



Adam Baske

# The IMO Number Explained

## What is an IMO number?

The International Maritime Organization (IMO) introduced its Ship Identification Number Scheme in 1987 to help prevent maritime fraud and enhance the security of merchant vessels. It is recognized by regional fisheries organizations and most governments and is considered the best available global identification system for ships. IHS Maritime & Trade, a company based in the U.K., administers the scheme on behalf of the IMO. The unique seven-digit vessel number the company issues to each vessel, preceded by the letters IMO, stays with it until it is scrapped and never changes, regardless of the ship's owner, country of registration or name. The records based on the IMO number provide an independent audit trail for each vessel. The scheme was applied to fishing vessels in 2013, and the eligibility criteria were amended in 2016 to cover smaller and non-steel hull vessels.

## Why do fishing vessels need an IMO number?

Illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing worldwide accounts for up to 26 million metric tons of fish annually, worth up to \$23.5 billion. IMO numbers are an essential tool in the fight against illegal fishing because they help to improve monitoring, control, surveillance and enforcement of fishing operations. They:

- Allow flag States to accurately manage vessels under their authority.
- Give national authorities information to help them police their waters more effectively.
- Bring clarity and consistency to Regional Fisheries Management Organization (RFMO) records, helping governments determine whether vessels are authorized to fish in their waters.
- Help port authorities ensure that they are accepting only legally caught fish, a requirement of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization's Port State Measures Agreement.
- Give retailers and seafood buyers a way to identify the vessels catching and landing their fish.

Since fishing vessels became eligible to apply for IMO numbers in 2013, many major RFMOs and other fisheries bodies, the European Union and some coastal and flag States have mandated that vessels above a certain size or tonnage must carry one. It is therefore becoming increasingly important to obtain one if vessels want to fish in these areas. As more organizations and States require the IMO number, the areas at sea in which vessels can legally fish without one will shrink.

Having an IMO number could also make exports more attractive, and an increasing number of retailers have made an IMO number a requirement for vessels they purchase fish from.

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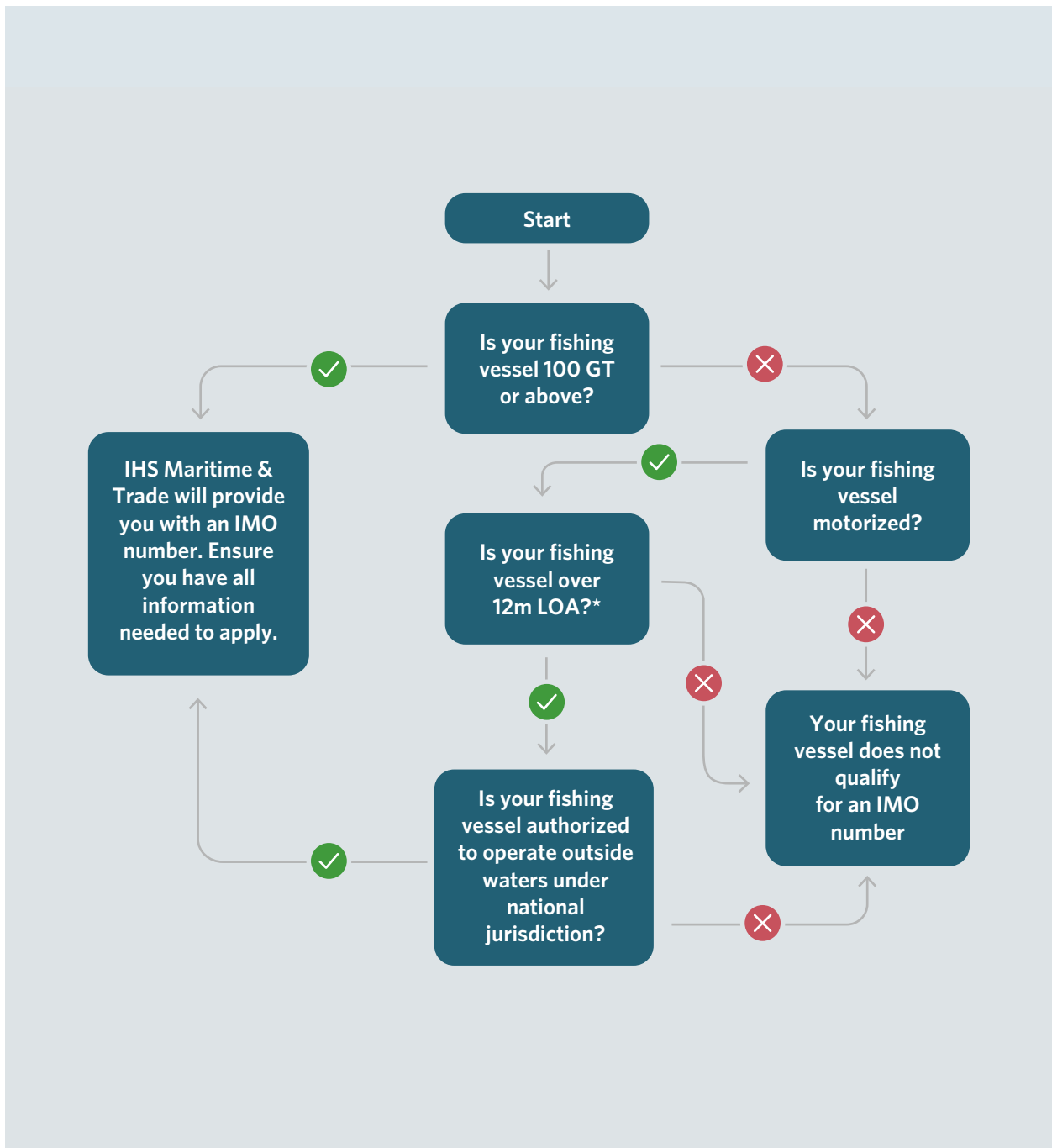
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## Which vessels are eligible for an IMO number?

Any fishing vessel, refrigerated cargo vessel (reefer) or supply vessel 12 meters in length or above, authorized to operate outside waters of national jurisdiction (within an RFMO or another country's 200-mile exclusive economic zone), and including those with a non-steel hull construction, is eligible for an IMO number. Any fishing vessel over 100 gross tons (GT) is also eligible for an IMO number, including those not authorized to operate outside their country's jurisdiction. For further information, please see the following chart:

Figure 1  
Is Your Vessel Eligible for an IMO Number?



Note:

\* Please refer to the following chart to see all information needed to apply for an IMO number. LOA = length overall; GT = gross tons.

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## What information do I have to provide to obtain an IMO number?

As a minimum, you should be able to provide the following information for each vessel:

Vessel information	Where to find this information
<b>Ship name</b>	Actual name under which the vessel will navigate
<b>Original name</b>	Name the vessel was originally known as. May be found on the vessel's flag or registry certificate
<b>Former name(s)</b>	Name(s) the vessel was previously known as. May be found on the vessel's flag or registry certificate
<b>Current flag</b>	Nationality of vessel. May be found on the vessel's flag or registry certificate
<b>Former flag*</b>	Nationality of vessel before current flag. May be found on the vessel's flag or registry certificate
<b>Port of registry</b>	May be found on the vessel's registry certificate
<b>Call sign</b>	May be found on the vessel's flag or registry certificate
<b>Official number</b>	May be found on the vessel's flag or registry certificate
<b>MMSI number</b>	A Maritime Mobile Service Identity (MMSI) number is issued only to vessels fitted with digital selective calling (DSC) and/or (satellite) ship earth station equipment. To get an MMSI number, you will need to be in possession of a valid ship radio license.
<b>Fishing number</b>	Fishing registration letters, numbers or combination of both and issued by national fishery licensing authority. May be found displayed on vessel hull or superstructure
<b>Gross tonnage</b>	May be found on the vessel's tonnage certificate and/or flag or registry certificate
<b>Net tonnage</b>	May be found on the vessel's tonnage certificate and/or flag or registry certificate
<b>Length overall (m)</b>	Extreme length of vessel's hull. May be found on the vessel's flag or registry certificate. More often registered length or length between perpendiculars will be shown.

*Continued on next page*

<b>Moulded depth (m)</b>	Vertical distance measured from the top of the keel to the top of the freeboard deck beam at side. May be found on the vessel's flag or registry certificate
<b>Extreme breadth (m)</b>	Width of a ship over the outside of all planking or plating at the widest frame. May be found on the vessel's flag or registry certificate
<b>Date of build</b>	Date of completion/delivered/entered service. May be found on the vessel's flag or registry certificate
<b>Keel laid date</b>	Date on which construction identifiable to the vessel commenced. May be found on the builder's certificate
<b>Shipbuilder</b>	Name of company/shipbuilder that constructed the vessel. May be found on the builder's certificate, vessel's flag or registry certificate. Will be found on builder's plate if on vessel
<b>Hull number</b>	Shipbuilder unique reference number for a vessel on order/under construction, often sequential. May be found on builder's plate if on vessel or on the builder's certificate
<b>Country of build</b>	Country in which vessel was built. May be found on the vessel's flag or registry certificate or on the builder's certificate
<b>Number of main engines</b>	May be found on the vessel's flag or registry certificate
<b>Engine model</b>	Official designation of the engine given by the manufacturer, often combining model, type and displacement. Will be found on plate affixed to main engine
<b>Type of vessel (e.g. purse-seiner)</b>	Specific details on fishing vessel
<b>Hull material</b>	Specific details on the material of the hull
<b>Registered owner</b>	Name of the person/company to appear in the documents as registered owners
<b>Owner address</b>	Full address of the registered owners as it appears in the registration documents
<b>Photograph of vessel*</b>	If available

Note:

\* Information should be displayed if available

Source: IHS Maritime & Trade

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The crew of a fishing vessel paints a new name on the hull at sea in an effort to avoid enforcement for crimes committed under a prior name. Mandatory IMO numbers would make vessels easier to positively identify. The unique seven-digit vessel number the company issues to each vessel, preceded by the letters IMO, stays with it until it is scrapped and never changes, regardless of the ship's owner, country of registration or name.

## **Will I have to pay?**

No. Obtaining an IMO number is free.

## **How do I obtain an IMO number?**

As an owner of a single vessel:

Applications can be made online at <http://imonumbers.ihs.com> using the free registration system, or you can download a form and send it to IHS Maritime & Trade at the following address:

IHS Maritime & Trade  
Sentinel House  
163 Brighton Road

Coulsdon  
Surrey  
CR5 2YH  
United Kingdom  
Email: [ship.imo@ihs.com](mailto:ship.imo@ihs.com)  
Telephone: +44 (0)1344 328300

## As a flag State for multiple vessels:

It may be easier as a flag State to apply for IMO numbers for multiple vessels on your registry at one time. It will give you more control and will ensure more accurate records. Should you require this, contact the IHS Maritime & Trade IMO Ship Numbering Department at [ship.imo@ihs.com](mailto:ship.imo@ihs.com) for a multiple IMO request form in spreadsheet format.

## Where should I display my IMO number?

Seagoing vessels of 100 GT and above are required to display identification numbers clearly and permanently in a visible place, either on the vessel's hull or superstructure. The IMO number should be inserted on a vessel's Certificate of Registry, which includes information identifying the vessel, and on all certificates issued under IMO Conventions when and where appropriate. Pew, along with Trygg Mat Tracking, an organization specializing in fisheries intelligence analysis, recommends that companies also include the number in other certificates, such as classification certificates, when and where appropriate. It should preferably be included in the box headed "Distinctive number or letters" in addition to the call sign.

Fishing vessels may mark the IMO number either on the stern or stern quarter with the name and port, avoiding the part of the hull where nets may obscure them. Alternatively, vessels may display the number on the hull or superstructure sides, with the call sign and/or fishing number. Fishing vessels should also insert the IMO number on the certificates outlined above, as is required for large seagoing vessels. Your flag administration or class society can provide further guidance for displaying IMO numbers.

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**For further information, please visit:**

[pewtrusts.org/endillegalfishing](https://pewtrusts.org/endillegalfishing)

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