

## No clear path to get IMO's net-zero framework over the line: industry experts



*A tense and combative meeting of the IMO's MEPC last October ended with the net-zero framework being postponed for a year. Photo credit: IMO.*

[Greg Knowler, Senior Editor Europe](#) | Feb 24, 2026, 12:10 PM EST

Decarbonization experts are running through different scenarios that will enable the International Maritime Organization's delayed net-zero emissions framework to be formally adopted in November.

A best-case scenario will see the IMO framework, postponed for a year at a meeting last October, entering into force in 2028, a year later than planned, and coming into effect in 2029. But a prolonged political deadlock could delay regulatory certainty on greenhouse gas (GHG) reductions for several years.

The Global Maritime Forum and maritime classification society DNV looked separately at the different scenarios for net-zero implementation. And while the views of their

decarbonization experts differed, there was consensus that whatever measure is ultimately agreed to this November, the IMO's revised emissions reduction targets set in 2023 will need to be pushed back.

A new report from the Global Maritime Forum was released this week and looked at the different plausible outcomes for the net-zero framework (NZF). "Uncertainty at the IMO: Three scenarios and their consequences for shipping's transition," was co-authored by Tristan Smith, associate professor at the UCL Energy Institute, and Femke Spiegelenberg, project manager of the Getting to Zero Coalition within the Global Maritime Forum.

Three potential scenarios were covered by the report: adopting the NZF unchanged from the measures voted down last October, adopting a single-tier fuel standard with lower compliance costs, and removing the economic elements altogether. The report noted that each scenario would have materially different impacts on timelines, enforcement, investment signals, revenues, low-income countries, and regional policies.

"At a minimum, the implementation dates in the text will need to be adjusted to reflect the postponed adoption," the report said. "More fundamentally, the political dynamics that led to the NZF delay introduced new uncertainty not just about the timeline but also about the final shape and ambition of the framework.

"At one extreme, the NZF could be adopted 'as is' later this year, entering into force in 2028 and coming into effect in 2029," the report added. "At the other extreme, a prolonged political deadlock could delay regulatory certainty on GHG reductions for several years."

## **A battle to build consensus**

The motion to delay adoption of the IMO's net-zero framework last October was made at a tense and combative session of its Marine Environment Protection Committee (MEPC) in London. Despite 80% approval for the NZF from member states voting last April, 34 countries switched positions between April and October to favor the deferment in the face of growing pressure from the US. The vote to delay was 57 in favor and 49 against, with 21 abstentions.

Achieving the IMO target of full decarbonization by or around 2050 with benchmark targets set along the way will require narrowing the wide price gap that exists between fossil fuels and the low- or zero-emission alternatives, which by its very nature will require making fossil fuels more expensive.

But the US believes putting a price on carbon emissions from ships will be passed on to its consumers, increasing costs by 10%. That position, centered around President Donald Trump's view that a price on carbon emissions was a "global green new scam tax on shipping," triggered extraordinary threats by the White House that included sanctions, port fees and visa refusals against member states voting to adopt the IMO net-zero framework.

The IMO is now focused on building consensus around some version of the NZF this year before a reconvened MEPC meets in November to finalize the legally binding measures.

With the US so fundamentally opposed to any economic measure that penalizes carbon emissions, one of the potential scenarios being suggested by some member states was to remove it completely from the NZF and focus instead on a technical measure.

The Global Maritime Forum report warned that any removal of the economic element that is designed to make green technologies cheaper than high-emission alternatives would also remove the likelihood of effective enforcement.

"A standalone global fuel standard with no economic elements would likely merely replicate what already exists in the Carbon Intensity Indicator (CII) mechanism, which requires ships with repeated non-compliance at a certain level to file a corrective action plan," the report noted.

## **Geopolitical hurdles ahead for net-zero framework**

Eirik Nyhus, director of environment at DNV, has also been looking at possible scenarios that would enable the NZF to be adopted by IMO member states. But he was not convinced that an unchanged measure would make it across the line.

"Geopolitics being what they are, there are no reasons to expect the opponents of the NZF to shift their positions or their approach to negotiations by November this year, and therefore repeating the same process with the same proposal under the same circumstances, while hoping for a different outcome is not the best strategy," Nyhus told a recent online conference.

Pushing through the NZF unchanged would require the framework's supporters to provide diplomatic surety and cover for the countries being pressured by the US.

"This is a high-stakes approach, high-risk, and not very likely to succeed, though there may be parties thinking it's worth a shot again," Nyhus said.

Also presenting a challenge would be the removal of the economic element in a restructuring of the existing proposal with only the technical element put forward. The technical element covers the fuel intensity regulation that mandates progressively lower GHG emissions over time.

“The opposition to any economic element, whether deferred or delayed, is going to be so strong that only a purely technical regulation really has any chance of going forward under that scenario,” Nyhus said.

“If all relevant alternative fuel options are on the table, [a purely technical measure] could contain incentives for a large cross section of countries around the world, and in theory, this could lead to adoption in November this year,” he added. “But all the stars will need to align, and I think it will be a challenge for that to happen.”

Another very real scenario would be flag states representing most of the global tonnage rejecting any proposal that is put forward. The NZF can be blocked if one-third of countries representing over 50% of global tonnage formally object during the adoption process.

“In all of these cases, the timeline has really been pushed back significantly,” Nyhus said. “Despite it being theoretically possible to have something in place by November 2028, I think the issues to be solved are so thorny that the IMO will need more time, if an outcome can be negotiated at all.

“Entering into force of some version of the regulation in 2029 is optimistic and 2030 is more likely, but I would not be shocked to see things slide even further,” he added.

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