

ABS REGULATORY NEWS

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AMENDMENTS TO THE INTERNATIONAL CODE FOR SHIPS OPERATING IN POLAR WATERS (POLAR CODE)

This Regulatory News provides an overview of the IMO Resolution MSC.538(107), which amends parts of Chapter 9 and Chapter 11 of the IMO Polar Code. The amendments are related to safety of navigation and voyage planning.

BACKGROUND

The IMO Polar Code includes mandatory measures covering safety part (part I-A) and pollution prevention (part II-A) and recommendatory provisions for both (parts I-B and II-B). The Code entered into force on 1 January 2017 for new vessels. Ships constructed before 1 January 2017 had to meet the safety requirements of the Polar Code by the first intermediate or renewal survey, whichever occurred first, after 1 January 2018. The environmental provisions of the Polar Code applied both to existing ships and new ships from 1 January 2017. The Polar Code covers the full range of design, construction, equipment, operational, training, search and rescue and environmental protection matters to increase the safety of ships operating in polar waters and reduce the risk and damage to the polar environment.

Furthermore, IMO made amendments to SOLAS introduced by Resolution [MSC.532\(107\)](#) and to the Polar Code, introduced by Resolution [MSC.538\(107\)](#) to apply specific new provisions of the Code to certain non-SOLAS vessels that operate in polar waters. The rules mandate safety requirements, including those for voyage planning and safety of navigation, in new regulations (9-1 and 11-1) of the Code, as explained below.

SUMMARY OF AMENDMENTS

Amendments to the Polar Code, adopted through IMO Resolution [MSC.538\(107\)](#) in June 2023, will enter into force on 1 January 2026. These revisions expand mandatory safety requirements for navigation and voyage planning to include specific categories of non-SOLAS ships, aiming to enhance operational safety and preparedness in polar environments. Vessels constructed before 1 January 2026 must achieve full compliance with the new regulations by 1 January 2027. However, any vessels constructed on or after 1 January 2026 will need to comply with the new requirements as soon as they start to operate in polar waters. The following sections outline the key amendments and associated compliance actions.

KEY NOTES

Entry into force date:

1 January 2026 (new ships)
1 January 2027 (existing ships)

Application:

Fishing Vessels (> 24 m)
Yachts (> 300GT)
Cargo Vessels (300 < GT < 500)

References:

- MSC.532(107)
- MSC.538(107)

APPLICABLE VESSELS

The Polar Code amendments are applicable to:

- fishing vessels of 24 meters in length overall and above;
- pleasure yachts of 300 gross tonnage and upwards not engaged in trade; and
- cargo ships of 300 gross tonnage and upwards but below 500 gross tonnage.

Table 1: Amendments to the IMO Polar Code

Ship Type	Implementation	Resolution	Amendments / Additional Requirements
Fishing Vessels (24 m and above)	New constructions after 1 January 2026 to comply before operating in polar waters	MSC.532(107) and MSC.538(107)	<p>Amendments to the Polar Code Part I-A enhance safety for non-SOLAS ships in polar waters with new Chapters 9-1 and 11-1:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Chapter 9-1 addresses navigational equipment in extreme conditions - Chapter 11-1 focuses on route planning. <p>These regulations apply to Arctic-flagged ships when voyages extend beyond territorial seas. ABS will issue the compliance certificates upon authorization by the Flag Administration.</p>
Yacht (300 GT and above)	Existing ships to comply by the first intermediate or renewal survey, whichever occurs first, after 1 January 2027		
Cargo Ships (300 < GT < 500)			

CHAPTER 9-1, SAFETY OF NAVIGATION

An additional chapter was inserted after the existing Chapter 9 applicable to non-SOLAS ships as defined above. The new chapter provides goals, functional requirements, and prescriptive regulations related to safe navigation in polar waters. This includes the ability to receive up-to-date information including ice information, the navigation equipment and systems are designed for the expected environmental conditions, systems for providing reference headings and position fixing are suitable for the intended areas, and the ability to visually detect ice when operating in darkness.

CHAPTER 11-1, VOYAGE PLANNING

An additional chapter was inserted after the existing Chapter 11 applicable to non-SOLAS ships as defined above. The new chapter provides goals, functional requirements, and prescriptive regulations related to voyage planning for operations in polar waters. The voyage planning requirements shall consider the following:

- the procedures required by the safety management system on board; if no safety management system is implemented there shall be a documented procedure for operation in polar waters;

- any limitations of the hydrographic information and aids to navigation available;
- current information on the extent and type of ice and icebergs in the vicinity of the intended route;
- statistical information on ice and temperatures from former years;
- places of refuge;
- current information and measures to be taken when marine mammals are encountered relating to known areas with densities of marine mammals, including seasonal migration areas;
- current information on relevant ships' routing systems, speed recommendations and vessel traffic services relating to known areas with densities of marine mammals, including seasonal migration areas;
- national and international designated protected areas along the route; and
- operation in areas remote from search and rescue (SAR) capabilities.

ACTIONS FOR COMPLIANCE

To ensure safe operations in polar waters, companies, masters, and crew must be provided with adequate information that supports the safety of the vessel, personnel on board, and, where applicable, environmental protection. Ships are required to adhere to the Polar Code's performance standards and conduct thorough operational assessments. Navigational equipment and systems must meet the updated functional requirements, and voyage planning must incorporate a comprehensive assessment of potential hazards along the intended route to ensure safe and effective navigation in polar waters.

REFERENCES

Document	Title
Polar Code	Chapters 9 and 11
MSC.532(107)	Amendments to the international convention for the safety of life at sea, 1974
MSC.538(107)	Amendments to the international code for ships operating in polar waters

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