WAVEMAKER PORT INNOVATION AWARDS 2026

Calling innovative start-ups and entrepreneurs to pitch their solutions to port innovation leaders

1. INTRODUCTION & WAVEMAKER OBJECTIVES

In 2025, the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT) designated the new **EIT Water Knowledge and Innovation Community (KIC)**. During its 2026 start-up phase, EIT Water is establishing its operational framework to become fully operational from 2027 onwards, aiming to tackle the most urgent challenges across the water, marine, and maritime (WMM) sectors. As part of this launch, the **Grundfos Foundation (PDJF)** has co-funded the 2026 Pilot WAVEMAKER Business Creation Call to run regional award events across Europe.

This particular regional award event is hosted by **Blue Cluster**, coordinating the Benelux and France regional hub. Focused on the **pivotal role of ports as maritime, economic and industrial gateways**, this project calls upon ambitious entrepreneurs and start-ups with solutions at Technology Readiness Levels (TRL) 4–7 to **pitch directly to major port challenge owners**. This represents a unique opportunity for matchmaking with some of the leading port authorities in Western Europe.

2. WESTERN EUROPEAN PORT ECOSYSTEM CHALLENGES

Western Europe hosts some of the world's most sophisticated and dense port infrastructures—representing 49% of Europe's total port engineering organizations and three of its top-five largest ports. Ports in this region face a delicate, highly complex balancing act: maintaining massive commercial logistics and industrial productivity while adhering to increasingly strict environmental compliance, such as the EU Water Framework Directive (WFD). To meet these challenges, **ports must explore emerging technologies and transition into active living-lab innovation hubs**.

EIT Water Strategic Objectives	Critical Port-Specific Challenges & Innovation Needs
Marine & Freshwater Ecosystem Health	Strict regulatory pressure under the WFD requires ports to improve environmental and sediment quality and apply stricter pollution monitoring. Critical needs include in-situ sediment management, removal of historical contaminants, chemical and PFAS remediation in drainage and groundwater and real-time salinity, water-quality and marine biodiversity monitoring.
Water Efficiency & Resource Circularity	High-density chemical and industrial clusters in port zones consume vast quantities of water. Ports require advanced circular solutions to reduce, reuse and replace freshwater. This includes advanced industrial wastewater treatment techniques, handling concentrated waste flows and collaborative water circularity schemes.
Climate Resilience & Protection	Severe weather, intense rainfall and sea-level rise threaten coastal and lock infrastructures. Ports require innovative techniques to protect physical berths and lock networks from flooding as well as smart, digitalized water-management systems to model and control 'too much, too little, and too polluted' water interactions.

3. CALL FOR SOLUTIONS & PITCHING FORMAT

Are you an innovative start-up, scale-up or spin-off addressing some of these critical port-specific challenges? We are launching a call for technology developers with **solutions at TRL 4–7** that have direct relevance for these challenges. This awards program gets your start-up or enterprise directly in front of major port authorities in Europe and is your **fast-track entry into the EIT Water ecosystem** with **free annual memberships** and the winner's opportunity to pitch for a select Europe-wide group of water sector corporates, investors and other stakeholders during the **official EIT Water launch event in Malaga**.

Pitching format: Initial screening and shortlisting will be based on a pitch deck (max. 10 pages) and (optional) supporting documentation such as Minimum Viable Product collaterals (e.g. videos, pictures, white papers) illustrating the relevance and power of your solutions. **Application deadline** to submit initial pitch deck and supporting materials is **20 August 2026 COB**.

Mentorship & Sparring: To maximize your potential, shortlisted candidates (5–7 startup ventures) will be paired directly with Blue Cluster's experts. These mentors will act as sparring partners to refine your technology's value proposition, regulatory validation, business model and pitch delivery ahead of the pitch event on 9 September 2026 in Ostend (Belgium).

4. PRESTIGIOUS AWARD SYSTEM & REGIONAL PRIZES

Participants will pitch directly before a jury of leading port innovation hub representatives (e.g. **Port of Antwerp-Bruges, North-Sea Port**, **Port of Rotterdam** and **HAROPA Port** (Le Havre, Rouen and Paris) and EIT Water experts**.**

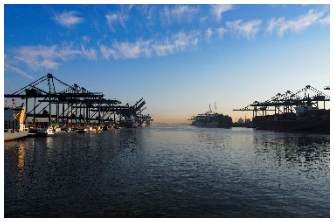
- **Three Regional Winners** will be announced at the event. Each winner will receive a **one-year membership in 2027 to the prestigious EIT Water KIC ecosystem**, unlocking pan-European partnerships, strategic fundraising and market-entry support.
- **First-Place Winner**: The representative from the top-rated start-up will receive an all-expenses-invited trip to pitch and receive recognition at the official **EIT Water Launch Event in October 2026** (scheduled for 15 October 2026). There, they will compete against winners from seven other European regional feeder events for the overall grand prize: an additional **one-year membership for 2028** and a monetary grant of **EUR 5,000** to fast-track market growth.

5. PRACTICAL INFORMATION & LOGISTICS

Ready to showcase your innovation? Mark your calendar for **Wednesday 9 September 2026** in **Ostend (Belgium)** and prepare your pitch. Start-ups are invited and highly encouraged to pitch **in person** to maximize networking and high-level exposure with challenge owners. However, to ensure inclusivity, digital/remote pitching options are fully supported for far-away participants. Support for travel expenses to Ostend can be provided.

Key Event Detail	Information & instructions
Date & Time	Wednesday 9 September 2026, starting at 10:00am till 1:30pm (including lunch)
Main Physical Venue	Council Chamber, City of Ostend, Vindictivelaan 1, 8400 Oostende, Belgium
Pitching Format	Hybrid (In-person presentation strongly recommended; interactive digital means available for remote/far-away start-ups)
Target Audience	Start-ups, scale-ups, spin-offs from Benelux, France, and neighbouring regions with solutions for port-related water, marine and maritime challenges at TRL 4-7
Host Organizations	Hosted by Blue Cluster (DBC) in collaboration with EIT Water & Grundfoss Foundation

APPLY TO PITCH: Submit your short pitch decks and supporting materials to arnout.desmet@blauwecluster.be **prior to 20 August 2026**. Applications are reviewed on a rolling basis. **Prepare to ride the next wave of port innovation!**



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