

“MEPC 84 (April 2026): The climate agenda reaches a critical juncture and the Net Zero Framework moves forward, with the debate still on-

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Energy transition

Maritime outlook, port strategy, decarbonization

The 84th session of the Marine Environment Protection Committee (MEPC 84) of the International Maritime Organization (IMO) confirmed broad support for the goal of net-zero emissions by around 2050 but also made it clear that the regulatory path has not yet been finalized. The focus returned to the Net Zero Framework: there will be intensive intersessional negotiations leading up to MEPC 85 to try to converge on a comprehensive package and avoid a patchwork of regional measures. The session also consolidated technical progress on energy efficiency, ballast water, air emissions control, oil pollution prevention, and the protection of sensitive areas, confirming the rapid pace of agreements at MEPC 84 beyond the central climate debate.

The **Marine Environment Protection Committee (MEPC)** is the main technical body of the **International Maritime Organisation (IMO)** responsible for coordinating international action against pollution caused by ships. It was established on a permanent basis in 1973, in parallel with the adoption of the **MARPOL Convention**, and its role was consolidated in the 1980s when it was integrated into the formal organisational structure of the IMO.

Its mandate covers the **prevention and control of marine pollution** from ships, including oil, harmful substances, sewage and garbage, and, increasingly, atmospheric emissions and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. It is also the body responsible for developing and updating the technical and legal instruments derived from MARPOL and other related conventions.

In its working procedures, the **MEPC** usually holds two plenary sessions a year at the IMO headquarters in London, supported by specialised intersessional working groups that prepare the technical and regulatory texts for the Committee to discuss, approve or adopt. Decisions are, in principle, taken by consensus among Member States; exceptionally, when consensus cannot be reached, a formal vote is taken. The adoption of amendments to the conventions normally follows the **tacit acceptance procedure**, which allows the rules to enter into force unless an express objection is raised within a specified period.

The **84th session of the IMO Marine Environment Protection Committee (MEPC 84)**, held in London from 27 April to 1 May 2026, took place in the shadow of a previous meeting where a lack of consensus had become apparent. In October 2025, the 2nd extraordinary session of the **MEPC** concluded without agreement on the **Net Zero Framework (NZF)**, following negotiations marked by political pressures of unusual intensity in a body traditionally geared towards consensus. On the final day of that meeting, 57 member states voted in favour of a postponement and 49 against, leaving the amendments to Annex VI of MARPOL unadopted and postponing the decision until 2026.

The decisive pressure came from the United States, whose Secretaries of State, Energy and Transport publicly rejected the **NZF** days before the extraordinary session, whilst Saudi Arabia led the call for a postponement, which ultimately succeeded. In this context, **MEPC 84** was the first opportunity to resume discussions on medium-term GHG reduction measures, although differences remained evident between those advocating the adoption of the NZF with minimal changes and those calling for significant adjustments.

Nevertheless, the meeting concluded with a reaffirmation of the delegations' commitment to rebuilding consensus, and the **Net Zero Framework** managed to stay alive in the negotiations.

This article analyses the main outcomes of **MEPC 84** and the current state of a regulatory process which, six months after the setback in October, remains the cornerstone of the decarbonisation of global shipping.

The **84th session of the Marine Environment Protection Committee (MEPC 84)** confirmed the broad support of the 176 member states for the **net-zero emissions target** around

2050, but also highlighted that the regulatory path remains open. Amid technical debates – such as the tender for the 5th GHG Study – and geopolitical tensions, the focus returned to the **Net Zero Framework**: there will be intensive intersessional negotiations leading up to MEPC 85 in an attempt to agree on a comprehensive package and avoid a patchwork of regional measures.

A Closer Look at the 5th GHG Study: Scope, Governance, and Conflicts of Interest

The first two days were dominated by an intense discussion of the **Terms of Reference for the IMO’s 5th Greenhouse Gas (GHG) Study**, a key element in updating the evidence base that underpins maritime climate policies. Several delegations warned of the risk of bias in the selection of experts and called for additional safeguards. Others defended the robustness of the review system and the need to move forward without delay.

On the methodological front, support solidified for focusing the analysis **on tank-to-wake emissions**, leaving the **well-to-tank** component primarily for fuel certification schemes. Even so, the debate on how to account for methane, hydrogen, and ammonia highlighted the current limitations of real-world measurement and the need for transparent assumptions.

There was also discussion on who should carry out the study. Several countries proposed excluding consulting firms, while the final position accepted their participation with strengthened safeguards against conflicts of interest. The agreement also included the creation of a steering committee and periodic updates. On that basis, the IMO plans to launch the tender for this study shortly—a key reference for the sector—which is expected to be published in spring 2028 during MEPC87.

Ports and cities are making progress on decarbonization: green corridors, public-private partnerships, and public procurement

In presentations by external stakeholders, **IAPH** and **C40** reinforced the message that decarbonization progresses more quickly when the port, city, and hinterland coordinate their efforts. The **Rotterdam–Oslo Green Corridor** was cited as an example of operational and logistical integration, and the role of port decarbonization strategies was emphasized. Oslo, for example, has promoted **100% electric ferries** through public procurement and local management measures: its urban maritime emissions footprint is reported to have dropped from 37% (2017) to 3%, achieved by combining penalties for not using OPS with incentives for zero-emission trucks. Decarbonization strategies for Los Angeles were also presented, as well as that of London, which has set a net-zero target for 2040 and has a Net Zero River Plan for 2024 that establishes the roadmap.

Net Zero Framework: Majority in favor, minority with the power to block it, and debate over costs

Wednesday's session focused on the **Net Zero Framework (NZF)**, with 12 documents submitted by Member States and international organizations and a discussion structured around two questions: how to address outstanding concerns regarding the package and how to move forward following the postponement of the October 2025 deadline. The overall tone combined a sense of urgency—driven by the need for international regulatory certainty for investments already underway in fleets and low-carbon fuel production, as well as those awaiting a final decision—with the acknowledgment of a persistent political divide over the **NZF's** economic mechanism.

In terms of alignments, a broad bloc of support for the **NZF**—with or without adjustments—was evident, comprising the European Union, Japan, Mexico, Brazil, Canada, Australia, Norway, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland, and numerous island Member States. Their arguments converged on three points: it is the instrument most consistent with the **IMO's 2023 GHG Strategy**; it avoids a regional patchwork of measures; and, if well designed, the economic pillar (Net Zero Fund) can support a just transition, with attention to island Member States and developing countries.

In another group, the U.S., Saudi Arabia, Russia, Argentina, Panama, Iran, Venezuela, and several oil-exporting countries expressed criticism of the **NZF** in its current form. The most frequently cited concern was the **potential impact on transportation costs** and, by extension, on **food security and energy**, along with doubts about the availability and scalability of alternative fuels. Several delegations rejected mechanisms perceived as punitive or akin to a carbon tax and advocated for technology neutrality. The U.S. maintained outright opposition to the price-based approach, arguing that over 50% of global shipping tonnage rejects it, though it agreed to continue intersessional dialogue provided all options remain on the table.

Beyond the positions, there was agreement on the need to address the distributional dimension of the transition (capacity, infrastructure, access to fuels, and financing) and to maintain momentum so as not to slow down ship orders and investments. The final picture is one of diverse positions but with a majority willingness to continue negotiating.

Work will continue during intersessional meetings

From a procedural standpoint, **MEPC/ES.2** will not yet resume, as it has been agreed to strengthen intersessional work and to task the Secretariat with drafting neutral Terms of Reference for the working group. The Chair's proposal sets two milestones: **ISWG GHG 22** (September 1–4, 2026) and **ISWG GHG 23** (November 23–27, 2026), in addition to an expert workshop on chain of custody. The outcome of this cycle should inform the conclusions of MEPC 85 (tentative dates: November 30–December 3) and, ultimately, break the deadlock in the debate on the **NZF**.

IMO–BBNJ Cooperation and Geopolitical Tensions: The Technical Agenda Is Not Immune

The session also addressed whether, and how, to cooperate with the **High Seas Treaty (BBNJ)**. The EU and Australia advocated for coordination to avoid gaps, while Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Russia, and Kuwait called for caution to prevent institutional overlaps. The decision was made to task the Secretariat with analyzing the implications and options for presentation at **MEPC 85**.

At the same time, a political confrontation emerged regarding the Strait of Hormuz, straining the balance between technical neutrality and security concerns. Despite the differences, majority support focused on the safety of navigation, the protection of seafarers, and freedom of passage, with repeated calls not to shift the MEPC's focus away from its environmental mandate.

Technical agreements and complementary measures: from energy efficiency to the protection of areas

In addition to the issues already summarized, **MEPC 84** made progress on several fronts. Regarding energy efficiency, the **Energy Efficiency Design Index (EEDI)** guidelines were updated to better accommodate dual-fuel and hybrid ships, and a discussion was initiated to strengthen the **Ship Energy Efficiency Management Plan (SEEMP)** as a tool for operational improvement.

Regarding **ballast water**, amendments were agreed upon to the **International Convention for the Control and Management of Ships' Ballast Water and Sediments (BWM)** that will require evidence of the effective operation and maintenance of Ballast Water Management Systems (BWMS) and compliance with Standard D-2 (performance standard for the discharge of aquatic organisms), beyond the initial installation.

Regarding **air pollution**, a new Emission Control Area (ECA) was adopted in the Northeast Atlantic, with limits for nitrogen oxides (NO_x), sulfur oxides (SO_x), and particulate matter (PM). Regarding **oil pollution prevention**, a new Regulation 12A of Annex I to the MARPOL Convention (International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships) was approved, concerning integrated ballast water management systems, along with its associated guidance.

Finally, regarding **area protection**, the Particularly Sensitive Sea Area (PSSA) of Nasca Ridge (Peru) was established with its protective measures, in addition to considering a PSSA in the Arabian Sea and a MARPOL Special Area for Nasca Ridge, among other measures.

Overall, the number of decisions and agreements adopted confirms the ability of MEPC 84 to continue driving substantive regulatory progress, beyond the debate on the **NZF**.

Key Points and Next Steps

The April 2026 **MEPC** meeting sends a clear message: the **net-zero target** is no longer up for debate, but the means to achieve it and the economic mechanisms involved are. The **NZF** remains the central focus, albeit with calls for significant adjustments, and negotiations are now shifting to an intersessional period that will be decisive for the international regulatory certainty the industry is calling for.

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