

Classification Societies in a Nutshell

IACS

International Association
of Classification Societies



What is marine Classification (“Class”)? What role do Classification Societies play in the maritime transport industry? Who is the International Association of Classification Societies (IACS)?

The role of Classification Societies is to provide assurance that the many different types of sea-going ships sailing around the world are safe and don’t represent a threat to the environment or people.

To understand in a bit more depth what Class Societies do today, it is worth going back to the origins of their existence, 250 years ago. Back then, marine insurers based in London developed a system to independently assess the condition of ships presented to them. They used this to decide whether to offer insurance cover for individual ships. At that time, an attempt was made to ‘classify’ the condition of each ship on an annual basis. This is how marine “Classification” was born.

Since then, Class Societies have been accumulating years of experience and knowledge in ship design, construction, and maintenance to be able to guarantee that ships sailing on our oceans today are safe. By providing classification services, they give confidence to governments, the public and all parties involved in the maritime industry that high safety standards are applied in an impartial and objective manner. Class Societies are thus an essential and integral part of the maritime industry as they provide assurance that world trade is carried out in the safest and most responsible manner for all concerned.

How do they do this?

Based on hundreds of years of maritime knowledge, Classification Societies have each developed their own “Class Rules”. Class Rules cover items, such as the quality of ships’ structures, machinery and electrical and control systems. They also cover the materials (e.g. steel) being used to build the ships, as well as equipment fitted to the ship. Based on these Rules, a Class Society delivers to ships its certificate of classification. To deliver this class certificate, the Society will approve the ship’s design plans, and carry out surveys during the construction of the ship. Once in service, the ship will undergo regular surveys by the Class Society to verify that the ship continues to meet the relevant Rule requirements for continuation of class.

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Classification Societies also have another important role. In parallel to developing and implementing their own rules, they act as “Recognised Organisations” (ROs) on behalf of States, including EU Member States. In this role, Class Societies verify that ships under the authority of a certain state (i.e. flying the flag of that state), comply with international, regional and national requirements (“statutory regulations”). Acting as an RO, the Class Society conducts surveys on ships, and if compliance is established, issues certificates on behalf of the state. This work is called “statutory activities”. Together, class rules and statutory regulations ensure safe shipping, and Class Societies play an essential role in ensuring those rules and regulations are enforced.

The work of Class Societies is however not limited to their classification and statutory work. They also have an important role as advisers to the shipping industry, sharing their experience, technical proficiency and extensive R&D programmes. As an example, in a time when the shipping industry is being compelled to move towards new technologies to meet ever ambitious climate goals, the role of Class Societies is key in assessing new risks, so that for example alternatively fuelled ships can be designed, built and operated in a safe manner.

Shipowners and shipbuilders, flag State administrations, port-State-control authorities, underwriters, shipping financiers, charterers, and, of course, seafarers all rely on Class Societies.

What is IACS?

IACS is an independent, apolitical, not-for-profit membership organisation comprising Class Societies from around the world. More than 90% of the world’s cargo carrying tonnage is covered by the classification design, construction and through-life compliance rules and standards set by the Member Societies of IACS. To be a Member of IACS, Class Societies must be in compliance with IACS membership criteria and its robust Quality System Certification Scheme.

Within IACS, Member Societies establish minimum common technical standards which are then included in their individual Class Rules. IACS also has consultative status with the IMO, and provides technical support and guidance since 1968 by developing so-called “unified interpretations” of international regulations.



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