

# NAVIGATING NUCLEAR: FROM ATOMS FOR PEACE TO A NEW COURSE FOR COMMERCIAL NUCLEAR SHIPPING UNDER ATLAS

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## US Policy and Regulatory Alert

By: Tison A. Campbell, Michael S. Heard Snow

Commercial nuclear propulsion continues to make meaningful development toward coordinated regulatory and industry attention this week as the United States hosts the launch of the International Atomic Energy Agency's Atomic Technologies Licensed for Applications at Sea (ATLAS) initiative in Washington, DC, from 26–27 August 2026, to develop more harmonized approaches to safety, security, safeguards, liability, and life-cycle regulation on an international scale.

Despite several successful demonstration projects following the first nuclear-powered merchant ship, the *N/S Savannah*, a robust commercial nuclear maritime industry never materialized. Over the past several years, governments and the shipping industry have renewed interest in the commercial maritime nuclear sector. The ATLAS initiative launching this week is bringing together senior government officials, industry leaders, and technical experts to focus on technical, regulatory, and other important issues that need to be addressed to support a robust commercial nuclear maritime industry.

Beyond the *N/S Savannah*, the first wave of nuclear-powered civilian ships included Germany's *N/S Otto Hahn* in 1964, Japan's *N/S Mutsu* in 1969, and the Soviet Union's *N/S Sevmorput* in 1988. Although those projects and the success of naval nuclear propulsion demonstrated that reactors could operate safely and reliably at sea, they did not establish an international market for nuclear merchant vessels. Such a market may be achievable today, with new maritime decarbonization objectives, advances in reactor technology, and renewed government support all aligning in favor of commercial nuclear maritime. Yet challenges, like workforce constraints, liability, and insurance, still need to be addressed before a viable, robust market can emerge. In this client alert, we summarize recent developments in commercial nuclear maritime.

## KEY DEVELOPMENTS

### Governments and Classification Societies Are Moving Toward a “System-First” Model

In May 2026, the US Maritime Administration (MARAD) requested industry insight on a commercially viable, scalable maritime small modular reactor concept and expressly identified liability architecture, insurance, port acceptance, classification standards, workforce development, fuel-cycle arrangements, and integration with shipyards and logistics networks as threshold issues.<sup>1</sup> The US Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) has stated that it is prepared to license maritime reactors under existing frameworks (i.e., 10 C.F.R. parts 50, 52, and 53) and is developing a white paper on applying those frameworks to floating nuclear power plants and propulsion

systems.<sup>2</sup> The NRC and US Coast Guard also entered into a new memorandum of understanding governing coordination on civilian maritime nuclear projects.<sup>3</sup>

### **Advanced-Reactor Vessel Concepts Are Achieving Classification Review**

Classification societies are evaluating several civilian commercial concepts. In June 2026, the American Bureau of Shipping<sup>4</sup> granted an approval in principle (AIP)<sup>5</sup> for integration of a Massachusetts Institute of Technology-developed reactor concept into a cargo-vessel propulsion system, a 15,000-TEU containership concept using a molten-salt reactor and supercritical carbon-dioxide power system. Lloyd's Register separately announced an AIP for a nuclear-assisted pure car and truck carrier concept in partnership with Korean shipbuilding entities. These AIPs with governing classification societies mark the first concrete step toward keel-laying in the development of commercial nuclear ships.

### **Public-Private Partnership**

Announced on 24 August 2026, MARAD and Core Power signed a first-of-its-kind public-private partnership agreement to help the United States build a fleet of nuclear commercial vessels targeting first construction in 2028.<sup>6</sup>

## **THE FIRM IS HERE TO HELP**

To realize the full potential of commercial nuclear for maritime purposes, companies will need to navigate complex government regulations and technical standards, as well as ensure a robust and ready workforce. Our experienced nuclear and maritime team, dating back to the birth of the industry with the *N/S Savannah*, holds a deep understanding of these key agencies and the industry and is well positioned to support the deployment of these key technologies.

## **FOOTNOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Request for Information: Development of a Commercially Viable System-Centric Small Modular Reactor Concept for Deployment in the Marine Transportation System, [91 Fed. Reg. 24961](#) (May 7, 2026).

<sup>2</sup> See Regulatory Considerations for Maritime Nuclear Applications (May 14, 2026), <https://www.nrc.gov/docs/ML2612/ML26125A205.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Memorandum of Understanding Between the United States Coast Guard and the United States Nuclear Regulatory Commission Regarding Civilian Maritime Nuclear Projects (June 2026), <https://www.nrc.gov/docs/ML2609/ML26096A081.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> The lead US maritime classification society established in 1862. For more detail on recent classification developments, see Tison A. Campbell, Julie G. Ezell & Michael S. Heard Snow, *Navigation Nuclear: A Leading Light for Nuclear Maritime Applications*, K&L GATES (July 7, 2026), <https://www.klgates.com/thought-leadership/Navigating-Nuclear-A-Leading-Light-for-Nuclear-Maritime-Applications-7-7-2026>.

<sup>5</sup> An AIP is an early design-assurance milestone—not a reactor license, flag-state authorization, SOLAS certificate, construction commitment, or permission to enter ports.

<sup>6</sup> Press Release, Core Power, Turning policy into steel. Turning vision into ships. (Aug. 24, 2026), <https://www.corepower.energy/news-resources/turning-policy-into-steel-turning-vision-into-ships>.

## KEY CONTACTS



**TISON A. CAMPBELL**  
PARTNER

WASHINGTON, DC  
+1.202.778.9323  
TISON.CAMPBELL@KLGATES.COM



**MICHAEL S. HEARD SNOW**  
ASSOCIATE

WASHINGTON, DC  
+1.202.778.9318  
MICHAEL.HEARDSNOW@KLGATES.COM

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