

TURQUOISE YACHTS
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Issue 11

Summer 2026

HOW TO BUILD IT

The technical magazine for those involved in the
design, construction and refit of superyachts

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The Case for a Unified Yacht Code

The superyacht sector has long operated under a patchwork of flag state regulations, justified by its unique characteristics. Some maintain the industry is best served by this process of innovation and refinement that can adapt the regulations to innovation and lessons learned. But Lorenzo Pollicardo, SYBass Technical & Environmental Director, argues the time has come for a unified approach to bring more clarity, consistency and credibility to yacht regulation.

BY LORENZO POLLICARDO



J. RATCLIFFE



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“Superyachts are but a small part of the maritime industry. Given their unique nature and the way they are operated, they should remain distinct from the international regulatory framework.”

This long-held standpoint has shaped the fragmented landscape of safety – and often environmental – provisions across the superyacht sector. However, in light of the remarkable growth of the global fleet over recent decades – outpacing all other maritime segments – alongside increasing public visibility and the sector’s prominence in innovation and technology, it is time for a candid reassessment.

Should the large yacht industry continue to operate as a niche, positioned outside the international regulatory framework? Or has the time come to assume a more formal role, with dedicated regulatory provisions under the auspices of the International Maritime Organization (IMO)? »



Lorenzo Pollicardo

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BACKGROUND

The International IMO’s regulatory foundation rests on conventions such as the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS), which establishes minimum safety standards for ship construction, equipment and operation. Enforcement lies with flag states, which ensure compliance for vessels under their registry.

SOLAS applies primarily to commercial ships engaged in international voyages. It exempts certain categories, including warships, non-mechanically propelled vessels and private pleasure yachts not engaged in trade. As a result, charter yachts fall within its scope.

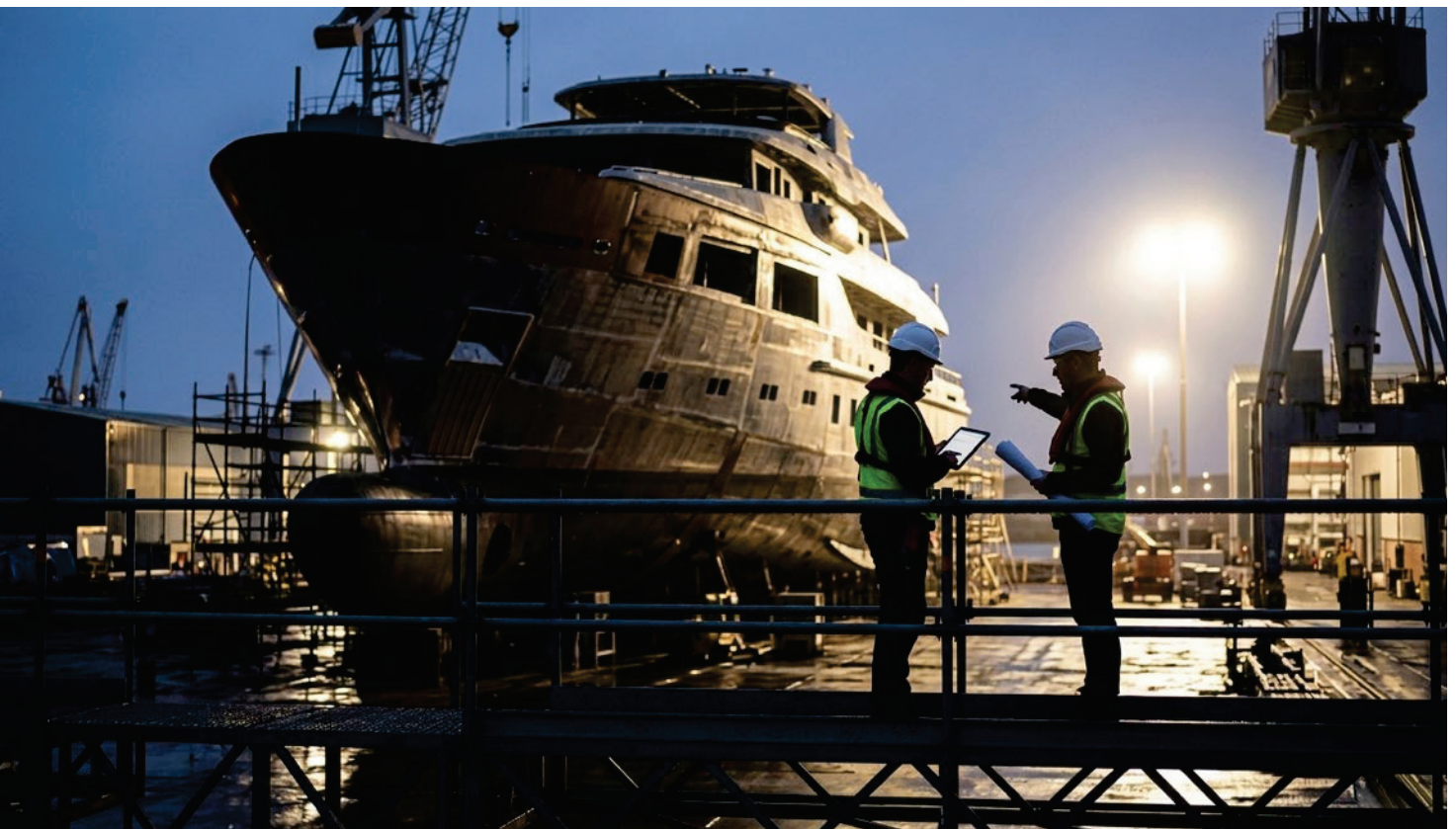
During the late 1990s, as yacht size and complexity increased rapidly, the direct application of SOLAS provisions proved impractical. In response, flag states began developing tailored “equivalent” safety codes. A milestone came in 1997, when the UK Maritime and Coastguard Agency

introduced the LY1 Code. This framework was formally notified to the IMO as an equivalent to SOLAS requirements.

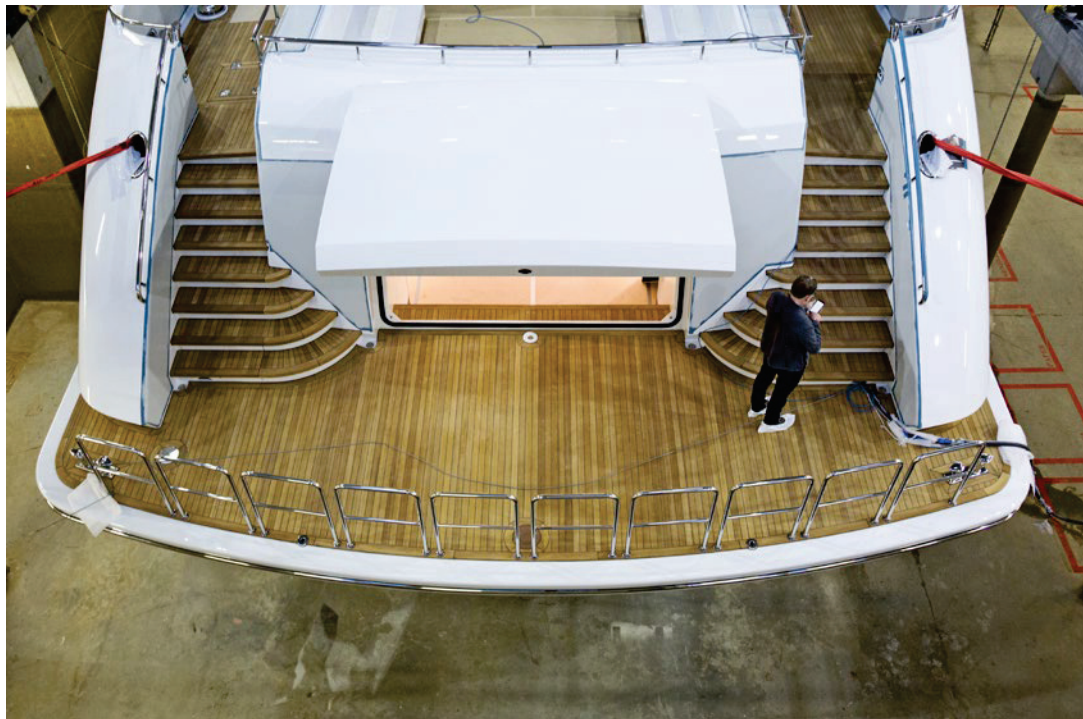
Today’s REG Code 2024 – adopted by the UK, its Crown Dependencies and Overseas Territories – builds on nearly three decades of evolution since LY1. Other major flag states, including Malta and the Marshall Islands, have followed a similar path, each developing and notifying their own yacht codes.

The result is a patchwork of regulatory frameworks. The five leading yacht flags – Cayman Islands, Malta, Marshall Islands, the United States and the United Kingdom – account for approximately 51% of the global fleet over 30 metres. While some align closely with the REG Code, others maintain distinct requirements.

After three decades, a critical question arises: does this system still ensure a consistent and equitable regulatory environment across the industry?



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TOWARDS ALIGNMENT

In 2021, the Superyacht Builders Association General Assembly endorsed the goal of aligning existing flag state provisions into a single, unified framework. The objective was clear: to prevent a “race to the bottom” in safety standards by promoting harmonisation, adopting recognised best practices and aligning as closely as possible with international conventions.

A key step in this process was a transparent comparison of the major codes. Initiated by RINA and further developed by the Yacht Safety Environmental Consortium (YSEC) the “SY Comparison Code” analyses the UK, Malta and Marshall Islands frameworks, identifying differences and inconsistencies.

This work has already yielded tangible results. Updates to the various flag codes are increasingly aligned, reflecting a shared commitment to higher and more consistent standards. Yet alignment alone is not enough. The question remains: how can this convergence be formalised within a binding international framework?

The IMO functions as the global rule-making body for shipping, developing treaties and standards that member states implement through national legislation. Its technical work is carried out by key committees, including Maritime Safety and Marine Environment Protection, supported by specialised sub-committees. While the IMO sets the rules, enforcement rests with flag states, complemented by port state control inspections.

Industry associations participate through consultative status as non-governmental organisations (NGOs). These organisations contribute expertise, attend working groups and submit proposals that directly influence regulatory development. Active engagement is essential to maintaining this status.

The large yacht sector is represented at the IMO by organisations such as the Superyacht Builders Association and the International Council of Marine Industry Associations, both of which have played an active role in the regulatory process over the past 15 years. »



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ARGUING THE CASE

The precedent for vessel-specific regulation already exists. The IMO’s High-Speed Craft Code (HSC Code), adopted in 1994, was developed to address the unique characteristics of high-speed vessels that could not comply with traditional SOLAS requirements. It provides an equivalent level of safety through tailored provisions.

Today, there are approximately 1,900 high-speed craft worldwide – compared with more than 6,000 large yachts. A similar approach for large commercial yachts would offer significant advantages:

- A single international yacht code ensuring the highest safety standards
- Mutual recognition by port authorities, reducing compliance uncertainty
- A level playing field, eliminating “flag shopping” for lenient interpretations
- Greater flexibility in flag selection and yacht construction
- Regulations tailored specifically to yacht design and operation, evolving with technology
- Stronger industry participation in IMO processes through member states and expert bodies
- Broader adoption of SOLAS “Alternative Design” methodologies
- The potential evolution of YSEC into a dedicated yacht group within IACS, strengthening technical input
- Enhanced reputation and credibility within the global maritime community
- Increased collaboration across the wider maritime supply chain.

MOVING FORWARD

The superyacht sector is defined by creativity and innovation. For regulations to remain effective, they must be shaped with direct industry involvement to ensure they are genuinely fit for purpose.

The Superyacht Builders Association (SYBAss) has already begun shifting its approach at the IMO – from monitoring regulatory developments to actively contributing to them. This marks a transition from passive regulatory awareness to proactive engagement in industry standards and policy advancement.

Proactivity in this context means anticipating regulatory needs, embedding compliance early and avoiding costly retroactive

adjustments. It builds trust, enhances credibility and creates opportunities for sustainable growth.

From personal experience over the past seven years representing SYBAss at the IMO, the perception of the superyacht industry has evolved significantly. Today, it is recognised as a serious and respected contributor to the wider maritime sector. Its technological innovation and operational expertise are increasingly seen as benchmarks for other industries.

The time has come for the superyacht sector to fully assume its role within the global maritime community – not as an outlier, but as an active participant in shaping its regulatory future. ●

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