CIRCULAR	Number 041
SUBJECT	**STCW-F Convention and Code** **Training, certification and watchkeeping for fishing-vessel personnel**
FROM	Office of the Maritime Administrator Vanuatu International Shipping Registry
TO	Fishing-vessel owners, operators, managers and skippers; crewing agencies, Special Agents and Recognized Organizations
DRAFT DATE	5 November 2026
ADMINISTRATIVE EFFECT	Upon publication
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Authority. Issued by the Maritime Administrator in the exercise of applicable functions under the Maritime Act [CAP 131], as amended in 2025. Read with the Convention, its revised annex and Code, and applicable Vanuatu requirements.

1. Why this circular matters

Safe fishing operations depend on people who can navigate, operate machinery, respond to emergencies and work safely with fishing equipment. STCW-F establishes international standards for their training, qualifications and watchkeeping. For an owner, compliance means matching each person's verified qualifications and fitness to the duties actually performed on board.

Vanuatu deposited its instrument of accession to the International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Fishing Vessel Personnel, 1995 (STCW-F), on 16 October 2025. The Convention entered into force for Vanuatu on 16 January 2026. (IMO status of conventions, 30 October 2026, STCW-F entry for Vanuatu)

The revised annex and new STCW-F Code took effect internationally on 1 January 2026. Part A of the Code contains mandatory competence standards; Part B provides guidance. Owners must therefore assess compliance against the revised framework, including its transitional provisions. These obligations do not await the entry into force of the separate Cape Town Agreement on fishing-vessel safety. (IMO resolutions MSC.561(108)) and MSC.562(108)

2. Who is covered

STCW-F applies to personnel serving on seagoing vessels used commercially to catch fish or other living marine resources. This circular addresses those vessels registered with VISR. The Convention excludes vessels navigating exclusively in inland waters or the specified sheltered or port-regulated waters. A vessel carrying or processing fish is not automatically a fishing vessel for this purpose; ask VISR to confirm any uncertain classification. (Convention, articles 2–3)

The 24-metre and 750 kW thresholds below concern particular officer certificates. They do not create a general exemption from safety training, familiarization or safe watchkeeping. Owners must review the whole crew and the vessel's actual operation, including transit to and from fishing grounds.

3. Which officers need which qualifications?

Use verified vessel particulars and the person's assigned capacity. GMDSS means the Global Maritime Distress and Safety System. "Limited waters" means an area defined by the Administration under the Convention; an owner cannot apply that label merely because a vessel fishes near a coast. Certificates must cover the actual operating area and any stated restrictions.

Capacity and vessel category	Required qualification / reference
Skipper — fishing vessel 24 metres or more	Appropriate Certificate of Competency (CoC) for unlimited waters (II/1) or limited waters (II/3).
Navigational watch officer — fishing vessel 24 metres or more	Appropriate CoC for unlimited waters (II/2) or limited waters (II/4).
Chief and second engineer — 3,000 kW or more	CoC appropriate to the rank and propulsion power under II/5-1-1.
Chief and second engineer — 750 kW to below 3,000 kW	CoC appropriate to the rank and propulsion power under II/5-1-2. At 3,000 kW, use the higher-power category.
Engineering watch officer / designated duty engineer — 750 kW or more	Appropriate CoC under II/5-2 for a manned engine-room watch or duty in a periodically unmanned engine-room.
Personnel performing GMDSS radio duties	Appropriate GMDSS certification, issued or recognized by the Administration, for the assigned radio duties under II/6.
All fishing-vessel personnel	Approved basic safety training and onboard familiarization under III/1, subject only to an expressly applicable Administration-approved exemption.

References: revised annex, regulations I/1 and II/1–II/6; regulation III/1

Use the Convention length and the aggregate maximum continuous rated output of the main propulsion machinery, as recorded in the official particulars. Regulation I/2(2) permits an Administration to use 300 GT instead of 24 metres, and 950 GT instead of 45 metres. Owners must not make that substitution without confirmation of its adoption by the Administration. Vessels below the thresholds remain subject to applicable Vanuatu qualification and manning requirements. The table identifies qualifications; it does not prescribe a second-engineer berth on every vessel irrespective of its approved manning arrangements.

4. Verify the certificate, its recognition and its limits

A CoC establishes qualification for a certificated capacity. A Certificate of Proficiency (CoP) evidences other required training or competence. Neither a course attendance record nor a crewing agency's assurance replaces the required qualification. Check identity, issuing authority, authenticity, capacity, operating-area and power limits, expiry and any suspension or restriction before assigning duties.

Where a foreign STCW-F certificate requires recognition, obtain the appropriate Vanuatu endorsement. Ordinary recognition under I/7 concerns certificates from another STCW-F Party; that provision excludes certificates issued by non-Parties. An endorsement cannot outlast its underlying certificate and has a maximum five-year validity. A pending application permits service only where the Administration has allowed it under the Convention, for no more than three months and with documented proof of application. (Revised annex, regulations I/3 and I/7)

5. Existing STCW qualifications: assess the correct route

The Convention expressly accepts appropriate STCW 1978 certificates for chief engineers, engineer officers and GMDSS radio operators as corresponding qualifications. For deck officers and skippers, relevant STCW competence already demonstrated at an equivalent or higher level need not be reassessed, but fishing-specific requirements and the applicable certification route still have to be satisfied. A merchant-ship master's certificate must not simply be assumed to authorize command of every fishing vessel. (Revised annex, I/3(7) and II/1–II/4)

Send existing STCW certificates to VISR's Licensing Department for confirmation of the applicable recognition, endorsement and any additional assessment or training. The express STCW route above must be assessed on its own terms; it is not the same as ordinary recognition of a foreign STCW-F certificate. No new recognition arrangement or blanket approval of an issuing country is created by this circular.

6. Safety training and familiarization for every crew member

Before assigning shipboard duties, ensure that personnel have the required approved basic training and demonstrated competence in personal survival, fire prevention and firefighting, elementary first aid, and personal safety and social responsibilities. Where basic training is not included in the qualification issued, the appropriate CoP is required. (Revised annex, III/1) (Code, A-III/1)

A valid STCW CoP can avoid repeat assessment of standards already met at an equivalent or higher level. It does not remove the need to identify any remaining fishing-specific requirements. Certificates must be accompanied by practical onboard familiarization with this vessel's alarms, muster and embarkation stations, escape routes, lifejackets, firefighting equipment, emergency actions and relevant doors or closures.

The skipper must ensure that crew understand safety instructions and can communicate on essential safety matters. Record familiarization when a person joins and when equipment or duties change. A person who holds a training certificate but does not know what to do during a fire or person-overboard emergency is not adequately familiarized.

Evidence of maintained competence in personal survival and fire prevention/firefighting is required every five years. Onboard training and experience may be accepted only for the elements permitted by the Code and accepted by the Administration; routine drills alone should not be assumed to replace every required refresher element. (Code, A-III/1(2)–(4))

7. Medical fitness and continued professional competence

Personnel holding Convention certificates and serving at sea must have a valid medical fitness certificate. The Convention's maximum validity is two years, reduced to one year for those under 18; any shorter period or restriction on the certificate must be respected. Medical certificates complying with STCW regulation I/9 are accepted under STCW-F. Owners must arrange renewal early and must not presume an extension or urgent-case permission. (Revised annex, I/3(8) and I/12)

Skippers, officers and GMDSS radio operators must establish continued competence at intervals of no more than five years. The Code provides routes including qualifying recent sea service, equivalent functions, an approved test or course, or specified supervised service. Keep sea-service evidence and submit it for assessment; five years since issue is not permission to serve on an already expired or suspended certificate. (Revised annex, II/7–II/8) (Code, A-II/7–A-II/8)

8. Watchkeeping, fatigue and safe operation

The owner and skipper must organize work so watchkeepers are adequately rested and fit for duty. Fishing schedules, catch handling and maintenance must not undermine the bridge, machinery or radio watch. The watch system must account for weather, visibility, traffic, navigational hazards, fishing gear and the condition of equipment, both while fishing and in transit. (Revised annex, IV/1–IV/2) (Code, A-IV/2)

Maintain an effective lookout and adequate bridge attendance; a watchkeeper must not be diverted by fishing duties to the point that safe navigation is compromised. Provide proper handovers and arrangements for calling the skipper or responsible engineer. Keep watch schedules and records sufficient to demonstrate that applicable manning, work/rest and fitness-for-duty requirements are met. Apply the work/rest requirements governing the vessel and address fatigue risks in the actual fishing and watch schedules.

9. Transitional provisions: assess each certificate

The revised framework does not mean that every existing certificate must be replaced immediately. Equally, the transition provisions are not a general permission to use unqualified personnel. Owners must identify the legal basis for each existing qualification and obtain VISR's confirmation where recognition or a transitional route is required.

a. **Certificates issued before entry into force.** Regulation I/8(1) preserves recognition of qualifying certificates of competency or service issued under a Party's laws, or the Radio Regulations, before the Convention entered into force for that Party. It does not remove validity conditions, capacity limitations or the need for recognition where applicable. (Revised annex, I/8(1))

b. **Previous certification practices.** A Party may continue them for up to five years after its entry date, only for eligible persons whose sea service in the relevant department began before that date. For Vanuatu, the entry date is 16 January 2026. This is a controlled certification option, not an automatic five-year exemption for the fleet. (Revised annex, I/8(2))

c. **Certificates of service.** A Party has a limited two-year window after entry into force to issue these to eligible experienced personnel. The Convention requires at least three years in the relevant capacity within the seven years before the Convention entered into force for that Party, satisfactory service and medical fitness. An owner's declaration of experience cannot itself establish entitlement. (Revised annex, I/8(3))

d. **Updating older qualifications.** For certificates issued before 1 January 2031, the competent Party must compare the standards previously required with the new Code and determine any refresher training or assessment needed. That date is not a blanket postponement of the Convention or an extension of individual certificates. (Revised annex, II/7(2) and II/8(2))

Owners must not rely on an assumed transitional entitlement. Provide the certificate, issuing State and relevant entry date, original training and sea-service evidence, present duties and any recognition documentation so the Licensing Department can confirm the applicable route.

10. Exemptions and dispensations require express approval

Limited flexibility exists for particular vessels, operating areas and training requirements, and a dispensation may be considered in exceptional necessity under strict conditions. Neither small size, a crew shortage nor a planned sailing creates automatic permission. Submit the facts before assigning the affected duties and obtain written confirmation of any lawful exception, including its scope and expiry. This circular grants no exemption or dispensation. (Revised annex, I/2 and I/9) (Code, A-III/1(5))

11. Action required from owners and managers

Review each affected vessel now. Within 30 calendar days after publication of this circular, submit a consolidated crew-compliance return to VISR's Licensing Department. A company may submit one fleet schedule, provided that every vessel and each crew member can be clearly identified.

1. **Confirm the vessel's particulars.** Give its name, IMO or official number, Convention length, main propulsion power, fishing activity, operating area and applicable manning document or approved manning arrangements. Identify any planned change of trade or area.
2. **Provide a crew qualification matrix.** For each person, list the assigned rank and duties, certificate type and number, issuing authority, issue and expiry dates, operating-area or power restrictions, and Vanuatu endorsement or other confirmed basis for service. Include GMDSS duties and any engineering watch arrangements.
3. **Verify supporting evidence.** Provide clear certificate and endorsement copies, issuing-authority verification, medical fitness validity, basic safety training and refresher evidence. Identify any pending application or proposed STCW or transitional route, with the relevant sea-service and training records. Send only the medical fitness information necessary for certification, not unrelated clinical records.
4. **Confirm onboard arrangements.** The owner or manager and skipper should confirm familiarization, effective safety communication, emergency duties, suitable watch arrangements and measures to prevent fatigue. Identify the person ashore responsible for monitoring certificate expiry and crew changes.
5. **Identify and correct gaps.** List each missing, expired, restricted or unverifiable qualification and the proposed corrective action and completion date. Report any issue affecting safe manning, medical fitness or the lawful performance of essential duties immediately; do not wait for the 30-day return.

The 30-day period is an administrative reporting deadline. It does not extend an existing obligation or authorize service without the required qualifications. Do not assign a person to duties for which they are not qualified or permitted to serve. Resolve material deficiencies before the affected operation or sailing, subject only to an expressly lawful written permission from the Administration.

12. Records, responsibilities and submission

Keep required certificates, endorsements, medical fitness evidence and supporting records readily available on board for verification. Electronic documents must be accessible and independently verifiable through the authorized system. Keep the company's records current after every crew change, renewal, restriction or change of operating area.

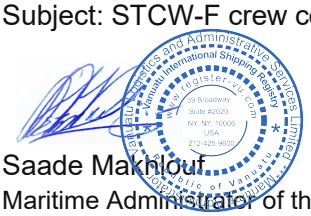
Read this circular alongside VISR Circular 027 on certificate verification and onboard availability, to the extent applicable. A standard STCW application receipt is not automatically an STCW-F authorization. Suspected fraudulent certificates or material inconsistencies must be reported promptly to the Administration. (VISR Circular 027, amended 20 August 2026)

Owners and managers remain responsible for selecting qualified personnel and providing compliant operating arrangements. Skippers must verify readiness on board. Crewing agencies and Special Agents must support complete, accurate submissions. ROs should report material concerns encountered within their authorized work; an RO survey or class certificate does not replace personnel certification or flag-State recognition.

Submit to: info@register-vu.com — Attention: Licensing Department

Copy: technical@register-vu.com and scailean@register-vu.com

Subject: STCW-F crew compliance — [vessel name / IMO or official number]



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