MARITIME
COOK ISLANDS
The Cook Islands Ship Registry

MCI Circular 340/2026

To: Vessel Owners, Managers, Masters, Officers, Deputy Registrars, Surveyors, Recognized Organizations and Other Interested Parties

Subject: International Code for Ships Operating in Polar Waters (Polar Code)

References:

a. **SOLAS**, *International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea,* Consolidated Edition 2024
b. **MARPOL**, *International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships*, Consolidated Edition 2022
c. **Polar Code**, *International Code for Ships Operating in Polar Waters*
d. **STCW** including 2010 Manila Amendments: *STCW Convention and STCW Code: International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers,* 2017 Edition
e. IMO Resolution A.1137(31), Interim safety measures for ships not *certified under the SOLAS Convention operating in polar waters,* adopted 4 December 2019
f. IMO Resolution MEPC.265(68), Amendments to the Annex of the *International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution form Ships, 1973,* adopted 15 May 2015
g. IMO Resolution MEPC.329(76), Amendments to the Annex of the *International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution form Ships, 1973, as modified by protocol of 1978 relating thereto,* adopted 17 June 2021
h. IMO Resolution MSC.532(107), Amendments to the International *Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea, 1974*, adopted 8 June 2023
i. IMO Resolution MSC.538(107), Amendments to the International Code *for Ships Operating in Polar Waters (Polar Code)*, adopted 8 June 2023
j. IMO Circulars MEPC.1/Circ.856, Guidance for issuing revised *certificates, manuals and record books of MARPOL for compliance with environment-related requirements of the Polar Code*, as corrected by MEPC.1/Circ.856/Corr.1, issued 6 August 2015
k. IMO Circular MEPC.1/Circ.915, Guidelines on mitigation measures to *reduce risks of use and carriage for use of HFO as fuel by ships in Arctic waters*, issued 15 November 2024
l. IMO Circular MSC.1/Circ.1519, Guidance on methodologies for *assessing operational capabilities and limitations in ice*, issued 6 June 2016
m. IMO Circular MSC.1/Circ.1562, Unified interpretation of SOLAS *Regulation XIV/2.2 and paragraphs 1.3.2 and 1.3.6, Part I-A of the Polar Code*, issued 12 December 2016
n. IMO Circular MSC.1/Circ.1612, Guidance for navigation and *communication equipment intended for use on ships operating in polar waters,* issued 14 June 2019
o. IMO Circular MSC.1/Circ.1614/Rev.1, *Revised interim guidelines on life saving appliances and arrangements for ships operating in polar waters,* issued 5 December 2022
p. Cook Islands Maritime Regulations
q. Cook Islands Yacht Code
r. Cook Islands Requirements for Seafarer Certification
s. Cook Islands Circular 304/2024, *Statutory certificates for all passenger vessels regardless the Gross Tonnage and for all commercial vessels 500 GT and over*
t. Cook Islands Circular 153/2017, *International Code for Ships Operating in Polar Waters*

Date: 1st April 2026

1. Summary

Kia Orana,

This Circular provides the Maritime Cook Islands policies for implementing the International Code for Ships Operating in Polar waters ("Polar Code" or the "Code"), which entered into force on 1 January 2017.

This Circular supersedes MCI Circ. 153/2017. The Applicability section has been revised to incorporate recent amendments to the Polar Code and associated amendments to the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) Chapter XIV. They **expand the Polar Code's applicability to certain non-SOLAS vessels and take effect from 1 January 2026**. Additionally, s 4.2 has been updated to clarify the application provisions of the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships (MARPOL) Annex I, Regulation 43A concerning the Heavy Fuel Oil (HFO) use and carriage prohibition in Arctic waters.

2. Regulatory Background

The Polar Code has been developed to increase the safety of ships' operations and mitigate their impact on the people and environment in polar waters. The Polar Code defines three levels of ship categories (Category A, Category B, and Category C) with decreasing ice operational capabilities.

3. Applicability

This Circular applies to all vessels operating in polar waters as follows:

Safety Measures

MCI applies the Polar Code, Part I-A to vessels operating in polar waters, certified in accordance with SOLAS Chapter I.

In accordance with the 2023 amendments of SOLAS Chapter XIV and the Polar Code, MCI will additionally apply the entire Polar Code, Part I-A to the following vessels constructed on or after 1 January 2026 when operating in polar waters:

A. fishing vessels of 24 meters in length overall and above
B. private pleasure (non-commercial) yachts of 300 gross tonnage (GT) and upwards, and
C. cargo ships of 300 GT and upwards but below 500 GT.

These vessels when constructed before 1 January 2026 must meet the new Safety of Navigation and Voyage planning requirements in Polar Code Part I-A, Chapters 9-1 and 11-1 by 1 January 2027. Until then, International Maritime Organization (IMO) Resolution A.1137(31) must be applied.

Pollution Prevention

Ships operating in polar waters must comply with Polar Code, Part II-A. The pollution prevention measures of the MARPOL convention apply as follows:

Annex I:	**All ships**
Annex II:	All ships certified to carry noxious liquid substances (NLS) in bulk.
Annex IV:	Ships engaged in international voyages of 400 GT and above and ships of less than 400 GT which are certified to carry more than 15 persons.
Annex V:	All ships, unless expressly provided otherwise.

Every Cook Islands-flagged vessel must take into consideration the recommendations contained in Polar Code Parts I-B and II-B.

Definitions

The Polar Code contains many definitions; some of which, for the sake of clarity, are provided below.

Antarctic area means the sea area south of latitude 60º S as defined in SOLAS Regulation XIV/1.2 and MARPOL Regulations I/1.11.7, II/13.8.1, IV/17.2, and V/1.14.7.

Arctic waters are as defined in SOLAS Regulation XIV/1.3 and MARPOL Regulations I/46.2, II/21.2, IV/17.3 and V/13.2, but are essentially the sea area north of latitude 60º with exemptions of ice-free areas, because of the Gulf Stream current.

Category A ship means a ship designed for operation in polar waters in at least medium, first-year ice, which may include old ice inclusions.

Category B ship means a ship not included in Category A, designed for operation in polar waters in at least thin, first-year ice, which may include old ice inclusions.

Category C ship means a ship designed to operate in open water or in ice conditions less severe than those included in Category A or B.

Open water means a large area of freely navigable water in which sea ice is present in concentrations less than 1/10. No ice of land origin is present.

Other waters means waters with more than 1/10 ice cover or with any ice of land origin.

Polar waters means Arctic waters or the Antarctic area.

4. Key Requirements

1 Polar Code Compliance

The Polar Code is mandatory under:

1.1 SOLAS Chapter XIV
1.2 MARPOL with amendments to Annexes I, II, IV, and V and
1.3 the International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers (STCW Convention) Chapter V, Regulation 4 and the International Code on the Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers (STCW Code), Part A, Chapter V, Paragraph 4.

2 Structural Provisions

The structural provisions (ship design and arrangements) of the Polar Code must be applied in accordance with the Rules of the Classification Society chosen by the ship owner or operator.

3 Safety Measures (Part I-A)

3.1 Polar Water Operational Manual

3.1.1 A vessel operating in polar waters must carry onboard a **Polar Water Operational Manual (PWOM),** which contains sufficient information regarding the ship's operational capabilities and limitations in order to support the decision-making process of the Master and the crew of the ship.

3.1.2 The PWOM must be developed by the shipowner or ship operator in accordance with the Polar Code, Part I-A, Chapter 2 which requires the PWOM to:

3.1.2.1 include information on the ship-specific capabilities and limitations as determined by the Operational Assessment (see s 3.2, below);

3.1.2.2 include or refer to specific risk-based procedures to be followed in normal operations and in order to avoid encountering conditions that exceed the ship's capabilities;

3.1.2.3 include or refer to specific risk-based procedures to be followed in the event of incidents in polar waters;

3.1.2.4 include or refer to specific risk-based procedures to be followed in the event that conditions are encountered which exceed the ship's specific capabilities and limitations; and

1.1.1.1 include or refer to risk-based procedures to be followed when using icebreaker assistance, as applicable.

3.1.3 MCI requires the model format contained in the Polar Code, Appendix II along with the associated guidance, to be used in the development of the PWOM to retain a common structure that will facilitate review.

3.1.4 To ensure that the PWOM adequately addresses each element listed in the model format contained in the Polar Code, Appendix II, as applicable. The PWOM must be reviewed (not approved) by a Recognized Organization (RO), prior to the issuance of a Polar Ship Certificate.

3.2 Operational Assessment

3.2.1 To establish procedures or operational limitations, an assessment of the ship and its equipment must be carried out by the shipowner or ship operator in accordance with Polar Code, Part I-A, Paragraph 1.5. This includes considering the anticipated range of operating and environment conditions (e.g., operation in low air temperature, ice, and high latitude, and the potential for abandonment onto ice or land) and hazards.

3.2.2 The guidance contained in IMO Circular MSC.1/Circ.1519, '*Guidance on methodologies for assessing operational capabilities and limitations in ice*', must be taken into consideration in conducting an Operational Assessment.

3.3 Goals, Functional Requirements, and Regulations

3.3.1 Compliance is required with the goals, functional requirements, and regulations laid out in the Polar Code, Part I-A.

3.3.2 In ss 3.4 – 3.9 below, certain requirements are emphasised, but they are not intended to be comprehensive.

3.4 Ship Structure, Machinery Installations, and Fire Safety Protection

3.4.1 In accordance with the Polar Code, Part I-A, Chapter 3, Paragraph 3.3.1; Chapter 6, Paragraphs 6.3.2 and 6.3.3; and Chapter 7, Paragraph 7.3.2, MCI has authorised the entities listed in s 3.9.1 below to approve materials of:

3.4.1.1 exposed structures in ships;

3.4.1.2 exposed machinery and foundations for ships intended to operate in low air temperatures, or for ships ice strengthened in accordance with the Polar Code, Chapter 3; and

3.4.1.3 exposed fire safety systems.

3.5 Subdivision and Stability

3.5.1 Category A and B ships constructed on or after 1 January 2017 must be able to withstand flooding resulting from hull penetration due to ice impact.

3.5.2 Information on the icing allowance included in the stability calculations as required under the Polar Code, Part I-A, Chapter 4, Paragraphs 4.3.1.1 and 4.3.1.2 must be provided in the PWOM.

3.6 Life-saving Appliances and Arrangements

3.6.1 Exposed escape routes on ships constructed on or after 1 January 2017 must be arranged so as not to hinder passage by persons wearing suitable polar clothing.

3.6.2 The Polar Code, Part I-A, Chapter 8, Paragraph 8.3.3.3.2 requires both individual (personal) and shared (group) survival equipment. Carefully consider the resource lists and additional guidance in Regulation 8 when considering this equipment.

3.6.3 The guidance in IMO Circular MSC.1/Circ.1614/Rev.1, *Revised Interim guidelines on life saving appliances and arrangements for ships operating in polar waters*, must be taken into consideration when operating in polar waters.

3.7 Navigation Safety and Communications

3.7.1 Ships constructed on or after 1 January 2017 and ice strengthened in accordance with the Polar Code, Part I-A, Chapter 3 must have either two independent echo-sounding devices or one echo-sounding device with two separate independent transducers.

3.7.2 Category A and B ships constructed on or after 1 January 2017 must have bridge wings that are enclosed or designed to protect navigational equipment and operating personnel.

3.7.3 Ships intended to provide icebreaking escort must be equipped with a sound signalling system mounted to face astern to indicate escort and emergency manoeuvres to following ships as described in the International Code of Signals.

3.7.4 The guidance contained in IMO Circular MSC.1/Circ.1612, *Guidance for navigation and communication equipment intended for use on ships operating in polar waters*, must be taken into consideration when operating in polar waters.

3.8 Training and Manning

3.8.1 Masters, Chief Mates, and Officers in Charge of a Navigational Watch (OICNW) on board ships operating in polar waters must be qualified in accordance with the STCW Convention and STCW Code, as summarized in the following table.

Qualifications:

Ice Conditions	**Tankers**	**Passenger Vessels**	**All other vessels**
Ice Free	Not applicable	Not applicable	Not applicable
Open Waters	Basic training for Master, Chief Mate, and OICNWs	Basic training for Master, Chief Mate, and OICNWs	Not applicable
Other Waters	Advanced training for Master and Chief Mate. Basic training for Master, Chief Mate, and OICNWs	Advanced training for Master and Chief Mate. Basic training for Master, Chief Mate, and OICNWs	Advanced training for Master and Chief Mate. Basic training for Master, Chief Mate, and OICNWs

3.8.2 MCI allows using a person(s) other than the Master, Chief Mate, or OICNW to satisfy the requirements of the Polar Code, Part I-A, Chapter 12 (e.g., ice pilots). This does not relieve the vessel's crew of their duties and obligations for the safety of the vessel.

3.8.3 Masters, Chief Mates, and OICNWs who have been evaluated as qualified will receive a notation on their endorsement that qualifies them for polar water service at either the operational or management level. A separate certificate will not be issued.

3.8.4 Every crew member must receive familiarization training on the procedures and equipment contained or referenced in the PWOM relevant to their assigned duties.

3.8.5 A pleasure yacht (i.e. not in commercial operation) may request a Minimum Safe Manning Certificate (MSMC). If requested, the MSMC will be issued at the corresponding commercial yacht levels and seafarers will be required to be trained in accordance with the STCW Convention and STCW Code, including for polar waters.

3.9 Polar Ship Certificate

3.9.1 Every vessel to which Part I-A applies must have on board a valid Polar Ship Certificate issued in accordance with the Polar Code Chapter 1, Paragraph 1.3. See IMO Circular MSC.1/Circ.1562, *Unified interpretation of SOLAS Regulation XIV/2.2* and paragraphs 1.3.2 and 1.3.6, Part I-A of the Polar Code.

3.9.1.1 MCI has authorized ROs on its behalf to issue Polar Ship Certificates.

3.9.1.2 A Polar Ship Certificate may be issued by an RO listed after successful completion of an initial and renewal survey. As stated in the Polar Code:

For Category C cargo ships, if the result of the assessment [Polar Code, Part I-A] in paragraph 1.5 is that no additional equipment or structural modifications is required to comply with the Polar Code, the Polar Ship Certificate may be issued base upon documented verification that the ship complies with all relevant requirements of the Polar Code. In this case, for continued validity of the certificate, an onboard survey should be undertaken at the next scheduled survey.

3.9.1.3 A Polar Ship Certificate must include a supplement recording equipment required by the Polar Code (Record of Equipment). Polar Ship Certificate validity, survey dates, and endorsements must be harmonized with the relevant SOLAS certificates in accordance with the provisions of SOLAS Regulation I/14.

3.9.2 The validity of the Polar Ship Certificate will not affect the validity of other certificates.

4 Pollution Prevention Measures (Part II-A)

The Polar Code, Part II-A contains both operational and structural requirements that pertain to MARPOL Annex I, Annex II, Annex IV, and Annex V. All ships operating in polar waters must comply with these requirements, as applicable.

4.1 Discharges

4.1.1 In the Arctic, discharges of the following are prohibited:

4.1.1.1 oil or oily mixtures; and

4.1.1.2 noxious liquid substances, or mixtures containing such substances.

4.1.2 The discharge of sewage is prohibited in polar waters, except when performed in accordance with MARPOL Annex IV and the additional requirements imposed by the Polar Code, Part II-A, Chapter 4, Paragraph 4.2.

4.1.3 The discharge of garbage into the sea is permitted in polar waters in accordance with MARPOL Annex V, Regulation 4, and the additional requirements imposed by the Polar Code, Part II-A, Chapter 5, Paragraphs 5.2.1 and 5.2.2.

4.2 Special Requirements for the Use and Carriage of Oils as Fuel in Arctic Waters

4.2.1 As of 1 July 2024, the use and carriage of HFO as fuel by ships in Arctic waters is prohibited under MARPOL Annex I, Regulation 43A.

4.2.2 Ships which are required to comply with construction standards regarding oil fuel tank protection may continue to use HFO as fuel or carry HFO for use as fuel in Arctic waters until 1 July 2029.

4.2.3 Ships engaged in securing the safety of ships, or in search and rescue operations, and ships dedicated to oil spill preparedness and response are exempted.

4.2.4 Recommendations for ship operators planning a voyage in the Arctic, or seeking waivers under MARPOL Annex I, Regulation 43A are contained in the Guidelines on mitigation measures to reduce risks of use and carriage for use of HFO as fuel by ships in Arctic waters (IMO Circular MEPC.1/Circ.915).

4.3 Structural Requirements

Additional tank protection is required for Category A and B ships constructed on or after 1 January 2017 in accordance with the Polar Code Part II-A, Chapter 1, Paragraph 1.2.

4.4 MARPOL Shipboard Documentation

4.4.1 Compliance with the Polar Code's pollution prevention measures must be reflected in existing certificates, manuals, and record books through the relevant MARPOL Annexes. These amendments to the shipboard documentation must be made prior to entering polar waters on or after 1 January 2017.

4.4.1.1 MARPOL Annex I

Oil Record Books, manuals, and shipboard oil pollution emergency plans (SOPEP) or the shipboard marine pollution emergency plan (SMPEP) as required by MARPOL Annex I must be updated to consider operation in polar waters.

4.4.1.2 MARPOL Annex II

Operations in polar waters must be considered, as relevant, in the Cargo Record Book, the Manual, and the SMPEP for NLS required by MARPOL Annex II.

MCI grants automatic approval to ships introducing modifications to paragraphs 1.3 and 4.4 of their Procedures and Arrangements Manual in accordance with IMO Circular MEPC.1/Circ.856. This approval will remain valid until the first scheduled survey related to the NLS Certificate or the Certificate of Fitness.

4.4.1.3 MARPOL Annex IV

Unless expressly provided otherwise, any ship certified to operate in polar waters must comply with the Polar Code, Part II-A, Chapter 4, in addition to any other applicable requirements of MARPOL Annex IV.

4.4.1.4 MARPOL Annex V

4.4.1.5 The Garbage Record Book form has been amended to refer to the provisions of the Polar Code, Part II-A, Chapter 5. No approval is needed for ships introducing modifications to the Garbage Record Book s 4.1.3.

4.4.1.6 Operations in polar waters must be considered, as appropriate, in the Garbage Record Book, Garbage Management Plan, and placards as required by MARPOL Annex V.