



CALL FOR EXPRESSION OF INTEREST BLUE ECOSYSTEM PROJECT

PORTUGAL - ALENTEJO

**CALL FOR THE COLLECTION OF SOLUTIONS FOR THE BLUE
SUSTAINABLE ECONOMY**



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1. ABOUT THE PROJECT

The Blue Economy

In recent years, awareness of the strategic role of ocean-related activities – the Blue Economy – as in Europe’s economic development has grown significantly. This “sector” is recognized as a key engine for growth and job creation, delivering essential goods and services in areas such as transport, food systems, energy, tourism and leisure.

However, the increasing demands of a growing population have intensified anthropogenic pressures on marine environments, resulting in pollution, loss of natural capital and ecosystem degradation. Coastal zones and related infrastructure remain highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, exposing the urgent need for resilient and sustainable solutions.

The importance of a Sustainable Blue Economy is widely acknowledged at the European level. The EU Mission “**Restore our Ocean and Waters by 2030**” underscores the need for targeted investments to address environmental challenges and foster sustainability. The (EU) **Blue Economy Report 2024** provides an in-depth analysis of sectoral trends, highlighting how innovation and sustainability are driving growth and creating new business opportunities. Complementing this, the establishment of the **EU Blue Economy Observatory** ensures continuous monitoring and analysis of marine-related economic activities, reinforcing the sector’s central role in safeguarding ocean health.

According to the (EU) **BlueInvest Investor Report 2024**, investment in Blue Economy sectors has tripled between 2012-2017 and 2018-2023. The most dynamic areas include blue renewable energy, ocean observation technologies, and aquaculture.

Research and Innovation are critical to advancing a circular, resource-efficient and low-carbon Blue Economy. The emerging paradigm of transformative innovation – designed to deliver systemic, resilient and sustainable change – requires the active engagement of diverse stakeholders around shared, societally relevant goals. This approach calls for co-design and co-creation of products and services that integrate societal needs throughout the innovation process.

Policies that accelerate the adoption of new technologies must embrace this collaborative and inclusive model, ensuring democratic participation and equitable opportunities for all. The complexity of the challenges facing the Blue Economy makes it an ideal testing ground for this new approach.



The strong social relevance of blue economic activities, combined with their environmental impact, demands innovative governance and collaborative solutions.

In recent years, **co-creation has proven to be an effective method** for shaping research and innovation agendas, conducting experiments and disseminating results – ensuring that civil society plays an active role in building a sustainable future for our oceans.

This **Call for Expression of Interest – Blue Ecosystem Project: Portugal – Alentejo** emerges within this context, aiming to identify and promote innovative solutions that address the region's specific challenges in the Blue Economy. By focusing on Alentejo, this initiative seeks to transform global ambitions into local opportunities, fostering sustainable growth and resilience in one of Portugal's most promising regions.

Blue Ecosystem Project

Blue Ecosystem Project **aims to promote transformative innovation solutions for the sustainability of the Blue Economy**, ensuring a better balance between human activities that exploit marine, river and coastal resources and the health of marine/river ecosystems, while addressing emerging threats related to climate change.

The project adopts a participatory and co-creation methodology, engaging Quintuple Helix stakeholders – public sector, private sector, academy, civil society and environmental actors – to identify complex challenges and define actionable solutions. It focuses on key innovation sectors such as marine ecosystems and coastal areas, blue biotechnologies, marine renewable energy, fisheries and aquaculture, ports and shipbuilding, marine robotics, and coastal and maritime tourism. To achieve these objectives, Blue Ecosystem Project will design, test, and validate three main components:

- **Transformative co-creation innovation labs (TRAIN Labs) in each pilot region** – Balearic Islands, Emilia-Romagna, Sud Paca-Occitanie, Zadar County, Alentejo, Attica and Albania – aligned with regional blue economy action plans.
- **The BLUE ECOMATCH program**, a MED-wide open innovation process designed to address complex challenges, connect stakeholders, and accelerate solutions through transnational collaboration.



- **A Transformative Book for the Sustainable Blue Economy**, consolidating the project's methodology, key outcomes and best practices to promote mutual learning and scalable innovation models.

Through these initiatives, Blue Ecosystem Project seeks to foster a shift in mindset among stakeholders, enabling the adoption of sustainable business models, the development of new skills in blue economy markets, and the removal of institutional and cultural barriers that hinder innovation.

The Alentejo region plays a pivotal role as one of the project's pilot territories. This call for expression of interest is part of that effort, aiming to identify and promote innovative solutions that address the region's specific challenges in the Blue Economy. By focusing on Alentejo, the initiative seeks to transform Mediterranean-wide strategies into local opportunities, reinforcing resilience and sustainability in one of Portugal's most promising regions.

2. ABOUT THE CALL

The **Alentejo region combines a unique coastal and inland dynamic**, offering significant potential for the development of a sustainable Blue Economy. Its extensive coastline, estuarine systems and connection to agro-food and cultural sectors create opportunities for innovation that can strengthen economic resilience while preserving natural resources.

However, the region also faces challenges linked to climate change, environmental degradation and the need to modernize traditional activities. Addressing these issues requires solutions that balance economic growth with the protection of marine, river and coastal ecosystems, while promoting social inclusion and territorial cohesion.

Through this Call for Expression of Interest, **ADRAL – Alentejo Regional Development Agency – seeks innovative ideas and practical solutions that respond to the region's specific challenges within the Blue Economy.**

2.1. Why Apply?

By joining this call, proponents gain the chance to showcase their idea, increase its visibility and access valuable resources to strengthen its development. Shortlisted solutions will receive recognition and promotion, while the winners of each thematic area will secure an exclusive opportunity to present their projects to key regional stakeholders and decision-makers – creating real value for the Blue Economy in the Alentejo.



This is your opportunity to turn innovative ideas into actionable solutions, contribute to regional sustainability, and position yourself at the forefront of transformative change in one of Portugal's most promising territories.

2.2. Who can Apply?

This call is open to **all public and private entities** interested in **research, innovation and technology transfer** within the Blue Economy.

The following list of eligible applicants, based on the **Quintuple Helix model**, is provided as an example:

- Private Enterprises (SME's, medium and large companies);
- National / Regional / Local public authorities;
- Business support organisations;
- Sectoral agencies;
- Higher education and research / innovation institutes;
- Research laboratories;
- Clusters;
- Universities;
- Education / training centres and schools;
- Interest groups, including NGOs;
- International organisations, EEIGs;
- Others.

Applications may be submitted in one of the following ways:

a) **Individually**;

b) **As a team (co-promotion), consisting of a minimum of 2**. To encourage collaboration and maximize impact, proposed solutions should adopt a multi-actor approach, involving or planning to involve multiple stakeholders from different sectors (e.g. public, private, academia, civil society).

If an application is submitted as a team and any member does not meet these eligibility requirements, the application will be considered ineligible.



An entity may submit a maximum of one proposal per thematic area and may apply to no more than two thematic areas in total, whether as the lead applicant or as part of a consortium.

2.3. Thematic Areas and Challenges

Each proposed solution must address a Blue Economy challenge relevant to the Alentejo region, as detailed in this subchapter. These challenges were identified through a co-design process and are aligned with the four main thematic areas of innovation defined by the Smart Specialization Strategy (S3):

- 1. Bioeconomy – Agrofood:** Aiming to protect biodiversity and enhance food security through sustainable aquaculture practices, the use of alternative proteins, biodegradable gear and valorization of marine by-products, while addressing challenges such as IUU fishing and the environmental footprint of fisheries.
- 2. Sustainable tourism:** Promoting eco-sustainable tourism by shifting from mass tourism to community-based coastal or river experiences, investing in digital transformation, sustainable mobility and the preservation of maritime/river culture, with a focus on natural reserves like Parque Natural do Sudoeste Alentejano e Costa Vicentina.
- 3. Transport and logistics:** Decarbonization through electrification of ports, green ship design, smart logistics and alternative fuels, positioning the Port of Sines as a key blue innovation hub for digital and green transition.
- 4. Energy:** Advancing towards marine/river renewables – offshore wind, solar, wave energy and green hydrogen – supported by infrastructure investments and aligned with national carbon neutrality goals.

The specific challenges and priorities are detailed in the table below:

Thematic Area	Priority 1	Priority 2	Priority 3
Bioeconomy – Agrofood	Promote sustainable food systems through alternative protein sources and emerging aquaculture species, supporting	Advance circular economy practices in fisheries and aquaculture, including the recycling and reuse	Strengthen governance and sustainability standards, addressing illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU)

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	diversification, nutrition, and resilience	of equipment and packaging	fishing, and promoting certification schemes to ensure transparency
Sustainable tourism	Promote ecotourism to support marine conservation and raise public awareness about the importance of protecting aquatic ecosystems	Develop sustainable forms of marine tourism, such as cruising, yachting, and diving, while enhancing areas of cultural and environmental interest like marine parks and wildlife observatories	Implement citizen science protocols to engage the public in data collection and environmental monitoring, fostering community involvement and scientific literacy
Transport and logistics	Adopt alternative fuels and electrify port infrastructure to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and support the decarbonization of maritime transport	Integrate smart technologies for sustainable logistics, including autonomous vessels and unmanned systems to enhance operational efficiency and reduce environmental impact.	Promote green ship innovations, focusing on eco-efficient vessel design, advanced propulsion systems, and material recycling to improve energy performance and circularity in maritime logistics.
Energy	Expand offshore renewable energy and storage solutions, including wind and solar farms, to accelerate the transition to marine renewable energy (MRE)	Promote multipurpose use of marine space, integrating platforms for food, energy, and freshwater production	Reduce emissions and environmental impact of maritime transport, through cold ironing (shore power) and adoption of eco-efficient technologies and materials

Table 1: Challenges identified in the Blue Transformative Challenges Matrix

The priorities and thematic challenges presented in this table are based on the **Blue Transformative Challenges Matrix**, which identifies and structures the key Blue Economy challenges for the Alentejo region.



2.4. Evaluation Criteria

The expected solutions are not fully structured or funded projects, but rather proposals to be developed, capable of generating impact, fostering innovation and enabling collaboration between public and private actors.

Proposes will be evaluated by ADRAL¹, based on these criteria:

- 1. Criteria A – Relevance and Alignment (30%):** How well the proposal addresses a Blue Economy challenge specific to the Alentejo and aligns with the thematic areas defined in this call.
- 2. Criteria B – Potential Impact (30%):** The expected contribution to sustainability, economic development and social inclusion, as well as the potential for scalability and long-term benefits.
- 3. Criteria C – Degree of Innovation (25%):** The originality of the idea, its transformative potential and the use of advanced or creative approaches compared to existing solutions.
- 4. Criteria D – Feasibility and Implementation Perspective (15%):** The clarity of the concept, technical soundness and the realism of the proposed development path, even at an early stage.

The specific criteria are detailed in the table below:

Criteria A – Relevance and Alignment	30%
Regional fit and strategic contribution – How effectively the solution addresses a specific Blue Economy challenge in the Alentejo region, demonstrates alignment with the thematic areas in Subchapter 2.3, and contributes to the overall objectives of the call.	30%
Criteria B – Potential Impact	30%
Impact on sustainability and regional development – Contribution to sustainability, biodiversity protection and social inclusion, while creating value for local communities, generating jobs and enhancing regional competitiveness.	20%
Scalability and replicability – Ability to expand or adapt the solution beyond the initial scope.	10%
Criteria C – Degree of Innovation	25%

¹ The evaluation will be carried out with the technical support of Fórum Oceano, CCDRA – Alentejo Regional Coordination and Development Commission, and the technical teams of the Municipalities of Odemira, Santiago do Cacém and Sines.



Innovation and technological approach – Originality of the idea and its potential to introduce transformative change, combined with the integration of advanced technologies or methodologies such as digital, green or co-creation approaches.	25%
Criteria D – Feasibility and Implementation Perspective	15%
Clarity and structure – Quality of the description, including objectives, activities and expected outcomes.	10%
Realism of development path – Technical soundness and plausibility of future implementation steps, even at an early stage.	5%

Table 2: Selection Criteria for Proposals

Note: Proposals involving partnerships with complementary skills and clear roles will be positively considered under the evaluation criteria.

2.5. Decision Process

The **decision and selection process** for winning ideas will take place in three phases:

A) Phase 1 – Eligibility Check

Verification of compliance with the call requirements (submission deadline, completeness of information and alignment with the Blue Economy and Alentejo context).

B) Phase 2 – Technical Evaluation

All eligible proposals will be scored according to the evaluation criteria described in Subchapter 2.4. For each thematic area, the three highest-scoring proposals will be shortlisted, creating a pool of up to 12 proposals.

C) Phase 3 – Final Selection

From the shortlisted proposals, one winner will be selected for each thematic area (Bioeconomy, Cultural and Creative Industries, Transport and Logistics, Energy). These four winners will receive enhanced recognition and prizes as described in Subchapter 2.6.

2.6. Prizes

The call will recognize the most promising ideas with benefits designed to increase their visibility, provide valuable resources, and create opportunities for future growth and collaboration:



1. Official Recognition

- A personalized Certificate of Achievement.
- A digital badge identifying the solution as a “Selected Solution for the Blue Economy in Alentejo,” which can be used in communication materials and websites.

2. Visibility and Promotion

- Publication of the solution on ADRAL’s official website and on the Blue Ecosystem project platform.
- Inclusion in a press release and social media highlights, giving visibility to the project and its innovative approach.

3. Capacity-Building Session

- Invitation to an exclusive online workshop: “*Practical Steps for Blue Economy Innovation*”, providing actionable insights on how to structure and advance your idea toward implementation.

Beyond the recognition and benefits granted to all shortlisted solutions, **the winners of each thematic area will receive an exclusive opportunity** designed to maximize their impact and bring their ideas closer to real implementation.

4. Exclusive Presentation Session

- A dedicated pitch opportunity to:
 - o The relevant Municipal Authority (Câmara Municipal);
 - o Key regional stakeholders and business associations connected to the thematic challenge.

2.7. Submission Guidelines and Deadline

Applications must be submitted in Portuguese or English by **January 16, 2026, no later than 23:59** (Portugal time). To apply, candidates must complete the online application form available at the following [LINK](#).



2.8. Co-Creation Workshop/ Infoday

To foster collaboration and strengthen the innovative ecosystem, **ADRAL will organize an online Co-Creation Workshop/Infoday on November 26, 2025.**

This event is **open to all interested participants**, including those who have already submitted a proposal and those considering participating in the call. **Attendance is optional** and aims to foster collaboration and networking within the Blue Economy ecosystem. This session will also serve as an **Infoday**, providing key information about the call and its objectives.

It will provide a space to share ideas, exchange experiences, and explore potential partnerships with other participants and stakeholders from the Blue Economy ecosystem. The workshop will include **interactive sessions aimed at promoting dialogue, identifying synergies, and supporting the development of innovative solutions aligned with the region's priorities.**

Further details, **including the venue, agenda, and registration process**, will be announced in the coming weeks on the official ADRAL page: www.adral.pt. For exclusive information, please contact us at geral@adral.pt.

2.9. Notification of Results

Applicants will be notified of the results **via email** using the contact information provided in the application form. After notifications are sent, the list of selected solutions will be published on ADRAL's official website (www.adral.pt), on ADRAL's social media channels, and on the Blue Ecosystem project platform (<https://blueecosystem.interreg-euro-med.eu/>).

2.10. Responsibility and Confidentiality

Each applicant is solely responsible for the completeness, accuracy, and truthfulness of the data and information provided in the application materials and documentation.

ADRAL assumes no responsibility for the content submitted, nor for any inaccuracies, omissions, or violations of third-party rights.



All information and content provided in the application form, as well as any data or materials concerning the submitted solutions and shared during the organization and implementation of the programme, shall be considered public and available to the Blue Economy Community.

Data Protection Notice (EU Regulation 2016/679):

In accordance with Articles 13 and 14 of EU Regulation 2016/679 (GDPR), ADRAL, informs applicants that their personal data, collected as part of project-related activities, will be processed in compliance with the principles of lawfulness, fairness, transparency and confidentiality, in full respect of the applicable data protection legislation.

2.11. Request for Information

Information and documentation related to this call are available on the ADRAL website: www.adral.pt, on ADRAL's social media channels, and on the Blue Ecosystem website: <https://blueecosystem.interreg-euro-med.eu/>.

For more information, contact us at: anabela.caeiro@adral.pt geral@adral.pt.