SOER 2015 [3] is the fifth edition of the 'European environment – state and outlook' report, published by the European Environment Agency every five years. SOER 2015 Synthesis presents the most comprehensive picture of Europe’s environment ever published, underpinned by 87 online briefings (11 global megatrends briefings, 25 European briefings, 9 cross-country comparison briefings, 39 country briefings and 3 regional briefings) -

In 2015, Europe stands roughly halfway between the initiation of EU environmental policy in the early 1970s and the EU's 2050 vision of 'living well within the limits of the planet'. Underlying this vision is a recognition that Europe's economic prosperity and well-being is intrinsically linked to its natural environment. Environmental policies are also creating economic opportunities and thereby contributing to the Europe 2020 Strategy, aimed at making the EU into a smart, sustainable and inclusive economy by 2020.

Looking back on the last 40 years, Europe has made progress in reducing some key environmental pressures, but often these improvements have not yet translated into improved ecosystem resilience or reduced risks to health and well-being. Furthermore, the long-term outlook is often less positive than recent trends might suggest. Feedbacks, interdependencies and lock-ins in environmental and socio-economic systems undermine efforts to mitigate environmental pressures and related impacts. For example, improved efficiency in production processes can lower the costs of goods and services, incentivising increased consumption (the 'rebound effect'). Changing exposure patterns and human
vulnerabilities, for example linked to urbanisation, can offset reductions in pressures. And the unsustainable systems of production and consumption that are responsible for many environmental pressures also provide diverse benefits, including jobs and earnings. This can create strong incentives for sectors or communities to resist change.

The EEA’s report provides limited evidence of progress in effecting the fundamental shift towards a much more integrated approach - i.e. green / circular economy- to addressing persistent, systemic environmental challenges. The analysis suggests that neither environmental policies alone nor economic and technology-driven efficiency gains are likely to be sufficient to achieve the 2050 vision. Instead, living well within ecological limits will require fundamental transitions in the systems of production and consumption that are the root cause of environmental and climate pressures. Such transitions will, by their character, entail profound changes in dominant institutions, practices, technologies, policies, lifestyles and thinking. Recalibrating existing policy approaches can make an essential contribution to such transitions.

This overall picture is also reflected in the marine environment, as further analysed in EEA’s ‘State of Europe’s Seas’ [4] report, also published in 2015. The analysis shows that, despite some improvements, the marine environment is neither healthy nor clean and the way we use our seas remains unsustainable. Human activities and climate change are increasingly putting a number of interacting pressures on Europe’s seas, the cumulative effects of which threaten the functioning and resilience of marine ecosystems. This poses challenges to the sustainable development of the blue economy in the EU, as it sets to harness further the potential of Europe’s oceans, seas and coasts for jobs and economic value. Achieving the 2050 vision put forward by the 7th Environmental Action Programme of ‘living well within the planet’s limits’ will thus require more ambitious actions on policy, knowledge, investments and innovation. This transition is a collective challenge for Europe, of which the blue economy is an intrinsic part, but it also presents a wealth of opportunities to explore and boost sustainable jobs and growth in Europe.

[5] presentation
State of Europe's seas