 2020 (SOER 2020) helping to shape European Green Deal (EGD) priorities.
- The Agency has incorporated advanced digital technologies in its Strategy, but there is still untapped potential for further improvements, in particular for leveraging cutting-edge technologies and enhancing the use of Copernicus products.

At the same time, the EEA Management Board notes with concern the finding that insufficient monitoring and evaluation framework in the EEA limits this assessment and that shortcomings on how to assess efficiency have been identified by the evaluation. The EEA Management Board acknowledges the need for improvements. However, the MB would also like to stress that the evaluation of EEA-Eionet work demonstrates **serious methodological problems in its assessment of efficiency**. The Management Board therefore invites the Commission to address these problems before embarking on the next 5-year evaluation of EEA-Eionet.

In addition, the evaluation states that not all **recommendations of the previous evaluation[1] have been addressed**, either because they were not followed-up or because responses were put in place towards the end of the evaluation period and it was too soon to appreciate their impacts. The EEA Management Board emphasises that the present evaluation covers the period 2017-2021. Since then, the policy scene has changed significantly with the emergence of the European Green Deal, and important progress has been made, through the adoption and implementation of the EEA-Eionet Strategy 2021-2030 with its five strategic objectives and five areas of work. In addition, the landscape of the European Topic Centres (ETCs) has improved in response to these changing contexts.

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[1] The previous evaluation of the EEA and Eionet covered the period 2012 – 2016.

Considering this, it is of utmost importance that future evaluations will be aligned with more recent time frames and reflect the latest developments to ensure that recommendations are applicable and timely.

That being said, the EEA Management Board underlines its commitment to ensure that lessons are learned from the evaluation in order to lead further improvement processes, where required. Against the background of this external ex-post evaluation of EEA-Eionet; and taking into account responses from the Eionet National Focal Points, the Scientific Committee[2] and the EEA management, the **EEA Management Board has reflected on the future of EEA and Eionet, and decided on the following forward-looking conclusions and recommendations.** The EEA Management Board would like to stress that these conclusions and recommendations address areas for improvement that are relatively minor compared to the achievements mentioned above.

On the recommendations of the evaluation

1. **Develop a comprehensive monitoring system is the main priority.**
The EEA Management Board agrees that the monitoring system should be improved and in this regard it has asked EEA to put in place an improvement process for its Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to be fully aligned with the EEA-Eionet Strategy 2021-2030 and based on quality assured data. The new communication platform (MS Teams) currently implemented by EEA to enable smoother engagement with Eionet, the EEA Management Board, and the EEA Scientific Committee will be a key data source feeding into the KPIs. The EEA Management Board also invites EEA to review and upgrade its Quality Management Systems.

That being said, the main priority of EEA and Eionet clearly should remain its key statutory tasks, especially to provide the Community and the EEA Member States with:
    a) objective, reliable and comparable information at European level enabling them to take the requisite measures to protect the environment, to assess the results of such measures and to ensure that the public is properly informed about the state of the environment, and to that end
    b) the necessary technical and scientific support.

2. **Further strengthen coordination with the Commission through its partner DG, DG ENV.**
The EEA Management Board agrees. The coordination between the EEA and DG ENV as EEA's partner DG, as well as the synergies with DG JRC and DG EUROSTAT as cooperating DGs, is of utmost importance in the production of data and knowledge in the field of environment and climate. In that regard, the EEA Management Board regrets the demise of the Environment Knowledge Community. The Intergroup is appreciated as an initiative to enhance cooperation and communication. It should however, not become a substitute forum for discussions on issues that are the responsibility of the EEA Management Board.

The role of DG CLIMA in the relationship between the Commission and the EEA is particularly important for two reasons: climate issues are a growing part of the current activities of the EEA-Eionet; EU policies require more and more understanding of the integration between environment and climate trends e.g. trade-offs in use of biomass, human health impacts, and circular economy synergies.

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[2] In the June MB meeting, the Scientific Committee agreed that it would share its opinion on the evaluation of the EEA and its Eionet network 2017- 2021 in the autumn 2024. Cf. Annex 1 enclosed.

3. Address EEA-JRC coordination on a more structured basis through an ad-hoc coordination group.

The EEA Management Board agrees. A clear division of tasks and coordinated cooperation between EU institutions is an absolute must. The EEA Management Board welcomes the closer links with JRC as facilitated in recent years, and indeed exemplified by the JRC hosting the March 2024 meeting of the EEA Management Board.

There are numerous examples of past and ongoing operational cooperation and alignment as documented in the March 2024 Management Board paper. These include joint tasks/cooperation around zero pollution monitoring, exchange of data and information on biodiversity, climate change impacts, contaminated soils, air pollution, forests, land-use and foresight as well as joint entrusted entities for Copernicus land monitoring services.

The EEA Management Board would warmly invite the EEA and JRC to appoint dedicated single points of contact as well as to explore the option of staff secondment as ways to help build upon the strengthened cooperation/coordination mechanisms already in place.

European Commission cooperation with Member States might also be improved. For example, there are a lot of different European projects and working groups, and it is hard for countries to know their differences. In addition, the compatibility of different data for multiple policy purposes should be addressed by the European Commission.

4. Ensure that synergies with activities of the other EU Agencies are explored and fully exploited.

The EEA Management Board agrees and highlights the broad engagement by EEA in recent years in the EU Agencies Network on issues such as artificial intelligence, human resources, foresight and communications, as well as its close cooperation with sister agencies such as ECHA, EFSA, EMSA and Eurofound. The EEA has particular strengths on integrating information across topics and has played a valuable role as contributor to initiatives such as the One Health Task Force and the joint risk preparedness under the Serious Cross-Border Threats to Health Regulation.

5. Consider including long term non-core activities into the core activities whenever appropriate.

The EEA Management Board agrees and invites the EEA to bring a proposal for discussion in early 2025 on how non-core activities could be addressed through the next EU Multi-annual Financial Framework 2028-2034. See below under 9 and 10, as well.

6. Adapt the SOER cycle to align with the EU political mandate.

The EEA Management Board sees the merits of this proposal, especially as the timely publication of the SOER 2020 in 2019 contributed substantially to the EGD featuring so prominently on the agenda of the last Commission. Further discussion on the details, namely a possible stepwise approach, will be necessary, taking into account that SOER 2030 will coincide with many policy milestones. To remain in the spotlight, the timeframe of the SOER package should be aligned with these milestones in the best possible way, including the EU five-year policy cycle, to further increase the relevance and impact of the SOER. The Management Board supports EEA efforts to make SOER more digital thereby making EEA-Eionet more agile in responding to policy needs across different timescales.

7. Enhance involvement of the EEA Management Board in some of the strategic processes.

The EEA Management Board agrees. A lot has been done already, and it is important to continue these developments. The EEA Management Board and the Bureau have already initiated a process to define clearer roles for the Vice-Chairs. It should be further elaborated. The current Rules of procedure of the Management Board and the Bureau, dating back to the EEA Management Board decision of 26 November 2015, should be revised to reflect current practices. The EEA Management Board will play a more active role in the further development of KPIs. It will also take a decision by December 2025 on the future directions of the EEA-Eionet Strategy for the period 2026-2030. In June

2024, the EEA Management Board **also requested a strategic discussion on enlargement during 2025.** Collaboration with non-EU countries should be strengthened as it offers substantial EU added value.

8. Improve prioritisation of publications and explore opportunities for efficiency improvements.
The EEA Management Board agrees. At its January 2024 meeting the EEA Bureau addressed this issue and proposed to address the prioritisation of publications annually through the Single Programming Document to ensure alignment of products with policy objectives. This could be further developed. E.g. the EEA could develop a "service path" for member countries to facilitate the distribution of publications, etc. to countries, using digital communication channels i.e. social media. In addition to prioritisation through the flagship publications of the year, EEA shall clearly define the main target groups and, to the extent possible, outline its communication plans towards the end of the previous year. This way, the overall plan with schedules would help secure time (and resources) to prepare and maximize opportunities for EEA-Eionet knowledge to have an impact.

Furthermore, it is also clear that not all environmental issues reach a wide audience. For example, issues related to soil tend to have a much smaller audience than issues related to the quality of European bathing waters, which reach a very wide audience. It is difficult to link efficiency and effectiveness to the size of the audience reached by a publication, as this would lead to a situation where not all environmental issues would receive equal attention from the EEA, which might no longer be in line with Article 3(2) of the Regulation.

While agreeing with the need to improve prioritisation, it should also be noted that EEA publications represent one example of outputs, and thus reflect only a smaller part of the agency's value-creation and potential impact drivers. From 2025, EEA will introduce a new delivery model that presents the agency's outputs in a more comprehensive way and will make it easier in the future to conduct full assessments of EEA's effectiveness based on the full range of output types.

9. Enhance the digitalisation strategy and expand the uptake of Copernicus services and products (including for reducing reporting burden) and other modern digital technologies in the operations of the EEA and Eionet.
The EEA Management Board agrees to this very important recommendation and looks forward to receiving in December 2024 the new EEA IT Strategy in response to the recent audit by the European Commission Internal Audit Service. EEA is slightly lagging behind when compared to some member countries and the EEA Management Board would invite EEA to bring forward an updated Digitalisation Framework for discussion during 2025. The framework should also consider digitalisation costs.

EEA and JRC could play an important role in developing standards, etc. together with the member countries. This way, new methods could rapidly be implemented and validated, e.g. for modernised monitoring and data reporting, and the role of artificial intelligence in future EEA-Eionet work. Here, it would be important to identify what the EEA's role would be with Eionet, and how EEA/Eionet would best benefit and promote the issues.

The EEA Management Board underlines that the ETC on Data Integration and Digitalisation (ETC DI) could play a significant role in cooperation with EEA's key staff in this area. Copernicus has a key role to play in this respect and consideration should be given on how Copernicus could be integrated into the core activities of EEA, including through the next Multiannual Financial Framework.

10. Closely monitor the implementation of Eionet's modernisation.
The EEA Management Board agrees, but would like to add that towards the end of the evaluation period, EEA initiated and implemented the Eionet modernisation process to align the Eionet network with the priorities of the EEA-Eionet Strategy 2021-2030. This resulted in the proposal for the new structure of Eionet, implementation of new ways of working, and development of a new communication platform. By the end of 2021, this process was still ongoing. The modernisation process was guided by regular MB discussions prepared by the Eionet modernisation MBAC.

Nevertheless, the Management Board agrees that proper metrics should be created for the Eionet cooperation, how to measure the success of the goals and the modernisation. It would be important for the EEA to start the needed round of adjustments by accurately prioritising where it needs cooperation with member countries. Here, less could be more. And, of course, the member countries also have to think about their own priorities and resource them – as well as possible. The member countries and the organisations participating in Eionet are following different administrative cultures so this is not an easy process.

The Management Board recognizes mutual benefits and a need to maintain contacts with non-EU member countries and accession countries through Eionet. In the context of cooperating countries, adequate resources shall be integrated into the EEA core budget to ensure proper and regular engagement and support. EEA should be encouraged to coordinate in a coherent approach, together with relevant DGs, the engagement beyond EEA-EIONET membership in cooperating non-EU member and accession countries.

In conclusion

The EEA Management Board sees an unprecedented opportunity to position EEA-Eionet as the central knowledge support for EU environment, climate and sustainability policies for the remainder of this decade, and beyond. Implementation of the many policies agreed under the European Green Deal and the 8th EAP will remain the primary challenge.

In that regard, the EEA Management Board again requests the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the Council to:
- ensure a **future resource base** for EEA-Eionet, consistent with the positive conclusions of the Better Regulation evaluation and increased policy mainstreaming of environment and climate in the proposed MFF for the period 2028-2034. LIFE programme is not deemed as a suitable (co-)funding source;
- ensure that legislative acts, which propose assigning new tasks to or increasing the scope of existing tasks of EEA-Eionet, also include additional allocation of core resources to cover these additional activities;
- ensure that adopted initiatives and legislation engaging EEA-Eionet and cooperating countries, are accompanied with a decision on adequate allocation of additional core EEA-Eionet resources.

Following the adoption of the MB response to the evaluation, the MB asks the EEA to put in place an overview of actions needed to address the evaluation recommendations, and the MB will provide strategic guidance as needed.

<div align="center">Adopted by the EEA Management Board on 28 November 2024</div>

<div align="center">André Weidenhaupt, Chair, EEA Management Board</div>

Annex:

Opinion by the EEA Scientific Committee on the Evaluation of the European Environment Agency (EEA) and its European Environment Information and Observation Network (EIONET) for the period 2017-2021

Mandate. The Scientific Committee (SC or Committee) of the EEA welcomes the request from the EEA Management Board (EEA/MB/xx) to give its opinion on the Evaluation of the European Environment Agency (EEA) and its European Environment Information and Observation Network (EIONET) for the period 2017-2021. In its advisory role, the SC provides the EEA-EIONET with action-oriented insights into complex scientific and policy trends across all areas relevant to the transition to sustainability. This ensures that the EEA-EIONET's activities are informed by cutting-edge knowledge, enabling the agency to anticipate and respond effectively to evolving issues in sustainability, climate resilience, and the circular economy.

Summary. The Committee is pleased with and endorses the key conclusion of the evaluation, which finds the mandate of the EEA and EIONET fit for purpose, and their activities relevant, effective, consistent, and of significant EU-added value. The Committee acknowledges the challenges in evaluating the efficiency of resource use and allocation and is committed to assisting the EEA-EIONET in enhancing the existing performance monitoring framework. A central concern is how the EEA-EIONET can address the urgency associated with the triple environmental crisis and its interlinkages, compounded by severe but transient geopolitical, social, and economic crises, and how the performance monitoring system can capture these interlinkages. The EEA-EIONET organization and its working procedures must be adapted to effectively respond to this urgent and complex context.

Methodology and focus of evaluation. The Committee shares the concern that the framework used to assess the efficiency of EEA-EIONET is not adequate for its intended purpose. The timing of the evaluation is also problematic. Evaluating the EEA's 2017-2021 operations in 2024 makes some recommendations either redundant or no longer relevant. Evaluations should be aligned with more recent time frames and reflect the latest developments, making sure that recommendations are applicable and timely. The Committee is committed to assisting EEA-EIONET in designing a robust and actionable monitoring framework tailored to tracking progress and assessing the effectiveness of EEA-EIONET activities. This framework needs to be flexible and adaptable to take into account new policy developments and priorities as they emerge.

The Committee is pleased with the positive evaluation of the EEA-EIONET modernization efforts outlined in the Strategy 2021-2030 and acknowledges that the impact of these efforts cannot yet be fully assessed. In its scientific opinions on the single programming documents (SPDs), most recently in May 2024, the Committee emphasised the urgency, complexity, and need for an integrated approach in addressing the triple environmental crisis—climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution—compounded by geopolitical, social, and economic challenges. The Committee recommended that the EEA-EIONET continue adapting its structure and working methods to integrate efforts across objectives and revise the performance monitoring system to better capture interlinkages and align with evolving scientific and policy trends.

Role of the Scientific Committee in the evaluation. Several SC members were interviewed as part of the EEA-EIONET evaluation process, and an online workshop was held with a larger group of SC members. The evaluation report reflects some input from these interviews and workshops. The Committee would like to emphasize its ongoing open and constructive dialogue with EEA executives

and the Management Board, which is essential for fostering a close working relationship and which contributes to the overall high impact of the SC's advice. This could be addressed in future evaluations by elaborating further on how the SC contributes to shaping and guiding the EEA's scientific output and knowledge dissemination.

EEA - JRC collaboration. The collaboration between EEA-EIONET and the Joint Research Centre (JRC) has focused on improving the quality and coherence of environmental data and using that knowledge for designing and monitoring EU policies. The evaluation identified challenges such as overlapping activities and unclear role delineation. To address these, it is recommended improving communication, coordination, and strengthening strategic alignment. The SC welcomes closer collaboration and partnership between EEA-EIONET and the Joint Research Centre (JRC). The Committee notes that JRC representatives are regularly invited to SC Seminars to discuss the latest scientific developments relevant to the EEA. JRC researchers have also made significant contributions to key EEA reports, including the European Climate Risk Assessment. Another important area of collaboration is within the framework of the EU Horizon Europe Missions, particularly the EU Mission on Adaptation to Climate Change, where both organizations play crucial roles in providing scientific knowledge, knowledge-sharing platforms and guidance to help achieve the mission's goals. The further development of the collaboration between EEA-EIONET and JRC should be primarily framed within the context of, and in response to, the urgency and complexity posed by the current pollution, biodiversity, and climate crises. Closer cooperation could also be pursued in the priority domains and research areas identified by DG RTD.

Revision of the SOER time cycle.

The external evaluation recommended aligning the State of the Environment Report (SOER) time cycle more closely with the European political election cycles. While recognizing the value of providing authoritative knowledge inputs when political agendas are being formulated, the Committee believes that the scope of SOER should cover all stages of the policy cycle – from agenda-setting to monitoring progress and assessing the need for further actions in relation to established targets. To serve these purposes and provide timely, targeted insights for maximum policy impact and relevance, SOER and other major assessment reports should evolve into a dynamic digital platform with more frequent updates and on-demand syntheses.

Digitalisation strategy.

Further enhancement of the digitalization strategy is crucial to fully leverage modern data acquisition, handling, and interpretation tools, especially as technologies like digital twins and AI become more mainstream. However, the Committee recommends that the short- and long-term costs of digitalization be carefully estimated and monitored, including access to (super)computing facilities, server infrastructure, and the operation and maintenance of databases. While it should be expected that digitalization costs and investments will increase in the future, these should lead to greater efficiencies and new capabilities, enabling the agency to better fulfil its mission.