

# 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.

Adopted by written procedure, 1 November 2024.

*[Signed]*

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Chair of the EEA Scientific Committee